



To Sway A Charlatan (Tempting Thieves #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Harlow Hedgewater is by all accounts a 34-year-old astute wizard who just snatched an apprenticeship to a high-ranking wizard known for going through apprentices faster than the rumors of their solitude can spread.

In reality, she's an undercover thief hell-bent on stealing a mysterious relic from the eccentric Atlas Daggerroot.

She must get close to them to find the magically-hidden vault within their moody sentient manor.

The relic is her key to finally realizing her dream of serving as a Thieves Guild council member and making the world remember her.

But she quickly discovers she'll have to balance the charade of being an accomplished wizard with steering her heart away from Atlas who continuously surprises her with tenderness she doesn't believe she deserves.

With each shared adventure, Harlow gets further away from repeating her pattern of running away when she gets too close.

Falling in love with her mark was never the plan and now her promised social status hangs in the balance.

She must decide if this strict, no-nonsense life she's been forcing herself to build is really what life is meant to be or if it's time to let go and let her heart lead.

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Kraken blood smeared. Firefly heart crushed and stirred. Now to drop it two millimeters from the left and... POP.

The arcane lock shuttered when Harlow pulled the lockpick from its innards.

With a slow, gratifying sigh, she looked down at her hand to a bit of smeared blood, not hers, but it bothered her not as well as everyone in the high seats way above her.

It took seconds for her to cast a quick, basic spell that every wizard learned first, to clean up the mess.

She stepped backward to admire her work, much like the last few months where she had been devoting herself entirely to magical locks... more so breaking them.

Normally pioneering new techniques were saved for higher-class spellcasters; Harlow allowed herself a reprieve from the last three years of normal studies to chase this exact indulgence.

Harlow Hedgewater from all appearances was a wizard.

Any missteps or lack of knowledge were blamed on the simple fact that she was a student of the magical arts.

It was entirely unknown, save a very select few, that her... inadequacies, were not of her misunderstanding but that she was trained for the blade and not the wand.

Harlow Hedgewater was a thief.

A rogue by any other classification, but a thief at her best.

Most of those in her guild chased coin, or pursued the general mysterious nature that a thief exuded, which could be alluring and downright sexy, but she did it for the satisfaction.

When she was unlocking something impossibly complex like a wizard's chest, sneaking past a grouping of highly trained guards, or mixing the right ratio of potion, Harlow would feel a gentle warmth, much like a tiredness, that would spread to her chest and release an ache.

This ache for more was only pacified for a short amount of time, so she had to keep busy and nothing so far in her life kept her as busy as masquerading as a wizard.

The large demonstration hall sparkled naturally with its polished white stone and hoards of gilded furniture.

Even the three stories of tiered seating were edged in decadence.

This hall was specifically for passing exams, testing magical theory, and for anyone that required quite an audience.

For today's showing, it was mostly students from higher classes perfecting their master term projects.

Much to the chagrin of those watching, Harlow grabbed the chest and refused to open it in front of anyone.

She much preferred to keep her secrets.

A man three years her junior but two classes higher than her, whose name she had

deemed unnecessary to remember, glared daggers at her from the ledge directly above her.

Harlow offered him a quick salute of thanks and sauntered off with her winnings.

It was his arcane lock spell she broke, and now he must go back to the drawing board with less than a week until his class's finale showing.

Such a setback wouldn't be such an issue if it wasn't the only spell his family passed down to him that they hadn't yet sold out.

He now had to make a name for himself.

Or not.

Harlow's shoulders dipped in a slight shrug.

Who was she kidding? With residuals from previous spells that his family had made for public use, he would still live the high life and want for nothing.

Some whispers reached Harlow's ears, which was not surprising because wizards were NOT good at whispering.

From what she could gather, they were gossiping about how they thought it's unfair that she used a more practical method to pick the arcane locks when she should be using 00% spellwork.

But it wasn't in the rules and she knew all the loopholes.

Harlow exited as slowly as she could, letting them get in all the whispers that they wanted.

Quite a few of them were older than her, but even those that were past their thirties still acted childish.

Being practiced in magic seemed to give them a false sense of superiority.

“Spare the streets and spoil the wand”, as they said.

Harlow adjusted her grip on the chest and heaved it over to her other hip, letting the other side of the hall get their fill of it.

A few eager sets of eyes stared it down as if they could will it to reveal itself.

The Wizard Guild filled chests like these to ensure the student didn't tamper with anything outside their listed spellwork.

Inside could be rotten eggs, a mimic, a 2,000-year-old scroll.

Harlow wouldn't let them see.

A lady must have her secrets and as for wizards, they could go fuck themselves.

The stone hallway was empty and cold.

Why it was cold when there were spells for heating, Harlow didn't know.

She thought it was more about ambiance and how she never met a wizard who didn't like a little show.

She bent her fingers in a cascading effect and pulled them apart quickly, opening a small dimensional hole where she kept her things that she refused to carry.

In her pocket, a feather disintegrated, leaving an oddly moist clump of dust in its wake.

Magic all came from somewhere and for opening her catch-all, the reagent was a singular feather.

The dust was an unfortunate side effect of the process.

She couldn't stand touching it so she just continued to shove more feathers in there without cleaning out the dust.

That's a problem for later me when I run out of pockets and wizard robes have SO MANY POCKETS, she thought.

It was one thing that she was envious rogues hadn't caught onto yet.

With Harlow's love for picking locks sated for now, she cracked her neck from side to side and rubbed her upper back with as much force as she could muster.

The suns were going down, and everyone was out on the streets to head home or to taverns to pregame for the upcoming celebration week.

But not Harlow.

She'd have the library to herself and that's something that didn't happen often here.

Talkisha held the region's most extensive wizard towers.

It was where the "higher education"

for spellwork was located.

Most came here to gain specialties and to work among peers.

So, it stood to reason that the Grand Library was always full and bustling but at night before a weekend... well, that was the best time to try and grab some tomes being returned early.

Which was what Harlow was banking on.

If there was one benefit for the small city here being occupied by mainly wizards it was that everything was always SO CLEAN.

Automated spells whisked away trash and dirt in moments and there were always newcomers looking to test spells on trash.

The beige stonework was repeated throughout all the towers and the Grand Library.

Blue banners with the city's emblem hung everywhere.

She passed between two of them as she entered the library and the doors opened unassisted.

It was quiet, eerily so.

Runework was scattered throughout to deaden any excess noise so getting used to not hearing footsteps but seeing a crowd down a hallway took Harlow ages to adjust.

Magdalanous stood ready at the front desk, never sitting (Harlow had tried to catch khem so many times that she'd given up).

Kher short black bob was tucked behind kher ears today.

Harlow brought her hands up to gesture that it looked rather fetching.

Khey returned a quick thank you with khers.

Khey leaned forward and slid a stack of books in her direction and her stomach dropped for a moment.

All her holds.

At one time? Seriously? Harlow wouldn't possibly get them all done in time, but she refused to not check them out.

She gulped and leaned the stack against her chest to look for the study corridor with the least amount of people.

Gods below, Harlow wished she could just put them in her catch-all like the chest but if she did, Magdalanous would find out and she Did.

Not.

Want.

Kher.

Wrath.

Khey'd been there since the library's construction... and hadn't aged a day ... and the knowledge and skill khey possessed was, if she spoke honestly, unattainable.

There were only a few wizards near Magdalanous's class and even they watched themselves extra closely for any missteps.

Magdalanous was a Spellsaven class, which was really the highest rank you could go, but khey refused to go by it.

Something about khey existed before the classification system so khey said khey opted out.

Which reminded Harlow to look for Lithon, a rather unclassifiable mage.

He should be around there somewhere...

In Lartenovia, anyone, no matter what career or classification they went into, must take on a mentee or apprentice if they reached a certain rank.

Society was built on continuing teaching knowledge and growth.

Lithon had never complained about his mentor, which was a testament to his patience.

Because of his skillset he was a floater between mages and wizards.

Being a mage meant, unless there were special circumstances, you couldn't apprentice to a Spellsaven class.

Lithon did, however, complain about everything else.

And Harlow loved it.

He was her rant buddy and there was nothing like unloading something you needed to get out of your system.

In turn they never spoke about it again outside the library walls.

She found an empty study area.

It was always empty so it wasn't exactly surprising.

Wizards loved to donate their work to the library and it was almost a rite of passage, so naturally the place was full up on biographies, recipes, histories, and published spellwork.

But over there, that was where bardic tales were kept.

Labeled "fiction,"

of course, as the very fact bards wrote it means it was likely to be embellished and therefore not accurate.

Harlow enjoyed the tales.

She thought a lot of fellow scholars forget the lessons found within, embellished or not.

That even their own thought experiment at that moment of conception was but fantasy itself until proven.

With her back against the corner, she was able to spot Lithon come flying into the room which was concerning in of itself.

Lithon didn't run. Always walked at a "leisurely" pace. He said it made him feel like he was giving the appearance he's too busy for nonsense. Which was ridiculous. He loved nonsense. That and Magdalanous would surely grapple anyone who ran in these halls.

“Quick Harlow, we got to go.”

His chestnut brown waves are frizzy... unlike him... and his silken robes are disheveled like he had quickly thrown them over his normal, extravagant thorincloth ensemble. Golden eyes flecked with olive green stared her down until she slowly rose.

“What’s going on?”

It was bit hard to speak with the noise suppression spells in effect but at least no one would be able to overhear them.

“You got a summons from Him.”

Lithon pushed his sleeves up to his elbows, revealing his dark umber forearms that were rather toned for being a wizard. Sleeves back meant business. Secret business.

Lithon was the one of the few people in the city that was fully aware that Harlow was not who she seemed to be. And the Him could only mean her Guild Master.

“Was it a happy summons or an I’m-angry-with-you summons?”

Harlow gathered all the tomes on top of each other. Gah, now she had to return all her holds before she got to read them. Truly tragic.

“I don’t believe He has ever been happy in his life.”

Lithon grumbled and led her quickly back to the front desk.

Magdalanous was just down the hall leading the way with a student in tow so Lithon hopped behind the counter to log the books back in and place them in to-be-put-away

section. Even with such a pressing matter, he wasn't going to risk Magdalanous' wrath.

"OK... let's go go go."

They speed walked out the front and once outside it became a bit of a competition where she had no idea where they were going but had to try and be slightly ahead.

It seemed his path was heading towards Sanctuary, and when they turned left at the end of the road, it was fully confirmed.

Sanctuary was the original settlement area here and now served as a large courtyard of various open portals.

These portals led to different cities over the region.

As much as she'd like to directly port to her Guild Master, portal transportation was heavily monitored and regulated.

Sometimes even in a city of mages, wizards, sorcerers, and the like, you had to follow the rules.

Harlow grimaced.

She didn't like it, but here she was.

There wasn't a line for their destination, so they were able to speed walk right through and she held her breath as they entered.

Harlow knew it was superstitious, but she couldn't help it.

The act of it always put her on edge.

And when they emerged, she could see that even a well-traveled mage like Lithon felt the same way by the discoloration of the pressure from his hand that he left on her arm.

He let go and she rubbed the spot, thankful that it wasn't hard enough to leave any bruising on her russet skin.

The capital city was too large, too dirty, and way too busy for its own good.

But Harlow absolutely loved it as much as anyone who had fallen between the cracks of a society that still said it had no cracks in society.

It rose from the cliff faces as if naturally carved but by the various tones of stone texture, it couldn't have been natural.

Stone from all over the continent was brought there to symbolize different peoples coming together.

To show oneness through diversity.

Large multicolored fabric awnings stretched from peak to peak, causing shadows to dance among the lower buildings, giving its citizens shade and protection from the constant light drizzle of this region's weather.

Some districts utilized these shades as planters, which encouraged the full-sun-loving plant varieties to thrive.

The docks were well traveled and even with several layers of magic and constant attending to it was the oldest-looking area of the city.

There was a market that extended the length of the docks and several ships that floated around selling wares, food, cultural passes, and so forth.

It was the most expensive market in the city.

Although the capital was home to many and impressive, those who didn't wish to leave their boats to shop were waited on hand and foot. They paid well for the services and often maybe a little too much.

With the clientele generally having loose purse strings it made sense that the Thieves' Guild grew out of a side entrance.

Close enough to keep an eye on the goings-on and yet far enough to sneak away if needed.

Several of the businesses here looked away during some roguish interactions so that perhaps their goods wouldn't be targeted.

Lithon left her at the door; no way he was going in.

Although he had access, he wasn't a guild member, just on the payroll.

He did Harlow the honor of not leaving until she at least went in.

Harlow wasn't worried.

She was old and she was tired, not nervous of a meeting with the Guildmaster.

She just wished she could have taken a bath before or gotten something to eat on the way.

Either way she took relief knowing that the Guildmaster wouldn't have summoned her to waste her time like other council members.

Harlow thought they got lonely a lot.

He was standing behind his desk and she nodded as she closed the door behind her.

Lithon sucked his teeth yet simultaneously gave her the sign for good luck/you got this.

“Good. You're here.”

He tossed a paper on the desk and a large smile broke over his face.

“Yes, queue the parades, I have returned.”

Harlow gave it a little gusto and pantomimed a trotting horse but then she winced, realizing she was being a bit too weird. “And what is the cause for you to roll out the welcoming mat?”

She gestured at the small rug at the edge of the seating area. It was pitiful but he said it was good luck, so she stepped gingerly on it to show her respects... to the carpet, she guessed?

“Someone died.”

Words that were sad at first notice, but the smile on his face and the excitement in his eyes changed that to something a little more positive.

“Ah dang, hate how that sneaks up on ya.”

Harlow coughed to clear her throat and ran her tongue over her teeth.

“An apprentice.”

He dangled the words out in the open.

“Yes, well, hazard of the job, eh?”

She didn’t take the bait. Apprentices died all the time, nothing special. Sad, but not special.

“Daggerroot’s apprentice.”

He fluttered his hand about as if it meant less than it should, testing her.

“Oh.”

Her eyes widened and she started nodding to hype herself up. This is what she’d been waiting for. Well, not so much the death, but the opening left by the corpse... wait, no... that sounded wrong... The available position left by the corpse. Yeah, that was better.

“Yes, ‘oh’ indeed’.”

He was practically beaming as if it was something he personally arranged. Possible.

“How much time do we have?”

She began to run the numbers of who she knew from Talkisha that would likely be referred for the job.

“None.”

And that smile fell. A serious demeanor took over him faster than an open window at winter.

“Excuse me?”

She meant it. Harlow was offended.

“I called in some... favors. You’re in. You leave tonight.”

He grinned and the iridescent tooth he spent a year’s earnings on sparkled at her. It mocked her.

“Oh-okay. Yeah. This is good. Yeah, I got this.”

Harlow rocked on her knees like she was gearing herself up for something but instead just a series of creaks and cracks. Gah.

Guildmaster was used to her. After all, he and about 8 others raised her. He began to peel a grapefruit and portion it out on a plate.

“W-wait... how’d they die?”

Harlow stood completely still with her head tilted like an inquisitive dog.

“Got turned inside out.”

He took the grapefruit pieces and used his thumbs to press the back of it, forcing the juicy insides to burst their way out.

Fuck.

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The uneven pebbled courtyard was a poor choice.

Actually, the whole estate seemed to be a poor choice.

The carriage driver that brought Harlow from town didn't even bother to take the horses down the path.

Apprentice or not, the man seemed not to care.

Far enough out of town and into the coastal woods, the town's wide-cast translation spell couldn't reach this manor.

She didn't get to test this with the driver, though.

He didn't even speak to her or answer her.

He communicated with stares and gestures.

It was to the point that Harlow leaned halfway out the window of the carriage once it stopped to question him.

But he just stared equally intensely back at her.

Was this a test? Did all the apprentices have to go through this routine? Sure, she could have asked him why he and his horses didn't dare get closer to Daggerroot Manor but that would mean she'd have to break the silence first.

Harlow didn't know how this became a contest of silence, but it was and she was going to win it.

Mere moments passed but then it dawned on her that perhaps the Spellsaven would be watching from somewhere and all they would see was two grown adults glaring at one another and nothing happening.

She'd be late.

And even though wizards were never late, she couldn't risk such a social faux pas being the start of her life as an apprentice.

She leaned back into the carriage and began to crack each finger.

It was a terrible habit.

And an even more terrible one for a thief to have.

Any damage to her fingers could surely affect her quality of thieving.

But it just felt like it was a better option than wringing someone's neck.

Harlow took and held in a deep breath as she drew the curtain aside, this time to gaze out at the ill-kept manor instead of staring daggers at the driver.

This was it.

If she could just get through this, she would finally get approval from the Guildmaster.

And she needed that so badly. She needed his swing vote to secure her seat on the

council. If she could steal just this one thing, then she'd be able to start her own legacy. No one could forget her then.

Blowing the air back out slowly, she nodded to herself and opened the carriage door.

With careful steps to not trap her coat tail, Harlow grimaced when she fully emerged in the bright, cheerful sunlight.

Too cheerful.

Too bright.

As she brought a hand to her brow to ease her vision from being blown out, the carriage lumbered away.

She sucked in her breath and her stomach bottomed out.

She suddenly felt nauseous, and it wasn't from transitioning from a moving carriage to standing on solid ground.

No, it was that the carriage was her last chance to give up the ruse, to go back home and say "ENOUGH, I don't need to parade as a wizard, I'm a rogue, damn it."

The nausea was only kept at bay with mild panic – her things! She patted her coat, and sensing the anchor object that held the spell to access her actual things safely where it should be, she felt an overwhelming sense of frustration.

With herself.

She had been using these compartment dimensions for their things for the last few years.

It was incredibly difficult to get used to.

A target's greatest flaw was believing things were perfectly safe when out of sight.

Her natural instinct pulled her away from trusting her own magic.

The gravel crunched loudly, making any smooth arrival nearly impossible.

The manor's white paint was flecked and peeling in most places and what places still held paint were dirty enough that Harlow couldn't quite tell if it was supposed to be white or ivory.

A few shutters hung askew, and the windows were dark with grime.

The Spellsaven was legendary, and it would be so easy... basically thoughtless to cast a quick enough set of spells to fix up the manor, so why was it like this?

In the three years of studying magic, she couldn't ever really pin down why so many wizards were like this.

It was as if it was out of sight, they couldn't be bothered.

Or perhaps, such a messy appearance was a warning to stay away, that anyone's presence was indeed not welcome at all.

Harlow tested her weight on each stone step up to the porch and then with each floorboard so she wouldn't fall through.

The door was massive and the framing even larger.

It had to be solid oak.

There were intricate carvings of leaves and eyes of all different types.

She brushed her fingertips against the wood, which with just that easy motion, dirt parted and revealed runes written among the designs.

Protection spells from the quick look of it.

There might be more but without cleaning the whole frame, she couldn't be sure.

Above the door was a large stained-glass window depicting an eye with a golden iris that shone so brightly it cast a reflection upon the porch floorboards.

Harlow took another deep breath and let it out slowly.

She had to take the moment to put on her mask, to change just enough of herself to make her approachable.

To make her seem a well-mannered and eager apprentice.

She knocked boldly.

One should always knock boldly.

A knock is an announcement, a proclamation of you and yours.

Let all that hear or feel it know, you are very much here.

Don't let them doubt your existence, don't let them forget you are indeed here.

She stepped back and as she waited in a very practiced pose with both her hands clasped in front, she eyed the edge of the doorframe once again.

The door itself seemed slightly shorter on the right side, as if an odd shape, but when she took a half a step forward and eyed it closer, it seemed to pop back into its right-angled self. Unusual.

The brassy doorknob began to turn and with a gasp, Harlow stepped back into place.

The door creaked open but only so slightly.

Just enough to allow a person's mahogany-haired head to poke through.

Their long hair cascaded down like a curtain while a few large strands were caught on the various beads and angles of their glamoured earrings.

Harlow had heard a lot about the Spellsaven but no one, but no one, told her about how absolutely stunning they were.

Full, strong dark brows framed their golden eyes and she found herself caught between staring into them and following the way their jawline jutted just so into their chin.

“...Yes?”

One of those quirked brows lifted as whom she assumed was Daggerroot peered deeply at her.

Harlow shook her thoughts from her head and cleared her throat. She fought against herself to take a step back but decided against it and stretched her back to accentuate what height she had.

“Spellmaster Daggerroot, I'm Harlow Hedgewater.”

She winced slightly as the clearing of her throat didn't do a good enough job and her voice cracked a bit at the end.

"Hmm, never heard of you."

Daggerroot shrugged and started to close the door.

Panic began to edge in so Harlow stepped quickly forward, "I'm your new assistant? The guild reached out several times..."

"Ohhhh, that Harlow Hedgewater that's meant to be my assistant..."

A wide smile broke across their face as if it all made sense now and they opened the door a bit more. They were a bit taller than she expected.

Harlow let the breath out slowly that she caught herself holding and nodded with a curt, tiny smile, "Yes."

"Well, off with you. I'm in no need of an assistant."

Daggerroot shrugged and waved her off.

"But... you must."

Harlow's brows knit together, and instead of panic she felt a growing intense annoyance brewing.

"Must I?"

Daggerroot leaned now against the top of the doorframe with their left hand while holding onto the interior doorknob with their other. They seemed amused, which

Harlow was definitely not.

“Yes... it’s the law.”

Her patience was growing thin, which she expressed by almost hissing the words through her teeth.

“Well, that’s not a very good reason at all. Good day.”

They bowed their head and began to close the door with a quick shrug as if their attention was already drawn elsewhere.

“Please.”

Harlow heard the desperation in her voice and hated herself for it. That she would be brought to this point so quickly by just such little pushback. “I’m here and I understand that you might have some misgivings about new people but... I’m here. I deserve to be here...”

“Do you now, Harlow Hedgewater, assistant to Spellsaven Daggerroot?”

There it was again, that wide smirk now paired with eyes that caught the bright sunlight filtering through the cracks in the porch roof.

“Yes.”

She stared into those welcoming eyes. Hers were harsh thanks to the practice glaring at the driver when what seemed like days ago already.

“Hmm. Can you hold a pen?”

They crossed their arms and the several layers of their mismatched patterned clothing accented their movement with a gentle sway.

“Yes.”

What kind of question was this?

“Show me, then.”

Their lithe body was relaxed against the doorframe, but their expression was intense. It caught her off guard how quickly Daggerroot could shift between stoic and carefree.

Clearly now flustered, Harlow bristled as she began to pat down all her pockets. Each pat became more desperate than the last as she realized she did not actually have a pen anywhere on her person. Biting her lip, she refused to be dismissed and instead mimed holding a pen and wrote her own name on a completely and utterly ridiculously made sheet of imaginary paper.

Their smirk dropped and they leaned very far forward as they inspected her aerial writing. “Oh yes, that’s good.”

They nodded, very sure of themselves. Daggerroot backed up and opened the door wider.

“Welcome, then, to Daggerroot Manor.”

They stood completely off to the side to allow Harlow to enter on her own, unimpeded.

Her shoulders dropped as she finally relaxed, but only just a bit. “A rather... beautiful

home. I've always found the manors among and within these woods to be so interesting... they of course change their names with each owner but always end up feeling like home."

This line was practiced, something she thought might compliment such a wizard.

"Oh, it's never changed names."

The grin was back, the one that Harlow began to find herself favoring already. They were already moving around the foyer. It seemed to her that the Spellsaven was never quite at a perfect rest, always in motion and always fluidly in the middle of something.

"Oh, excuse me, I assumed it wasn't inherited. I apologize."

Great. Just great. She was already so uninformed, and it would have been such an easy thing to prepare for. It would be another thing she'd privately chastise herself for later.

They stretched their hands wide and gestured to as much as the foyer as they could, "It's always been Daggerroot Manor. When I came to live here, I changed my name in suit."

Ridiculous. "Wh-hy?"

Daggerroot stepped quickly around her and peered over her shoulder at the house with her. "Seems a shame to change a name. It was here first. I only exist within it as much as it allows me to. To have me arrive and change its name... seems like an eraser, yes?"

Harlow tried to ignore the closeness but their voice beside her ear spoke with such

excitement that she found herself tilting towards them. It was as if she could achieve viewing the world the same way they did if she just got close enough.

“And your name, did you not like it either?”

There was power in a name and to abandon one for the sake of a house seemed absurd. Was this why no one seemed to have enough information, let alone much of an opinion, on the Spellsaven?

“Oh, it was a perfectly fine name. I’m the same me, just with a new name. It suits me, I think. The house and I now make it a family name.”

She stepped aside with a shake of her head as she noticed herself watching just their lips. “It’s just a house.”

Daggerroot laughed and clapped their hands together. “Indeed! It really, really is!”

They turned quickly on their heel and headed off down the hall as if completely finished with their conversation.

It took two seconds of confusion as she watched them leave to decide if she was meant to follow them or not. Harlow started down after them but refused to hurry to catch up. She would take up all the space and time she needed. That was mostly for herself. She had to establish boundaries. She may be a charlatan, a ghost of a wizard, but she was still Harlow. And with that Spellsaven would have to adjust to her just as much as she adjusted to them. It was one thing that getting older had taught her, although it was something she wished her younger self would have learned much, much earlier.

As she followed down the hall, she took the time to inspect the peeling damask wallpaper, the once-soggy, now-dried baseboards, and the state of things. With the

general upkeep of the estate outside, she assumed that perhaps the inside would be immaculate. After all, even a recluse would be faced with looking at everything every single day. But no, it matched the distressed state just the same. The Spellsaven was, although eccentrically dressed, well dressed all the same and appeared to be fairly clean, so why did that not extend into their home?

Harlow peered up a grand staircase that would have been far better suited to have been at the main entrance instead of stashed at the end of this corridor, and gazed up into the darker-than-it-should-be second floor landing. A sudden chill blew across her, causing Harlow to pull her arms around herself. “Quite chilly in here, hmm?”

Popping from around the corner, the Spellsaven surprised her with a reply and a quirked brow. “Yes, yes it is.”

Their tone was curious, on the verge of a scolding, but they said no more and continued down the adjoining well-lit hallway.

They walked at such a brisk pace that Harlow felt as if they were about to be incredibly late. Daggerroot would pause at each door, knock, and open the door with a flourish to show Harlow the room inside. With each open door, Harlow crossed her arms behind her and tipped forward to peek inside.

Each room was barely kept and sparsely decorated. But the ones that had any sort of personality... oh, they had PERSONALITY. There was barely a spare inch of space between various portraits and paintings hung up along the walls. Fabric would drape corners and danced across lavishly dressed windows. All topped with a rather inelegant layer of dust.

It was about after the eighth door that Harlow cleared her throat. “I was under the impression it was just us here. Will I be meeting the other inhabitants today?”

“There’s no other inhabitants other than us and whatever spare creature that might find its way briefly inside.”

She was confused. “Then why the knocking?”

To emphasize her point, she knocked on the door she had just peeked through – dry reagent storage. Exciting enough for the stock but nothing out of the ordinary for a spellcaster.

“Well, it would be rude to open a door without a knock, yes?”

Daggerroot chuckled as if it was a quirk of the region, a cultural expectation, before turning on their heel and heading around the corner.

Harlow cracked two of her knuckles this time. The questions she asked seemed pointless when given the odd replies from the Spellsaven. They responded as if the answer was to be expected and perfectly rational. She took the next few moments for herself. Her expectations had been wrong. And that was on her. If she didn’t readjust her way of approaching Daggerroot, her entire time there would be mounting frustration after frustration and that would only lead to resentment. She reminded herself her overall mission was not to get answers from them – not in the way that such roundabout suggestions would matter. She only needed to get the relic.

Finding a new sense of calm, Harlow followed after and was surprised to find that around that corridor was yet again what appeared to be the same exact darkened staircase. The Spellsaven was waiting for her at the bottom and when she saw them she noticed herself smiling.

The wizard was tapping their foot only slightly impatiently but the ease with which they held themselves kept Harlow’s attention. Which was saying something when she found herself gazing down their chest where their white silken undershirt was left

untied down to their navel.

Catching herself and heavily embarrassed at that, Harlow looked back up the staircase, wishing for another cool breeze to chill the heat in her face. Daggerroot glanced upstairs again, and their face scrunched with frustration.

There was a quick murmur and a wave of the hand as the upstairs finally illuminated. Without looking back, Daggerroot climbed the stairs, taking two at a time with their robes billowing behind them. Watching them climb, Harlow wondered why they seemed bothered when looking upstairs. For a person who seemed to have emotions on their sleeve, it was the ones that they pulled back that intrigued her. This wizard seemed so uncomplicated. What was that like?

Harlow spotted them at the end of the hall when she finally caught up and they leaned against the wall outside one particular door. The frame of it was cleaned and oiled, quite a change from all the others, and it looked like the doorknob was new or at the very least recently polished.

“And these are yours.”

Daggerroot took a large deep bow and gestured to the door.

Harlow tilted her head and surveyed the wizard. They still held their bow, and she began to wonder, why was it she wanted them to like her? Why would it matter if her every day could be met with such a free spirit like Daggerroot? She wanted to do her job, of course, so why was it she was now wanting more?

With her attention back on the door, she shrugged and gave the door a steady but polite knock. And then it dawned on her. Why was such a knock so different than how she felt hours ago when she first arrived? Hadn't she even thought how a knock was important? A proclamation of existence. What were these knocks if not to just

announce to the world, “Yes, I exist!”

As she turned the doorknob, she feathered a quick peek back down to Daggerroot where she noticed a corner of a smirk on those tinted lips.

The room beyond was at least three times larger than her quarters back at the Thieves’ Guild. She never needed much, so a bed, a side table, and a simple chest were basically all she kept. She hadn’t even decorated as she was always worried that she could leave any private information for others to steal and sell. But this room, this room she could spin around with all of her skirts and it wouldn’t touch a single thing. There was an animal portrait of a white, curly-haired dog above the mantel; the fire was unlit but the wood pile was fully stocked.

“This? This is all mine?”

It made sense to her that there would be large rooms in a manor such as this one, unkept or not, but the reality of it being hers was something she didn’t prepare herself for. It was such a shame she wouldn’t be staying longer than she had to. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t enjoy it while she had it.

“As long as you’ll have us.”

Daggerroot smirked from the hallway and then mimed a tipping of a hat. “I’ll leave you be for the evening. Rest up, we have a big day tomorrow.”

Harlow dipped her head politely as the Spellsaven left and she turned to the room once again after closing the door softly.

She had much to do.

The room would have to be inspected and she’d have to place her own set of safety

runes. All standard for a thief. But for now she could take her time and live a little.

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Finding the kitchen was the top priority.

And it should have only taken two minutes to get there but due to some serious unforeseen morning fog, it took Harlow a full fifteen minutes of wandering the halls and staircases.

It should have been very apparent when Daggerroot gave her such a tour but perhaps she was more distracted than she thought.

Nevertheless, the whistle of a ready tea kettle drew her in the right direction, and she found Spellsaven Daggerroot occupied with steeping a tea bag in a rather oversized and chipped violet teacup.

The steam from the freshly poured water fogged the lenses of the half-moon spectacles they were wearing.

“Good morning, Spellsaven.”

Harlow shot them a wide smile.

It was time to turn on the charm.

Friends tell friends secrets, and she desperately needed that vault location, or hell, any information about this relic at all.

The Guildmaster was quite tight-lipped, and Harlow still didn't know if it was because he didn't know what this relic was exactly or if it was part of the challenge

for her to locate it.

Either way, forming a friendship would be the easiest route. And one she found herself wanting to accomplish anyway.

There was a flash of a grimace upon their face before they turned, glasses still fogged.

“Good morning, Spellsaven Apprentice Hedgewater.

I understand formality might be difficult to break but if you could be so kind as to just call me Atlas.

It would be much less confusing in the long term when establishing which Daggerroot you’re talking to.”

Confusion knitted her brows together and Harlow looked around the empty-save-for-them room. “Other Daggerroots?”

“Yes, yes. The House and I.”

Atlas took a sip, winced at what seemed to be still way too hot water, and set the teacup back on its saucer with a klink.

“...Why would I be talking to the house...”

It was more a question for herself but she had said it aloud and the Spellsaven... no, Atlas, recoiled in a bit of offense. “...before lunch...”

She was grasping at straws but it was what popped in her head at the moment.

“Ahhh, yes.”

Atlas chuckled. “Yes, that’s true, hahah.”

As quickly as it came, Atlas’s demeanor grew serious and they narrowed their eyes, “Before lunch would be a mistake.”

The seriousness slipped so quickly away that Harlow felt she had some sort of social whiplash. However, appeased, Atlas returned to the kettle and began to refill it at the overly large porcelain double sink.

Harlow tried to shake the confusion that must be written across her face and began to check the cupboards for any makings of breakfast.

She hadn’t eaten since the night before when there was a quick knock and an awaiting tray of salad, carrots, and other snack-like items was left outside her door.

Atlas must have run quickly away to give her privacy.

The cupboards and the upright icebox were more of the same. Leafy greens, various forms of potatoes, mushrooms galore, and somehow unsurprisingly, a lack of spices.

She slowly closed the door with a sigh. She could kill for some sweet sausage, a fried egg, and some rice. Her craving must have been internally felt because her stomach echoed her disappointment with a low growl.

“Oh my, quite the hunger pain, hmm? Would you like me to get something together for you? When we go into town later, I’ll introduce you to Buttons so you can place your preference for provisions.”

Atlas had backed up against the counter and was blowing lightly on the surface of

their tea.

“That sounds lovely. Any chance you can point me in the direction of any breakfast meats?”

“Oh, well. I wish I could. But there is none here.”

“I didn’t realize you were vegetarian. I’m sorry, I’ll make sure not to introduce any animal products then...”

“Nah, go ahead. I am a vegetarian, but it’s not because of that.”

“Why then?”

“Because I hate plants.”

“You hate plants?”

“Absolutely. They’re cunning and ruthless and they think so little of everyone else.”

Atlas’s tone was serious, and Harlow waited an unnaturally long time to see if Atlas would break into laughter or admit it was a joke. Only crickets. So, not a joke then.

Harlow nodded slowly with wide-open eyes before turning to the icebox. She selected a few greens and made yet another salad.

“Am I allowed to know where we are going today?”

Harlow teased.

“Why wouldn’t you be allowed such information? Are you used to others holding

things back from you?”

Atlas took a crooked sip from their teacup.

It was abrupt, came out of nowhere, and totally accurate.

Harlow did not like it.

How could they determine such a thing about her having met only less than a day ago? Perhaps Harlow was letting her face do the talking again.

She was a professional, damn it.

Even this inner turmoil must have been on display, for Atlas continued, “We’re going to Saddlewood to meet with the people we will be working with over the next few months.

It’s also where I have a standing order for provisions, so anything you need or want, you’ll have to order it from there.”

Harlow nodded since a mouth full of lettuce would be unbecoming to talk around.

Finally, at least something she expected.

Spellsavens were wizards for the people; their services were always highly regarded and no trade was needed.

The catch was that Spellsavens were usually so busy with other tasks for society that the average person had difficulty getting to them in a reasonable amount of time.

However, Spellsavens regularly sent out their apprentices to do appearances and

social tasks.

They wouldn't let their apprentices go solo for a few years though, so if anyone wanted anything from a Spellsaven, the time they got a new apprentice was the best time to query.

For Harlow, it would be busy work.

However, she'd be able to watch Atlas and their spellcasting closely.

Perhaps they had a tell or a certain way they cast spells that made their casting unique.

If she could figure that out, then it stood to reason she could work backward and then perhaps reverse cast any spells protecting the vault.

Atlas whisked himself off to pack for the visit to town and Harlow decided tea actually did sound perfect.

There was an early morning chill that lasted longer out here closer to the woods than it did along the coast this season and some spiced tea was subtly calling her name.

She pulled the stained-glass kettle from its resting place back upon the burner and after reading the simple fire rune etched onto the stove, she dragged her finger over it to activate.

Nothing.

She pulled a ribbon from her pocket and tied her hair back so she could get a better look at the rune.

She could have sworn she'd seen Atlas use the same burner.

From a closer inspection, there was no reason why it shouldn't work.

The ruin was perfectly drawn and had no specifics such as identity to activate it.

It was a rune that was found in just about every household. Bizarre.

Harlow took a deep breath to release her frustration and shook her head in annoyance.

She'd have to keep her own list of things she'd have to fix around the manor.

For now, she reached into one of the enchanted pockets and withdrew a clove of petrified black garlic.

With a murmur, a small flame came from her fingertip and straight to the stovewick, lighting it.

Not one to trust something that didn't make logical sense, Harlow leaned back against the large kitchen island to keep an eye on the flame.

Nothing was going to get past her.

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Harlow was softly stewing.

Not enough to pass across her features but enough for her to not engage in conversation.

The hamlet that she and Atlas were heading to was about an hour or two away from Daggerroot Manor.

What she expected was that the Spellsaven would use their unlimited portal license to... let's say...

PORTAL THERE... but here they were, walking the tightly packed dirt roads.

The fact the weather was so cheery only made her stew more.

It was also at this moment that she noticed the silence didn't bother Atlas.

They were cheerfully stopping every few feet to pick a long-stemmed flower and weave it into an admittedly rather intricate flower crown.

The flowers, individually, could be dried and processed for the base of a cleaning spell but otherwise were completely useless.

Stewing in her own slightly bad attitude, Harlow couldn't bring herself to inquire just what their intention with it was.

Taking a break from reciting useful spells in her mind that the residents might need,

Harlow realized that even if she wanted to she didn't really know how to strike up a conversation from out of the blue.

At one point was the ease of talking to strangers or people you just met a thing that younger people were capable of? Why with more life experience was it hard to reach out, to start that conversation?

Instead of just going for it, Harlow chose instead to overthink every word in the question "What are you making that for?" as well as any way that each of those words could change with inflection.

By the time she settled on the perfect combination of wording – "That's an interesting flower sculpture"

– just in case it was not a crown, and she would be caught assuming – her thoughts were interrupted by a sight down the road.

The silhouettes of the town up ahead were just visible as the trees on either side parted.

It was not any kind of special-looking town compared to any of the others.

It had a fair mix of wooden slats and some of the more permanent buildings...

mostly shops... had stonework likely carved out of the quarry not too far away.

But the town was sweet and small.

The kind of place that people from the busier cities would go to retire and live out their days.

Which was always kind of a silly thought to Harlow.

She had grown up in the city, but it wasn't a stretch to wonder why people left to smaller towns.

As if the business of the city would mean less busy work for you.

Did they not understand that it would be the same amount of work if not more? You'd have to be an active member of the community.

You'd be one bad storm season away from not being able to live comfortably anyway.

Why was it you would "do your time" for the city community but then expect the rural/outskirt community to take your promise of work on your word alone?

The town here was a happy medium between that. There was a central road that held many shops from basic to highly specific, like Indigo's dye shop. That, now that she thought about it, it was vaguely familiar. If memory served her right, then maybe it was the same place where she used to buy pigment reagents for certain spells; high quality and made by hand. Not produced like in Quarkosh.

Just as soon as Harlow was lost in the motions of watching the town's movements and reading the signs, a few children ran to the main road, spied Atlas and shouted hellos as loudly as they could. One particular little one approached from behind the small group of children. They didn't seem to try to speak, which was for the best as the other children were loudly chatting and requesting Atlas to do all sorts of magic.

"Fireworks, Spellsaven, a sea of fireworks!"

"Make me fly, Spellsaven!"

“Turn me into a rat, Spellsaven, then I can go scare my brother!”

Harlow stayed quiet, observing the tossing of hair and the way Atlas merrily interacted with the children. They conjured an elemental rabbit; it seemed to be made of snow, for as it hopped, it left snowflakes in the breeze in its wake. The children cheered and careened after the rabbit, eager to see who would catch it first. But the child that kept in the back didn't run. She waited till they all left, and Atlas looked down at them with a large smile.

“Happy birthday, Sophia.”

Atlas bowed deeply, which caused a grin to spread across Sophia's cheeks.

Upon her head, they placed the flower crown. The little one beamed and motioned for Atlas to come closer, in which they took a knee and leaned forward so Sophia could whisper in their ear. Atlas leaned back and laughed while Sophia took a step back.

“Well, consider it done, Sophia.”

There was a moment where Sophia stood, awkwardly clasping her hand and wiggling in place as if to decide how to respond before waving goodbye at Atlas and taking a step back to leave. Sophia stopped, turned to face Harlow, and then waved again before racing to catch up with the other children.

“What did she ask for, Spellsaven?”

Harlow placed bets even though Atlas asked for the use of their first name, they were not in the house therefore public appearances must appear to be ship-shape.

“Apprentice, I couldn't tell! But perhaps I'll ask for your assistance with it later.”

Atlas winked.

The two of them continued down the road until they got to a large stone building with a glorious glass front. There were tiers of various items in the windows, and it appeared to have an enchantment on the glass to not leave fingerprints. Cosmetic spells on smooth services like glass required a specialized frame. One exactly like this large pane of glass sat in. It wasn't even that good of a guess, as most entry-level wizards learned this spell to pay it forward in the community.

Harlow leaned closer to the window and cast a quick detect magic spell. It revealed that the spell had built-in backups in case of weather or even purposeful damage. It was a rather tightly written and cast spell. Complicated and beautiful, even. With the detect magic spell she even was able to get the smell of the spellwork. One that smelled of campfire: Atlas'.

"Is this your work?"

Harlow slyly asked Atlas as they held the front door open.

"Of course. I traded a month's worth of groceries for it and I'm still eating canned peaches from it."

Atlas beamed with the bragging of their business savviness.

Harlow walked into the shop, "Buttons", and looked around. If she was blindfolded and walked in, she would have sworn it was a bakery for the smell of baked breads, sweets, and the general warmth of the shop was like a fire-warmed shawl wrapped around her. The lighting – more of Atlas's handiwork by the look of it – was warm and came from simple globe sconces around the room. The floor was wood and had matching large wooden shelving aisles packed with various foods and necessities.

“We get all our provisions from this shop, they deliver what we don’t carry, and we can have standing orders. I’ll introduce you so you can add whatever you’d like to the list.”

Although large, the shop did seem emptier than she imagined but as they approached the counter, Harlow noticed there was a whole separate cashier who seemed to be pulling a folder at a time, having a busboy run the shop who then returned with a basket and began to place them in large, uniform baskets and packaging. The cashier would make some kind of notes in the folder and then a different pair of individuals grabbed the baskets and packages and ran out the door. It seems this standing order business was something everyone participated in.

Fighting the urge to track down whatever smelled like warm butter rolls, Harlow waited patiently for one of the runners to return and approach the wizards.

“Ah Daggerroot, it’s good to see you!”

“As you, Tiberious! I’d like you to meet my apprentice, Harlow Hedgewater.”

“Quite nice to meet you, apprentice. How is the pragmatic troublemaker treating you thus far?” A tease.

“I’ve only arrived as of yesterday so... opinions are still out.”

Atlas grinned to back up Harlow who correctly caught on to the two’s relationship.

“Well, you came to the right place for recon.”

The tall raven-haired orc managed a quick wink.

“Hmmm, perhaps I should stay...”

Atlas feigned a suspicious glance between the two of them.

“You weren’t going to in the first place?”

Harlow cast a glance around, looking to see if there was a line of waiting quest givers or an emergency that escaped her.

“No, I have other things to attend to that I might as well tackle.”

The Spellsaven sounded like they wanted to do anything but what they planned. They didn’t even spare an insight into what that might be but the general lack of attention in their body, the droopiness as they groaned while they spoke sounded akin to a teenager having been asked to do a household chore.

“...sure... okay.”

Harlow began to doubt herself just then. Sure, adding groceries and other amenities was not a problem. “Should I come find you when I’m done?”

“No, that’s quite alright. I’ll give you a list of people to check in with.”

Harlow believed her face was expressionless but she must have winced outwardly after all. Harlow was a grown-ass woman. She had very much been able to function her whole life on her own. Her doubts were not about her own abilities but rather, how well she’d be able to make up for the warming presence Atlas gave this town’s citizens. She couldn’t live up to that. Fooling one target that she was a wizarding apprentice, sure, but a whole town of people who might be suspicious of anyone? That would be more difficult.

“Ha, do not worry. It’ll be a rather short list.”

She was slightly embarrassed to be discussing this in front of the shopkeeper, but it seemed having your wits about you and being ready for any sort of awkward situation was a regular thing with Spellsaven.

“Don’t you want to watch me so I don’t mess up?”

“Hah, what I will say is that I trust you. You’re capable, smart, and as I can tell, incredibly determined. You’ll figure it out your own way. Magic is but of a vessel of intention.”

Harlow wasn’t sold on it. Apprehension drenched her veins. This had to be a test. No doubt about it. Not even 2 hours had passed and a Spellsaven was leaving her alone with community members? A test indeed. If she messed up it wouldn’t affect her so much as the relationship the town had with their local wizard. And that was a delicate balance. Long repeated mistakes in community relationships were wrought throughout the contentious history. Many a wizard had been run off. Some were even replaced with hedgemages, sorcerers, or even... dare she say it... the deity-inspired (paladins, clerics).

A younger, more rebellious her would very much test this trust to its extent by taking her sweet time to answer the likely never-ending requests. But her performance was important, and like it or not, she was no longer a younger her, although maybe still just as rebellious sort of woman who would do as she was told but her way. If she wanted to secure that spot on the council she’d have to play along. Besides the spot at risk it was the favor of the Guild Master and although she wouldn’t like to admit it, the approval of her father figure was important to her. Being older meant realizing that you were your own person and yet still an amalgam of interpretations of what other people thought you were. For now, she wasn’t ready to risk cutting that cord. She wasn’t going to start over. So, if being an apprentice was what it took, then that’s what she’d do.

She'd pass whatever test this was. Or, perhaps it was that the Spellsaven wished to fuck off the rest of the day. The state of the manor might suggest this but Harlow had no other evidence of a lack of work ethic on Atlas' part. Perhaps her natural apprehension of people in charge of her was falsely placed here.

Atlas reached within their robes to produce a pen and a rather wrinkled piece of parchment. After writing down a list of names, Atlas handed them both to a confused Harlow, who attempted to hand the pen back.

“Nah, keep it. Now you'll always have one.”

They got her there. All that pocket space and not a pen in sight. Taking the tease at it was she placed it in a normal, unimpressive pocket of her pants and turned her attention back to the shopkeeper to give Atlas an out.

And they took that out rather quickly. The space they once occupied was now only a brighter and direct sight to a bread basket topped fully with buttered crescent rolls.

Harlow added various meats for delivery, a cardamom and cinnamon fine ground coffee, and other *THINGS* to the standing order after avoiding copious questions from the shopkeeper and various customers about Manor Daggerroot. (They oddly didn't have many questions about the Spellsaven. Perhaps they'd had their fill of them already. Harlow could DEFINITELY see their eccentric nature tiring some people.)

Now with a crumpled list in her hands, she made her way down the center of town and looking to find all the lists, taking the opportunity to introduce herself as the apprentice whenever she could.

The shopkeeper drew a little map on the back of her list of the residences she needed to visit. (Along with a frowny face or a smiley face to indicate if he thought they were

grumpy individuals or not.) She decided that if she could finish her list early enough, she might be able to leave a message with Tiberious that she went home (assuming Atlas wasn't waiting for her) and then she could make it back to the Manor before them. That way she could get even a few precious minutes to search the manor without them in the house. And if/when questioned, she could easily reply that it was a misunderstanding. And that kind of excuse/situation could really only be used one time before suspicion could set in.

There was one name on the list now: Bethal. No last name, nothing but a frowny face. In fact, it was the only frowny face on the paper at all which begged the question, why even draw the smiley faces at all. Clearly overthinking it, she cleared her thoughts and continued down a path that wove around the town's local garden park and next to a refuge for a CREATURE.

Gah, she had never seen one up close before and it was so tempting to just see if she could spot it from the road. Clearly it was taken care of by the community and the fact no one was around with no fences seemed to mean it would be fairly friendly as well. But duty called.

The property was outlined with various flowering plants; nothing seemed to be planted anywhere unless it had a flower. There was a modest two-story home in the center of the acreage. Cut stone, so it was expensive or an important building at one time. The grounds were maintained meticulously either by spell or by hand, Harlow didn't bother to check. There'd be time for that much later.

Harlow knocked on the door and heard nothing in reply. She looked cautiously around her, tipping back. Perhaps she could visit this one another day... but Atlas had written the name down on purpose. So, they likely were expecting the Spellsaven at the very least. Giving it another shot, Harlow knocked again, with extra vigor just in case.

“Around back, Spellsaven!”

An older, feminine voice echoed from behind the building. Being cautious to mind the obviously very well-taken-care-of plants, Harlow tiptoed around the home utilizing the paving stones. She almost lost her balance a few times but managed to stay on task and on stones. When she rounded the corner, she noticed an older woman on her knees in full gardening gear: a large woven coned hat, linen leggings with extra padding in the knees, long sleeves and impressively large gardening gloves. She was surrounded by various tools.

Although the woman didn't look up when she was within range, she did toss the trowel gently on the bed of flowers in progress of being planted, before standing and dusting her hands off on her pants.

She seemed taken back when her eyes squinted and she features pinched. “You're not the Spellsaven.”

“Correct, I'm their apprentice, Harlow Hedgewater. The Spellsaven sent me to assist you.”

She managed her biggest smile, one with teeth even though she ached to cover them with a hand out of personal embarrassment.

“Well, you're no good, off with you.”

She flitted her hand at Harlow, beckoning her to leave.

Excuse me? No good? She may not be Spellsaven but her work stood for itself. Sure, the Guild Master got her this job in his own way but she still had to do SO MUCH WORK. There were tests she had to pass all on her own, magic she had to wield in lieu of wanting to handle it with her hands, not her words, and here this old lady was

telling her she wasn't good enough. Pshaw, what could an old lady want from the Spellsaven out here in the middle of nowhere that she couldn't do?

Harlow cleared her throat, using the action to manifest clearing the negative energy, and took a tentative step forward. "I'm afraid I've been assigned to help you, so please, at the very least, could you let me know what you're in need of and if I cannot perform such a task, then I can better inform the Spellsaven for you?"

The old lady chuckled and rolled her eyes. "Fine. Fine. I need my irrigation wheel to be constant."

She gestured to a series of bamboo poles positioned all about the property, all irrigation lines being fed from a source that was currently out of sight.

There was a pause that Harlow needed to take for herself as she went through her mind to find out how this impossibly simple task would require anyone beyond a novice. Hells, even a first-year student could perform such a duty. There had to be something else wrong with it. Something unspoken. Perhaps this wheel was no ordinary wheel.

"OK, may I see this wheel?"

The old woman grumbled under her breath but nonetheless escorted her over the central line, and, well... it was just a typical bamboo-fashioned wheel. OK, so nothing unique.

"And you need it to run non-stop...?"

"Yes, so all I have to do is open the irrigation line and it'll feed everything else through. I need it weather-proofed as well... And tamper-proof! Just in case that creature messes with it again."

“OK, no problem.”

Harlow began to reach into her pockets, another feather in her supply turning to dust and now joining the almost overflowing pocket of reagent dust.

“—what are you doing?”

The old woman held out a hand as if to pause her from afar.

Harlow looked over her shoulder in confusion before turning back to the woman.
“...I’m getting the reagents for the spell...”

“No.”

The depth in which this woman reached into her soul and spoke with her whole chest led to Harlow going instantly pale.

“Excuse me? What do you mean no?”

She remembered checking her tone as she spoke back, trying with all the patience she had to not sound offended or brash.

“I’m quite sure you know that no means no. I will not have you cast a spell right here.”

The old woman raised an eyebrow, studying Harlow’s reaction.

“Then... well... why not?”

Gaining any extra time to peruse the manor was fleeting before her eyes and Harlow tried REALLY hard not to roll those same eyes. What did this lady want from her?

“Because, just if anyone comes over here and throws spells around, it could upset the flowers!!”

The old woman seemed equally frustrated and gestured at the garden around them as if the answer was clear enough.

“It’s not like I’m throwing a spell to land anywhere. I’m an apprentice to the Spellsaven. I can manage a simple spell without any... ricochet.”

Harlow felt a pang of annoyance but more for Atlas than this woman. Was this why they suddenly had something to do? Did Atlas and this woman argue until the sun went down? Which one was more stubborn?

“Sure, sure, but my plants and I require a deft hand. One that I’ve only seen the Spellsaven use.”

Bethal’s eyes flicked down to Harlow’s stiffly presented hands.

Harlow stood there, unsure of what to do from here. She needed to cross this lady off her list but how was she going to do this if she couldn’t cast the spell? The wheel was large and needed to be in place for her to cast it. She couldn’t enchant it back at the manor and bring it back.

If the old woman only trusted Atlas, maybe she needed to act like Atlas... or in a way they themselves might approve of.

“OK, we don’t want to upset the plants, they’re clearly doing well just like they are...”

Harlow managed these words through her teeth, “So, as their gardener... and friend... how would you think they’d like someone like me... to cast a spell near them?”

“They need to trust you and magic can go awry even years later.”

She tossed her hands up in the air.

“And. How. Do. You. Suggest. I do that.”

The crowns of Harlow’s teeth clenched against each other.

Wait, what was that? Was that a little smirk right there? Maybe Harlow missed it, but it definitely was a quick upturn of the mouth. “Prove that you understand them.”

She walked briskly a few yards near the home to a potting table.

“How should I do that?”

Harlow was getting tired of leading this woman.

The woman returned with a small pot no bigger than a fist. She pressed her finger down in the soil and dropped in a seed, covered it back up, and handed it to Harlow.

“Make it bloom.”

Harlow began to raise her hand to cast a gardening spell. Simple enough.

“NO MAGIC.”

She dropped the hand. “No magic?”

“Yes, show the plant... and me that you can listen and pay attention. Show us that you don’t need magic to survive, to let things live.”

She placed her hands hastily on her hips.

“How long will that take”

Harlow curled her lip.

“As long as it takes.”

“And what about your wheel?”

“It’ll keep. Return to me when it blooms and I’ll let you cast your spells, whatever you need. But, if you use magic on it at any time, I’ll know.”

“And then?”

“You’ll be a failure.”

The woman said it in such a matter-of-fact way that it caught her off guard. With that the woman returned to her planting and settled back upon her knees, clearly dismissing her presence.

Harlow fought back from saying “Failure, hardly knew her”

as a reaction to the old woman’s extremely well aimed barb. Failure was something Harlow simply didn’t do. But acting a wizard far beyond her level was the hardest thing she’d had to do and the reality that failure was a bigger probability than success in this moment on this lawn with this godsawful pot of dirt was a reminder to buckle down and stay on task.

Halfway to the front, she paused and yelled back. “And what is this plant supposed to be?”

“A bleeding heart! I thought it rather fitting, considering.”

Harlow paused and was offended yet again. Smiley face on the paper indeed. That was a good call. She shifted the pot to one side and gingerly traced her way back. It was tough to fight the urge to avoid the stepping stones and stomp on the grass out of spite. However, what if by chance, it was a special type of grass that fought back? She thought the old lady didn't think she could do it. So, that was the best way to handle her... prove that she could. It was time to call it a day and head back. She did the list... save the old woman... and that was that.

The town was settling for the evening, children returning to their homes and other businesses' lights fluttering on as there was a shift from work hours to play hours. Even on the way out here, life still echoed life at the port.

Out in front of Buttons was Atlas, chatting up the shopkeeper, or was the shopkeeper chatting them up? It was hard to tell as they were both almost equally animated. When Harlow got close enough, Atlas waved her over. There goes any time to find the vault today.

“Ah, you've returned! How did it go?”

“Great except for Bethal. Seems she doesn't trust me yet.”

“Mmm. And what's that?”

Harlow raised it up for Atlas to spy inside the small pot. “A plant... well, a seed, actually.”

Atlas physically revolted back with clear disgust on their face.

Harlow raised her spare hand, palm out to them defensively. “I don't really have a

choice. She says I need to have this bloom before she'll let me help her."

"Hmm, typical Bethal... Well, do what you must."

Atlas encouraged Harlow but glared back down at the ever-so-tiny pot and made the "watching you"

gesture to it, not her.

Saying their goodbyes, Harlow began the walk back before Atlas stopped her.

"We'll just port back."

"Wait, why didn't we do that to begin with?"

"Because I needed the flowers to make a birthday crown for Sophia, of course."

She needed a break. Just five minutes to herself. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Yes, of course."

Atlas began gesturing for the portal spell and then Harlow took a step back, causing Atlas to freeze.

"What?"

"If we take a portal back to the manor, while I'm holding the plant... will that count as using magic on the plant..."

Atlas tilted their head. "Well, it technically is cast on us both and whatever is upon us so it does stand to reason..."

“And even if not... it’d have trace magic on it, yes?”

“A very minuscule amount with an extended half-life, yes.”

Harlow looked down at her cupped hands and sighed. “Great. Just great.”

She started back down the road back to the manor herself, “I’ll meet you there then!”

Perhaps the walk would help cool her agitated mood. But perhaps not.

It took only a few kicked pebbles for her to realize that she wasn’t alone. Atlas trailed behind her at a leisurely pace, not having ported back and instead walking with her.

Perhaps the walk back wouldn’t be so bad. To be honest with herself, it was a long walk and one she would never care to take on her own, mood or not. And with that, their very presence seemed to soothe her rough edges and she found herself attempting to find a suitable name for her plant. That’s what people did, right, name plants?

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A few weeks with DeeDee... the plant name was still a work in progress... a difficult one at that...

proved a fair amount of time to suffer the dipping lows of browned edges post sprouting to indicate overwatering and even a bit of sunburned leaves from experimenting with dozens of placements of the sproutling around the manor.

At first, her room seemed like the best place, for privacy.

But, in the end it worked out better for that to be one of the last places.

Sure, she slept there every night but other than that she spent such little time, it became a chore to check back in on the sproutlings' progress and record it in her log.

The log seemed like a great idea at the time but it became another task. A fiend for lists, Harlow loved the initial creation of it and the first few days of reporting "No sign of growth, soil moist, sun adequate..."

it wasn't... and there was no high quite like the one that she got when recording that tiny little blip that broke the surface of the soil but damn, it was slow.

Atlas stayed a fair distance away at first but their interest seemed to be too much and they slowly orbited closer around the pot.

That was what took up most of her time, which was a bit of an expectation adjustment.

Being a Spellsaven's assistant seemed like it would be an exciting and busy time but day after day Atlas did not assign her much.

The few times they asked for an enchantment here and there, Harlow pressured herself to succeed.

The only other thing they asked of her was to create a list of things she wanted to learn or questions that plagued her mind.

Harlow looked down at the blank sheet on her desk.

It mocked her from its spot.

The gleam of a clean, unspoiled paper bore into her and she felt that although the paper didn't have eyes, that if it did, they would follow her around the room.

What kind of assignment was this? Was this a test? Here she was overthinking it again and the worst part was she KNEW she was overthinking it.

Knew that she just needed to write anything, anything at all.

Finally, Harlow pulled her chair back in her workroom and sat firmly in the chair with a huff.

If she could grow a plant from a seed then why not come up with at least one thing? Was it because she had so many things she wanted to learn? Was it that she just came from a place where she had access to endless knowledge so what more questions could she ask? That was what Atlas was here for, to show her what SHE needed to learn out here in the wide wide world.

Or was it the clawing, sinking feeling that after this task, she'd be done and gone?

Back into her world of taking and sneaking and not at all in a place of feeling magic like this.

That she was unworthy or that she was anything but a wizard.

Harlow tapped her fingers on the side of the desk as if there was some secret combination of tapping that could ease this headache from taking over her.

One that she'd likely summoned herself as an excuse to put this off just one more day.

With a quick look out into the hallway, Harlow allowed herself to slouch in her seat and it felt GOOD.

Atlas wasn't one that commented on form or posture and they hardly practiced standing straight let alone still.

The posture of an avid student, of someone who was pursuing knowledge was straight back, chin up, hands in front when looked upon.

Students, learners, knowledge seekers were creatures that needed SPACE.

They draped themselves about, huddled over their work, feet found anywhere but the floor.

Now that was a student.

Surely no one could judge Harlow for allowing herself a little bit of dropping into a similar state.

One she accented with a hand idly tracing the part in her hair where her short side

met up against long hair that now cascaded down and about the desk.

What to write? What to ask for? What could help the community? That's what Spellsavens did best.

Her thoughts went to Saddlewood, and although from a big city, it was difficult for her to think of what the town didn't have.

Or didn't have by choice.

Boundary lines for safety.

This seemed like a good enough start; if she were to head out, surely keeping spellwork or runes around communities would be important.

She kept it vague, hoping that when asked Atlas would lead her in the direction of what they had already learned a community found counted as Harlow wanted to ask for a mending spell. Surely something to help the manor would be a great idea as it really needed the help. She could spare some daily casting to make mends. And it would show Atlas that she cared about their... home. Hers now too. Bleh, saying "home"

even in her head created a sour reaction and she licked her lips as if to clean it from them. No, not a home. A place. But Atlas' surely.

Harlow clicked her tongue. Could this be an opportunity to subtly direct herself towards the vault? Be bold. Be brave.

Protected Doorway.

Staring down at the parchment, now that she had written it down, it seemed idiotic to

her. Harlow scrunched her nose as she debated it and instead crossed out the line altogether. She bounced her leg in place and thought upon what little her would have wanted. When magic was still so new to an eager mind, when all things were possible, when silly thoughts were not silly but were unabashed ambitions.

She sighed and leaned forward on the heavy desk to stir her tea. Out of all things that were possible, she used to wish she could make it rain. Just so the streets would drain of people and she could run out in them and just feel free. There would be looks but they were always so soft as simple joy was recognized. A universal feeling of being lost in the magic of nature. Weather magic was not impossible but it was strictly prohibited. One person might welcome the rain for crops but their neighbor might wish for high winds for their windmills. When people played with the weather, it only ended in chaos and destruction.

Harlow wrote down “Make it rain.”

She thought about the impossibility of the request and added to the end of it, “just for me.”

As Harlow finished the curve of the e, a large sound rocked from the room next to hers. She stood quick enough to fling the heavy chair back and dropped her pen on the table with urgency. As she rounded the edge of the desk, she paused and turned quickly to palm the paper and shove it into one of the pockets that wasn’t filled with dust.

Peeking slowly around the doorframe of the room next door, Harlow spotted Atlas. Unlike their normal attire dressed completely in billowy clothing, they had a heavily patched knitted cardigan pulled around their form which caused those billowy sleeves to become big bubbled sleeves. There was tinsel draped throughout their hair and even a piece strung along their earrings. Atop their head were two different... no, three different hats all piled precariously on the other. There were even various

scarves tied around their waist. By all first appearances, it would seem that Atlas was in the middle of cleaning their room and adorning themselves with reclaimed treasures as they did so. However, as Harlow looked around, the room was very much not any cleaner. This storage room looked as if a large gust of wind tore through, but if it did, how would those hats stay perfectly in place?

Atlas had their hands full with a large bag which they were looking into as if they'd fall in any second (totally possible when it came to wizards) and so they didn't notice her at first. She waited only a few beats more before knocking politely on the door frame.

"Everything okay here?"

They turned quickly enough to make the hats sway harshly and Atlas dropped a hand to clutch them in place while looking sheepishly at Harlow. "Quite all right... well."

They tipped their hats back into place. "Except for our task today."

Their face hardened with a slight raise of their lip in disgust.

Harlow entered the room and held her hands together, intrigued by the thought of something new to work on. "And that would be...?"

They took two large steps forward towards her and clutched the bag to their chest before lowering their head to look her in the eyes with a grave set expression. "We must feed the beast."

Her eyes narrowed as she took in the seriousness of their face before they leaned back and looked her head to toe. "You'll need some tools..."

They then whisked themselves back to the shelves and began to dig through various

boxes and baskets, shoving random items into the green burlap bag.

“To feed... a beast?”

Harlow took a deep breath, trying to judge just how seriously to take this herself.

“Well, kind of.”

Atlas huffed. “The Beast needs caring for. Not much now that Bethal has designed and built its perfect habitat, but the runes to keep others out and it in need to be refreshed, and I apologize, my apprentice, it is a job that we must do. Normally with something so dangerous I would have you wait a little longer, but with Magdalanous out of town, I really do need another set of hands to complete the renewing.”

“Is the beast really all that threatening?”

Harlow shrugged and began to dig through one of the boxes to match Atlas’ energy. Her hands found a sleek and polished handle of a wood-carving knife.

“Oh yes, the most dangerous creature I have come across in quite some time. It is a creature and no matter the danger, every creature is worth protecting. No, this.”

Atlas took the small knife from her hands and switched it out with a large machete. “There, that’s better.”

Bless their heart, Harlow thought. She was much more capable of defending the both of them with the simple carving knife but one must keep up appearances. “Atlas... this seems a bit extreme... we’re wizards...”

She idly played with the machete as if she’d never touched a thing like it in her life.

“Yes, yes, of course. The blade is for the foliage that the beast lives in just in case we get separated...”

Atlas sidestepped over to her and nudged her arm with theirs. “I would say that if we get separated you should stay in place until I find you, but I can tell that if anyone rescues anyone, you’d be the one to find me.”

Atlas winked quickly and zipped up the bag. “OK, dear apprentice, there are some rules we must follow as we do this. The runes are simple enough, you’ll recognize them instantly, but it is important that we stay on the path and if the beast should come near you, do not engage.”

Harlow nodded.

“And whatever you do, do NOT touch it.”

Atlas wagged a finger as if scolding them both.

Harlow leaned closer and whispered, “...what happens when you touch it?”

Atlas shuddered and then leaned close enough that their breath brushed over her ear, “Well then you must kiss your ass goodbye.”

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They approached the gates of the enclosure with a porting spell by Atlas, much to Harlow's encouragement.

The town was quiet enough from down the road and they both gave Bethal's home a wide berth should she call either of them over.

Like they mentioned, the runes were simple.

Higher-level spellwork than the average home or campsite, but something that each student was taught quickly.

The casting and upkeep were a great way to earn coin on the side should a student require some indulgence to lift their spirits.

Atlas had removed the excess clutter and wore a billowing, open, sky-blue semi-opaque top that accented their form with Harlow being able to see their silhouette from within.

They also wore brown linen pants with a dropped hemline complete with a pair of open toed sandals.

Hardly "battling a deadly beast" wear.

Harlow, on the other hand, had removed her long robe and had kept her tight pants, component belt, and a light beige beach-colored blouse.

Together they looked more like tourists than wizards on the hunt.

The Spellsaven had given her the rundown of all the rune locations and had planned to stay together the entire time.

Should they separate, she was informed to find the way back to the main gates.

This all seemed like complete overkill now that Harlow stood in the habitat.

It was only about an acre and it was lined with a thick line of trees that blocked sight from the outside.

Not quite center, there was a large pond with various large stones stacked about it, creating a small waterfall.

There was no stream but she spied runework that kept the water at a very specific acidic level and filtered it back to the top of the waterfall.

There were lily pads and other plants floating in the water, so much so that it looked like a fair warning that it was very unwelcome to swimmers.

Harlow noticed Atlas kept a wide berth from the trees on the edge and while they made the rounds of the property, she kept within sight distance.

What kind of beast would dwell here? It looked so average and underwhelming, more like a picnic location than anything else.

As she gazed into the water she noticed her reflection.

Or lack of one.

Curious, she crouched near the water and peered closer.

A few bubbles reached the surface, breaking her concentration, and she tensed in preparation for the beast.

Instead, a velvet teal frog with a sweet mint green belly broke the surface and floated there as if starting a staring contest with her.

It floated close to the rocks and when it neared them, climbed atop.

Worried for the frog's safety, she stood back up and looked around.

Atlas had their back to her while renewing a rune from the southwest corner and she didn't notice anything out of the ordinary.

Harlow bent back down and when the frog hopped towards her, she chuckled and bent over to gingerly pick it up.

Harlow held it away from her face but kept it eye level. "Don't worry friend, I'll keep you safe from the beast,"

she teased.

"No, no, no, no, no..."

She turned her head slowly towards Atlas, who was stepping slowly towards her with hands outstretched, palms to her. "No sudden movements."

Harlow blanched and slowly, as if on a creaking hinge, looked behind her. There was nothing. "I don't see anything..."

Her voice hitched slightly and she slowly began to lower the frog.

“Pst, pst.”

Atlas’s eyes widened in terror as they watched her. “Harlow. You have the beast in your hands...”

Holding her breath, she looked down at the frog. “You’re the beast?”

The beast blinked one eye before the other and continued to stare at her.

“I don’t understand, Atlas... it’s just a frog.”

“No, no it’s not.”

Atlas reached out, just a step away from her. “Harlow. It’s important that you remember I will find you. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes... Atlas, I’m right here... what do you mean?”

she stammered.

“The beast... when startled...”

As they spoke, Harlow stopped lowering the frog, freezing in place. “...will force a teleport of those closely around it.”

“OK... OK, that’s not so bad.”

“Yeah, not so bad. Not so bad until you end up three leagues under the sea or in the middle of someone’s fireplace...”

“What?”

Harlow tensed; the frog spread its legs out as it dangled.

“Yes. When a person ports, we have a clear vision in mind... and if not, then the right words. The beast doesn’t have that kind of process. So, Harlow, here, look at me...”

Atlas feigned a reassuring smile. “Hey, there you are.”

Harlow’s hands began to sweat, or she thought it was sweat but the beast was also wet and that made the voice in the back of her head question the state of her hands while Atlas tried to rein in her attention.

“I’m sorry if I scared you, Harlow. Just know that no matter what, I will find you, okay?”

“I know...”

Sure, they’d find her, but in what state?

“Good, good.”

It was as if they were telling themselves. Atlas breathed a sigh of relief as they placed their hand on her shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly.

There were a few awkward moments where they both just stood there and stared down at the beast. Harlow cleared her throat. “So, do I just put it down?”

Atlas gulped and nodded. Their shirt was as loose as always but they still pulled at the collar. “Nice. And. Slow.”

They reached out their hands and cupped the bottom of hers so together they could lower the beast back to the pool of water.

Together they crouched low and the frog still refused to jump from her palms. Harlow looked to Atlas for advice and was met with a meek shrug. She tilted her hands at an angle as if to incentivize a jump and the frog scooted back on its on legs, preparing to jump. Harlow mistook this as early success and she yelled, “A-ha!”

Atlas looked to have felt the same with a wide smile on their face but then they looked from each other’s faces back down to the frog to notice it aborted the jump and was now glowing blue. The Spellsaven winced when looking back at Harlow, who could feel her eye twitching.

The blue cascaded away from the frog in a matter of less than a second, no time to react other than to memorize Atlas’s face just in case it was the last thing she saw. She had lived a life where being killed on the job could happen so easily and was always a possibility, but here she could be killed by a frog. A beast indeed.

It couldn’t have been long but Harlow felt like when she was little and would wiggle between the bed sheets. The beds always seemed impossibly large then, and from the very middle, it was like endless billowing white clouds. But this was no relaxing revisit to her childhood. This was an endless feeling of those bedsheets wound around her and something from the outside bouncing her to and fro. Upside down and right side up. Her stomach was instantly queasy and her eyes felt like they were rolling in their sockets.

And then it stopped.

Her organs lurched as she felt her body reorient herself, and she felt so dizzy she fought to stand. There was solid ground under her feet. Ground or something like it. There was a chill in the air which brought her skin some relief. Harlow braved a peek and saw the evening sky. That’s good, she thought. Not in the ocean or in someone’s fireplace. Just out in the open. That’s a good start.

She gulped and opened the other eye. One of her hands was still out in front of her and the other felt so heavy at her side. She didn't want to look at first; what could that mean? Wanting to get it over with, Harlow took a deep breath and looked toward that heaviness. Her heart skipped a beat when she noticed that heaviness was Atlas. They were sprawled on the ground, facedown, but their hand held hers so tightly. Their hand was warm; that was a good sign, right?

Harlow crouched and checked their pulse. She held herself back, held back the out of body experience of having perhaps played a part in killing Spellsaven Daggerroot. From beneath the mess of mahogany hair and various blades of grass somehow caught in their hair, Atlas peeped, "See? Found you."

The thief collapsed beside them and began to laugh. It spilled out of her like some sort of curse. She was joined by Atlas, who only flipped upon their back. Together all the nervousness, the fear, and the relief poured out of them.

They laid there holding hands until the lights from down a path she only just really noticed grew brighter and music met her ears.

"So, shall we?"

Harlow stood, still grasping onto Atlas's hand and then her body betrayed her. Her skin broke out in goosebumps and her vision began to darken around the edges. She dropped their hand and turned away from the wizard.

"Harlow?"

Concern peppered Atlas's voice as she could hear them stand from behind her.

"I'm okay... I think."

She turned to look back towards them but just that subtle movement almost made her lose the contents of her stomach. She felt suddenly hot and then very cold as her body fought to right itself.

Suddenly Atlas was in front of her and held a hand up to her forehead and another against her neck. “Hmm, hold on here.”

They threaded an arm around her and held to her side. The other hand held hers and they nodded towards the lights and noises. “Let’s just get there and we can get you a nice seat. Doesn’t sitting down sound nice?”

Confused but not ready to speak more than necessary, Harlow nodded very, very slowly. “It really does.”

Together they walked down the dirt trodden path towards the lights, which got brighter and the music louder. Atlas kept looking up to the stars and then surveyed the town emerging ahead. They clicked their tongue and nodded. “Good news is that I know where we are.”

Harlow strained against her better judgement on not talking. “When someone says good news, that implies there’s also bad news.”

“Well, that’s because there is a bit and only a bit of not-so-great news.”

Atlas squeezed her hand reassuringly.

“OK, lay it on me. I can...”

Harlow swallowed what she would only call a burp but it likely was not a burp to be trusted. “I can handle it.”

“Of course you can. You’ve got just a little portal sickness.”

Atlas slowed them to a stop at the edge of town.

It was a bit larger than the village near Daggerroot Manor but very much not large enough to be a city. Buildings were painted in various shades of red and had roofs made of clay tiles. Red and gold streamers connected buildings together. Doorways were decorated with trimmings of some dark green plant Harlow didn’t recognize. Out among the street were so many people. Faces that were not hidden behind insect-like masks were smiling at each other, laughing, and were singing along to a song that Harlow couldn’t bring herself to concentrate on at the moment. Tables were out among the streets filled with various wares and food. The smell made her mouth water even when struggling with her nausea.

“Portal sickness? So, you can’t just port us back or I should say just me?”

Harlow shook her head. She didn’t get any sort of sick often, and quite frankly this was embarrassing.

“Right. It would be irresponsible of me to even try. Come now, there’s an inn just beyond here and we’ll get you some ginger tea. That’ll get you sorted enough to not look so...”

Harlow raised a dangerous eyebrow towards them, warning them to continue.

“So... well, look, there it is!”

They pulled her slowly towards the inn while steering her around the people.

“Isn’t there a potion remedy for portal sickness?”

“There is. I have a few back at House.”

Harlow stopped just outside the inn on the stoop of it, clearly blocking anyone’s way.

“So, just pop over, grab one, and pop back and then we can get out of here.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s the firefly festival.”

“...Okay...”

“And during the firefly festival it is tradition to go without magic. “

“So, what... a couple of hours?”

“Yes, thirty-six of them.”

Harlow gazed a million miles away. Dissociating with the knowledge that the people around her were not putting things back into their home but instead setting up.

“So, we’re stuck here...”

“We could walk.”

“And that would take how long... how far are we?”

“I believe our shoes would wear through their enchantments and through the soles before we would arrive even at the edge of the woods outside Daggerroot.”

“Wonderful.”

“Isn’t it?”

Atlas grew chipper looking around. “We made it just in time then. Come along, let’s get your tea.”

Harlow led the way instead through the doors and the inn was surprisingly empty along the tables. Atlas sat her near what looked like the hallway to the privy. Smart.

The innkeeper spoke to Atlas in hushed tones and Harlow managed a small smirk in her direction when they both looked over at her. That was the best she was going to be able to do. Atlas took a chair at the table and brought it over to her side.

“Here.”

They handed her a slice of something yellow. She recognized it – ginger. “Under the tongue, you can chew lightly if you must but just let it sit there.”

“Yes, doctor.”

Harlow rolled her eyes but Atlas only laughed back.

“Don’t worry, Harlow. I’ve got you. I admit, it will be nice to slow down and spend some time with each other. Once you’re feeling better of course.”

They beamed at her, seemingly unaffected by how gross she felt.

The ginger was already helping. It could be just the effect of feeling like there was something that could help her but ginger was always part of home remedies. Ones she trusted. As she sat in the chair, feeling a bit sorry for herself, Atlas began to pick the

green blades of grass out of her hair and the feeling of their fingers combing through her felt so nice that she began to feel her eyes slide closed. Harlow couldn't remember the last time someone touched her so gently without any expectation or pressure to return anything.

Harlow was blissfully unaware of the innkeeper approaching her to place the hot tea kettle and hand thrown teacups upon the table.

"If at all possible, we could use a couple of rooms for the night..."

Atlas's hand left her hair and went to search their pockets.

"Out of rooms for the next two nights."

"Oh dear."

"But I do have a campaign tent that just got patched up this morning. Only large bedding though."

"That would be lovely. We appreciate you helping us even though we have given you zero advance notice."

Finally finding some sort of money, Atlas held out a handful of coins, each worth a week's stay anywhere in the capital.

Atlas was waved off by the innkeeper. "Just come by in a few hours and we'll have it all set up for you two. Enjoy the festival, Spellsaven."

"Oh, thank you, we will!"

Atlas shouted after the woman, who was already disappearing back behind the

counter.

The tea surprised Harlow. If it wasn't for the festival, she would have sworn that it had been boosted by magic. That the healing leaves had some help as they already settled her queasy stomach and she felt like color must be returning to her cheeks.

Atlas gave her a once over and finished their own drink. "We'll figure out the tent thing when we get to that."

They must have thought that was what was why she was looking at them that way. In fact, she was taking them all in. A Spellsaven, her Spellsaven, sitting at a table in the middle of somewhere drinking ginger tea. Like it was something that was always done, that every Spellsaven was among the people like they always were busy telling people they were. The light from the sconces around them lit their face just so that Harlow could see the crease lines of their smile, of the just starting crow's feet at the corners of their eyes. They were beautiful.

They must have figured out something else was going on behind her eyes because they tilted their head, hair spilling over their shoulder looking at HER like she was the only one in the room. Which she was, but that didn't matter so much. She felt like she was breathing so lightly as if taking in too much air would make this moment move along. How was she going to share a tent with them if she felt this pulled to them by just sitting at a damn table next to them?

Harlow took a deeper breath before she would hyperventilate and became instantly thankful when someone else entered the inn. She looked at them and gave them a quick welcoming smile but watched Atlas out of the corner of her eye. They had brought their hand to their face and were tapping their fingertips against their lips as if deep in thought while still watching her. What was going through their mind? She turned back just in time to see some blush in their cheeks. Which could, she had to admit, have been from the hot tea but she desperately hoped it wasn't.

The festivalgoer was not alone and soon others piled into the inn. Harlow finished her tea and turned back to the Spellsaven, who was doing the same. “Well, what do we do now?”

A wide smile broke with those flushed cheeks and Atlas’s eyes sparkled, “We enjoy the festival!”

They bounded up from their seat and held out a hand to her. “If you’re feeling better of course, or we could stay here, hole up in the corner, and I can take care of you until you do...”

Should she fake being still unwell? Harlow wasn’t completely herself, that was for sure, but to say she needed to be waited on was a huge overstatement. The idea of the Spellsaven taking tender care of her instead of going off into the festival was such a sweet thought. She believed they would one hundred percent do that for her. She couldn’t do that to them, to take away experiencing the firefly festival that they were so clearly excited for. So excited for, in fact, that now she was feeling unrest in her feet. They bounced eagerly under the table, ready to move.

She stood, a lot more carefully than Atlas had, and felt the very whisper of unease in her stomach, but that would do. “Show me this festival, I don’t remember the last time I got to enjoy one.”

This was somewhat true. She did remember, however, the night ending in a rather bleak chase in the catacombs of a city she could not name for it would implicate her in the crime of high treason. She did enjoy that as well, though, so perhaps it still counted.

They exited the inn. Atlas held her hand gently as if escorting a lady about court. Soon, though, the streets were so flooded with bodies, masks, robes, carts, and general celebrations that they could no longer hold onto each other without some

obvious physical romantic inflection.

They stopped at a cart with large, gilded wheels that they found by following the savory-smelling steam that drifted above the crowds. Atlas ordered for them both and together they were huddled off to the side, off the road blowing on the still-too-hot-to-eat red glazed balls of a meat that she didn't care to hear what it was from. She just wanted to eat it.

“So why is magic forbidden during this festival?”

She spoke quietly, not wanting to seem any more of an outsider here than was obvious.

Atlas stepped closer to her, their shoulder now against hers.

“Back when magic was simple and quiet, not overconsumed the way it is now, people believed magic was in all things. That the explanation of why a small insect could be a beacon in the middle of the darkest night was because it was magic. That when Arkadus drenched the world in darkness for forty years, it was bearable, it was survivable because a tiny insect found its way across continents, across endless dark seas, and into towns just like this one. How could such a tiny thing survive such difficulties if it wasn't magic? “

Harlow nearly snorted, “Arkadus? Really? That's just a myth.”

“You can keep telling yourself that, but you won't hear that from me,”

Atlas continued.

“And feeling and knowing that magic was in everything with every thread of their being, even the smallest creature was respected.

Come now into where societies are today and we no longer thank the tiny bug.

We don't spend time learning whether Arkadus was real or not."

Atlas winked teasingly at her.

"So, here at the Firefly Festival, it is acknowledged that all magic has a cost but it will never be at the expense of our past, of our stories, or of the firefly who flew in the dark, never wavering, to give us hope."

Harlow was quiet as she looked over the crowd around her.

No magic was allowed and yet life continued.

As she held her stick of meat to cool in the air, her attention was immediately grabbed by Atlas who was frantically blowing air in and out of their mouth.

They had taken a large bite of the meat, which should have been cool by now, but there were tears streaming down the Spellsaven's face which alarmed her.

She held a hand out to them as if that could survey the damage on its own.

"So spicy!!"

Atlas warned.

Laughter bubbled up through her and she watched as Atlas chewed a moment more before swallowing the bite. They immediately went for another and Harlow shook her head quickly at them.

"What?"

They spoke between hurried breaths. “It’s so good, worth the burn!”

She took the spare napkin and dabbed the corner of their mouth in a playful, mocking manner which Atlas only leaned into.

Although Atlas and Harlow were far from home and obviously didn’t fit in the aesthetics of the festival, they were never othered, quite often and quickly they were pulled into dance circles, something that Harlow found out Atlas couldn’t resist even to the point of feigning being pulled by absolutely no one into a circle.

No matter what the dance pattern was, the steps of the choreography, somehow and maybe with a little firefly magic, they were always paired together.

When the slower dancing required pairs to be so close that not even a sheet of paper could pass between them, there was Atlas.

When the dance required spins and pretended kisses to cheeks, there was Atlas.

And for tonight, Harlow could allow herself to dream that there was always going to be just Atlas.

The dancing never really stopped, and it took some convincing to exit the circle so that Harlow could cool down.

There was a lake large enough to keep the chill close but small enough to see the other side.

The other side had woods just as dense as the forest outside the Manor and it made, just for a moment mind you, Harlow a little homesick for it.

The sun was just about to set and the last deep purples and pinks were cascading into

deep violets and cool indigos.

Smooth, gentle fingers slid over her vision and she could hear Atlas's breaths just over her shoulder as they stood right behind her.

Harlow's hands went to theirs and held gently.

There was a moment's pause where she could feel Atlas's hands freeze in place.

She rubbed the back of their hands with her thumbs and that seemed to thaw Atlas's resolve enough relax their hands.

She pulled their hands away from her face, perhaps ruining any surprise a bit, and let them fall to her sides.

But she didn't let go, she held their hands, still slightly sweaty from the dancing or from the spicy meat that Atlas couldn't stop grabbing at every opportunity.

Harlow leaned back into their chest and she heard Atlas's breath catch.

Just like their hands, they became stiff, surprised.

Harlow wanted to look up at them, wanted to see their face, but that she knew would be a mistake.

That this fluttering in her chest would only want to push her for more and if Atlas pushed back in even the slightest, the illusion would be broken.

Instead, she nuzzled further back into them and they melted.

Their body relaxed around her and they drew their hands up and around her waist as

they both watched as tiny, inconceivable magical lights begin to peek from the darkness across the lake.

They stayed liked this for hours, Atlas just holding Harlow as they watched the tiny beacons flit and float around from the forest, creeping among them as the town began to douse their flames to encourage the fireflies to fly among them.

Harlow barely remembered being carried back to the campaign tent.

It was large enough for a full bed, albeit hobbled together with mismatched bedding but comfortable enough.

She barely recalled Atlas taking off her shoes, tucking her into bed, and brushing the hair out of her face.

She just remembered that the Spellsaven began to lay a sheet upon the ground for themselves when she called out to them.

Just whispered their name and stretched out a hand.

Atlas came to her so quickly, took that hand and placed it against their cheek. She just remembered that they curled together with Atlas wrapping her up in their arms and resting their chin on the top of her head.

She only barely remembered that it was true that magic was in everyone and everywhere.

And Harlow would never forget the magic she felt in their arms.

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A week's worth of mornings not waking up in the campaign tent brought the realization that time was still ticking.

This time it only took one mistake to find the staircase, which was odd because Harlow had taken moments before bed to canvass the area and double-check the route before returning to bed.

It was one wrong left turn.

Which made NO sense.

The staircase to the kitchen would then be on the wrong side of the mansion.

Deciding to not let it get to her, Harlow figured that her day would be caring for this...

plant and then asking Atlas about the staircase.

Perhaps then she'd also find out if Atlas had cast any other spells on areas of the house.

If she could work back the spell on the staircase she might be able to find a way to workshop a locating spell for magicked locations in the home.

She'd be able to find the vault.

She didn't let it get to her head about cracking the lock.

Oh, how she wanted to, the feeling of a lock.

So simple, it would be a great reprieve from grumpy gardeners, eccentric manor floorplans, and the need to constantly check herself for letting Atlas on to the fact she was just a thief, a fraud.

Descending the staircase, she almost tripped at the last step.

So much so that she stopped to look down and give it a quick glare.

Was the step always more steep than the others? Surely she would have tripped earlier if that were the case.

Or perhaps she was letting herself drift off yet again.

Finalizing her glare, Harlow moved onto the kitchen.

A rather empty and quiet kitchen save the sounds of songbirds and the general creakiness of the home.

There were of course some things left out, clean and ready on a marble slab.

A glass press, a hand grinder, a beautiful even if cracked teacup, and a breakfast plate with fixings.

Still warm... and a warm plate as well.

There, just far enough away to not be confused for breakfast items ,was a large porcelain pot, a small burlap bag of dirt and a water can the size of a coffee mug.

She didn't leave it out, which meant Atlas must have left it out for her.

Had they leaned into the raising of the plant when they were very clearly anti-plant before? And what was that about? All wizards were odd – they were not someone who didn't fit the wizard mold.

Everyone had their tics, tendencies, and fallacies that made them unique.

She liked that about them, where thieves and rogues seemed to always be cut from the same cloth.

She liked that Atlas had more of these qualities than most. Did she like the qualities or the quality of Atlas... that was still to be determined.

She prepared breakfast and took her time, to see if the Spellsaven would stop in to check in on her or not.

Surely they'd pop in so that she'd hurry and they could get back to work.

Whatever that meant for Atlas.

But an hour or so passed and there was no Atlas, but there also seemed to be a cozy atmosphere that did not feel rushed.

Maybe Atlas was more of a night owl than an early bird. That would not be surprising. Wizards had a terrible sense of time and always kept odd hours. Something that drove Harlow NUTS.

After washing up and replacing her hand towel-dried dishes, she gathered the planting items and headed back to her room.

A report would be something she'd have to do later.

For now it was more important that she take any more minutes she had of not being directly observed for her benefit.

She'd have to gather ingredients to detect the magic on the staircase.

Surely it would be alright if she cast it on the staircase first, and if it was an issue she could ask for forgiveness. A childish thought, but one that seemed to be commonplace in society.

Taking care to not rush and step quietly in the halls, Harlow found her way back to one of the many reagent closets with a basket of polarized stardust and a few shards of a hunting hound's molar to cast.

But first, she needed to place a quick protection spell on herself should Atlas have equipped the staircase with any boobytrap spells.

No need for such a thing on a staircase but she didn't know what was yet normal for Atlas, as she had only seen them cast a snowy rabbit and fingerprintless safety glass, and really nothing else since then.

A trail of thought for another time.

As she wound past the corner to the staircase she met another hallway.

The staircase was right there not even an hour ago.

It couldn't rotate around, could it? She didn't think of it before but it was entirely possible that having a moving staircase in a wizard's manor was actually a totally TYPICAL wizard thing to think of.

That would also explain why the staircase was only one turn away this morning from

the previous one.

She must have been off in her timing.

Harlow proceeded down the hall with a shrug.

She would have to do the footwork.

This was thankfully finally an area where her rogue training and experience could pay off.

She knew how to canvass an area and prepare for navigation.

Now with the knowledge that she wasn't imagining things, the staircase really did move, that changed everything.

It was almost as if everything was always as it should be and it was just her own perception that needed to be adjusted.

That her own biases caused her own misunderstanding, and nothing and NO ONE else.

Through the years she had noticed that things made by people, like a building in this instance, usually met some kind of metric system.

Measuring systems were all called different things but they always had some kind of pattern.

So Harlow kept her steps at a consistent pace and tapped a half beat of them to measure locations of rooms, bends, and even windows.

At this moment, it wasn't important really where things were or where they led to.

It was about finding the pattern the building lived by. The music it made with her heeled steps and muffled taps against her thigh.

Then, she could come up with a rhyme or a lyric that would keep her remembering.

Surely something about how creepy the place was, right? Or perhaps something lighter, airier like her fine-jawed and effervescent wizard.

Did she just say "her"

wizard? Harlow stopped in place.

Why was she thinking about them when she clearly should be focused on other things? She was literally in the middle of mapping the pattern of the manor and instead of going into her own memory palace to add a new wing, it was instead drifting off to Atlas.

What did this mean? What did it mean when you couldn't stop thinking about someone else even when working on something important? When you were working on something that's actually part of your actual passion, not something you were expected to do? Now she was thinking about Atlas even harder.

She even began to wonder if they were dressed the same way as yesterday.

With the billowing fabric that draped their frame and when they moved... and they were always moving...

it created windows to their skin.

Skin that Harlow was mesmerized with.

How soft would it be? They clearly loved the soft, thin drapey fabric that would be suitable for their delicate skin.

Ah hells, why was she wondering what their skin felt like? She shook her head, attempting to clear all the thoughts of Atlas, at least for now so she could focus on the task at hand.

Thankfully her fingers still tapped against her side in the same pattern as before and she was off yet again.

And then, a round of the corner, which if she would guess would have put her behind the manor's central area.

Likely two rooms between her and the front receiving area.

And then there was a discovery.

One of flesh to be sure.

But not the flesh she was fantasizing about before.

Flesh on a body, yes, but a dead body.

Its short frame was wrapped in familiar dark clothing and it lay splayed on the floor.

It wasn't Atlas, which was incredibly clear.

It was a stranger.

And unless magic was involved, the person must have passed recently.

She wasn't a Sancti, so she couldn't provide any medical observations, but she did know how what bodies looked like when they were dead... usually ones by her own hand.

This one wasn't on her death card.

Wasn't a target of hers at any time.

But she did know that face and that really odd belt.

It was woven from three different types of leather, all competing with different shine aspects.

Which was ridiculous for a rogue should anything glimmer, catch the light, and throw their position into the minds of scrying eyes or ones that could then be picked up by guards.

It was Copperkelly.

A fellow Thieves' Guild member.

One of her equals, even.

The guild split many a job between the two of them.

She was always neater and more efficient.

However, he was extravagant and a bit showy.

Each mark and each job required different things.

She was the subtle knife and he the laugh in the face of death.

But neither was laughing now.

Why was he here? Was he here to kill her? Or Atlas? Did the Guild Master not trust her to find the vault? It was only a few days and he had already sent someone else?

Or did Copperkelly take it upon himself to try and show her up first? Harlow felt her feet tingle as if they wanted to run off on their own and nausea crept up her throat.

“Well fuck.”

She sighed and lost the beat from her hands.

“I’ll say.”

Atlas was standing so perfectly still next to her that it made her jump in place and put a hand on her chest.

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They both stood over the body in the main hall. The cheery morning peeking through the dusty windows and fighting its way through gauze-like curtains made it seem a happy event. But it was very much NOT.

Within moments, Atlas was on their knees rifling through the pockets, elbow deep in some and turning others inside out.

Harlow was only slightly panicking, the pinpricks of her feet going numb had gone away but the nausea was joined by a rise of her own blood pressure.

“Atlas... what are you doing? You’re not supposed to touch the body...”

“That’s ridiculous. How would I find anything out without touching the body? It’s not like it can feel anything...”

Atlas poked a slender finger with much vigor against the man’s chest. “See? It’s fine.”

She could help search the body, yes, but not laying a finger on anything was likely the best course of action.

She’d leave no evidence on him to tie herself in any way.

It was preservation time.

The game was still afoot, and sometimes to win the game, you need to skip your turn, and this was one of those moments.

She busied her hands with picking out any dirt that would be hiding there.

It may have come off as nervous energy and she really hoped it did.

There was a body here of course, and as far as her record and Atlas knew, she'd never really seen a body before.

Then Atlas pulled their hand out of a deep pocket to retrieve a handful of small objects: a charged power crystal, a few feathers (likely for enchanted pockets, which made Harlow question if she was the only thief not using such pockets before her wizard training), and a gold coin.

She knew what it was as she had an identical one rolling around in one of her own pockets.

A Thieves' Guild coin.

Various guild member coins from provided different things.

In general, they were used as proof of membership and being in good standing.

Other uses were that if anybody with a coin was found, one could call a guild to retrieve the body so that it could be processed in the way the individual had registered. If there were any bounties, whomever brought the body and the coin could retrieve any funds that way. With her guild, you could also bring the coin to the guild and declare compensation for whatever tomfoolery the holder was in the middle of. (One could also use it to declare familial nemesis status, but that was few and far between even for the Thieves' Guild).

Atlas flipped the coin back and forth and a tsk escaped their lips, but they said nothing so Harlow pursued: "A guild coin?"

“It would seem so... Thieves’ Guild.”

“Is this something we should expect often?”

“As long as there are humans, there will be wanting.”

Ah, so they’re just assuming thievery but not upfront murder. Which she would agree. If you wanted to take out a Spellsaven, Thieves’ Guild or not, it’d likely be carried out by another Spellsaven.

“So, no one is going to come kill us in our sleep?”

Atlas laughed. Actually laughed when there was a dead body of a Thieves’ Guild member right there. Clearly there was some kind of access as they got this far. The idea wasn’t that farfetched! But still they laughed!

“...I don’t think it’s all that farfetched...”

Harlow crossed her arms across her chest.

Atlas stood, pocketed the items quickly and placed them on their narrow hips. “Oh, pushed a nerve, have I?”

Atlas winked flirtatiously at Harlow.

Without meaning to, a flush crossed her cheeks. “Well, they’re here, aren’t they? It’s not so strange to think that a rogue might be able to break into a home, even a Spellsaven’s home,”

she huffed.

“Oh, is it now?”

Atlas took a few steps toward her and leaned in close enough to see into the depths of her irises but not before their eyes looked over her with a quirky smirk. “And if it happens again, will you save me?”

Usually when so close to someone she’d been attracted to, her heart would speed up and she’d flush brightly. But with Atlas this near and them gazing towards her, she found her body took in deep breaths, drawing in the scent of tea spices they ground every morning and of campfire smoke that usually came from their spellcasting. Atlas had given her their undivided attention and Harlow was getting drunk off it. How long could they stay like this together? How long would Harlow lean closer as if pulled by an orbiting star wanting to taste someone as bright and burning like Atlas?

The pause was long enough unanswered that Atlas clicked their tongue and smirked before turning back to the body. Their hands were back on their hips and only then did Harlow realize her missed opportunity. Would she try to save them? Yes, definitely. Regardless of attraction, you could still save someone AND steal from them. Actually, she highly recommended it. Should she say it now? No, the moment had passed.

Instead, she leaned to the side to peer at the body from around Atlas’ shoulders.

“I’ve never seen him before, I’m sure of it. Do you recognize him from anywhere, by chance?”

Atlas seemed puzzled as they moved their mouth from side to side.

Harlow stepped around them to get a better look at Copperkelly. She was just beside Atlas, close enough to where her body basically screamed at her, YOU ARE INTO THIS PERSON, LIKE A LOT, and here she was now, ready to lie to them about

something incredibly important. Perhaps this was karma for all the lies in her past that came with her profession.

“No,”

She was going to continue but then remembered the fewer words the better, as unless you could lie by telling the truth, every extra word was another way for someone to examine your misstep.

As Atlas nodded in response, the floor beneath her began to rumble and Harlow quickly pressed her back against the hallway wall. Atlas stood where they were but glared down at the floorboards.

The boards were not only rumbling but they were buckling up and down and moving from side to side in waves. The whole hallway had enough motion that chairs, side tables and the like began to surf down.

Clinging to a sconce on the wall, Harlow shouted, “What’s happening?!”

“It’s upset!”

Atlas shouted.

“What the hell do you mean, it’s upset?!”

A house throwing a tantrum surely was a new one.

The floorboards yawned beneath the body and Copperkelly slipped into the void beneath the hardwood.

“What the fuck?!”

Harlow screamed.

“Calm down!”

Atlas shouted but was not at all looking at her. Instead, they held their palms out as they struggled against the floor in motion.

“HOW CAN I CALM DOWN?”

She was offended. No one liked to be told to calm down and surely not during a crisis where a house was falling down or rearranging or whatever the hell it was doing around them.

“Not you, Harlow, the house.”

They weren’t dismissive but Atlas’ attention was clearly elsewhere by the way they were frantically looking across hallways, upstairs, and down between the shifting floorboards.

“AND TELLING THE HOUSE TO CALM DOWN IS SUPPOSED TO WORK?”

Normally not one to shout, Harlow was surely exercising the breadth of her lungs now.

“It usually does...”

Atlas’ face reeked of confusion: a brow uplifted, mouth slightly open and the “what-the-fuckery”

loud and clear.

As she argued, Harlow almost didn't notice the scone getting sucked into the damask wallpaper and she quickly retrieved her hand and held it instinctually against her chest.

“WHAT THE HELL? WHAT DO WE DO?”

Harlow was becoming one with the screaming. This was her life now. If she were to survive this, she believed her voice would be stuck this way.

“Find out what pissed it off and go from there...”

Atlas, still calm, spoke it like they were referring to people in general, not renegade mansions.

Could the house have known she lied? That she knew the intruder, and this was why it was acting this way? Absolutely not, that just had to be horrible timing.

“I have no idea...”

As she spoke the words, the floorboards heaved high and low, flinging her off the wall and into Atlas. Atlas wrapped one arm around her to hold her close and the other cradled her head as the House threw them down the hall and towards the back stairs – which were now a ramp, no stairs, and they tumbled outside, off the back covered patio and onto the dirt patch that was the backyard. As if to accentuate its point, the house threw open all its doors and windows and slammed them closed. The ramp was disassembled, and no stairs reformed.

Still in Atlas's arms, Harlow peeked out. “Is it safe now?”

Atlas leaned them both up and gently removed her hands from covering her face. They peeked around her, checking for injuries. “More or less.”

They brushed the hair that had fallen out of her braid behind her ears and with a corner of their shirt, they brushed off a smudge of dirt. “Are you OK?”

Harlow, unsure of what to make of it all, did a check-in with herself and didn’t feel anything. This was a concern in and of itself but she wasn’t about to say anything to the Spellsaven. Sometimes there was a point when shit hit the fan where you sort of turned off.

Atlas bounded up the ledge of the porch and crossed the patio to attempt to open the door. It didn’t move.

“Come on, open up, it’s me,”

they cooed.

The house stood still.

“Ah, the silent treatment, hmm?”

Atlas chuckled, playing off the seriousness.

All the lights within the house were extinguished and there was a tremor in the porch, a warning.

“Alright, alright. Fine.”

Atlas’s hands were up and held out to the house. They slowly backed up, not turning their back on House, and with each step back, they tested the ground behind them with a few rapid toe taps.

Atlas returned to Harlow, helping her up, and as she noticed still held her hand after

she stood.

“What do we do?”

Harlow’s lips were forming the question but her mind was only thinking one thing: Is this why all of the Daggerroot apprentices fled, died, or straight up disappeared? She gulped.

“Unless we can find out what happened to make House so upset and apologize...”

Atlas shrugged.

Harlow thought for a moment, she couldn’t risk it. How the house would have known she knew the thief was beyond her. Besides, the house was very much alive in its own way. If she admitted she knew them and where from, she’d have to say goodbye to finding the vault, let alone getting out of the house with it. Harlow shook her head.

“Then we have to get something from the garden.”

As Atlas spoke these words, their lip turned up and their eyes narrowed out further into the yard. “Come now.”

Atlas squeezed her hands before letting go and head back further into the property closer to the forest line.

Harlow followed. “So this has happened before?”

“Only once. We had gotten into an argument.”

Atlas dropped her hand to count on their fingers.

“...What did you argue about?”

The depth of just what or who Daggerroot Manor was, was growing more impressive to her.

“I wanted to keep the place a little cleaner and House was a bit unsure but I cast a large cleaning spell anyway. House tossed me out, and rightfully so. I had gone against its trust and didn’t allow it to process, so I earned that.”

Atlas spoke sheepishly.

“And you apologized, and it let you back in?”

The end of her question picked up in tone with hope.

“No, not right away. I apologized, yes, but House needed time to process. And then it let me back in... two weeks later.”

Atlas said this so matter-of-factly.

Harlow stopped in her tracks. Two weeks? What was she going to do for two weeks if the house even did let her back in? She shook her head.

“So what’s in the garden?”

She glanced quickly around the garden for answers.

“A special doorknob that I think House will like,”

Atlas whispered like it was a little secret between the two of them.

“And if we present it to House, it’ll let us back in?”

she asked.

“Oh, probably not?”

Atlas’ statement actually ended with implication of a question and Harlow rolled her eyes.

Harlow already felt more exhausted. “Then why are we doing it?”

“Because I should have given it to House earlier. Giving gifts as an apology is just manipulation. Giving a gift after reflection, now that might mean something. But we’ll have to be sincere and allow House its space. And then we’ll open some dialogue. The doorknob...”

Atlas hardly took a breath while speaking.

Atlas stopped while they were walking and turned to Harlow with their head tilted as they tried to explain, “The doorknob is a physical example to show we’re ready to listen when it’s ready to talk.”

Atlas began to nod to themselves as they spoke. “We’ll put it on the porch and still leave the house alone.”

They continued to walk.

“An olive branch, if you will...”

Harlow was catching on.

“Yes, yes, a branch of a fruiting tree... but... without all that plant nonsense.”

Atlas spoke over their shoulder.

“So, the knob is in the garden...”

“The greenhouse,”

Atlas corrected.

“And by the looks of it, you really don’t wanna go there.”

She winced, not wanting to acknowledge it but with the levity of them approaching it, Harlow knew firsthand that partners in a situation need to be clean with each other. Or someone could get hurt, left behind, and so forth.

“I certainly do not.”

Atlas’s face soured.

“But why is that?”

“Because it’s my worst nightmare,”

Atlas replied, shuddering.

They followed the dirt path which gradually led to grass and then she noticed a stone wall with an iron gate. From over the top of the wall, vines cascaded down and stretched up and over. Tall plants with large leaves peered over the top.

As they approached the gate, there was a hardy lock, and Harlow’s eyes went wide...

she begged inside for Atlas to allow her to open it. But Atlas produced a key, unlocked it quickly and pulled the chain out, flinging it off to the side behind them.

Atlas was quiet and their breaths began deep and full. She recognized the breathing technique. They were truly uncomfortable with setting foot in this area. It wasn't a ruse or a funny quirk. Atlas truly did not like plants. Harlow's instinct was to tell them to stay back and let her get the doorknob, but she didn't know the layout or where the greenhouse even was. Getting a doorknob, that was something she could do. Something she was perfectly capable of. Some might even say perfectly in her wheelhouse... greenhouse. She could work in the "shadows"

and also protect Atlas. But would that show her hand?

They finished their breathing exercise and went to her side, reached down and cupped both her hands. "You should stay here. I'll be back... when I can."

"Don't be ridiculous, I'm coming with you."

Atlas narrowed their eyes and held her hands tightly. "In there, it can be a lot. Things are not so cut and dry."

"I'm good on my feet and I'm a quick thinker, I think I can manage. I'm not staying back here."

In any other case this discussion would be something to laugh at, but even in the amount of time she spent with Atlas, the moments they were as serious as this were nonexistent. There was no reason not to believe them, a Spellsaven, that the area ahead was of a difficult nature.

"Fine. But take this."

Atlas fished in their pocket and revealed a blonde cookie. It was stamped with a bird silhouette.

Harlow could cast a detect magic spell upon it, but she needed to save her reagents. “A biscuit?”

“Yes. But, break it and say where you want to go, it’ll port you there.”

Atlas spoke as if everyone had an arsenal of sweet biscuits that when broken ported you around the place. Harlow got lost in the thought of where she could go if she did in fact have an arsenal of sweets.

“I don’t need this.”

She didn’t. But she did want it.

Atlas sighed, “Just take it. If you don’t need it, fine. But there’s no way I’m allowing you in any further without some protection.”

“Protection? Well. I have you.”

Harlow smirked.

There was a drop in the tension in Atlas’ shoulder and their gaze became soft. “Yes, yes you do.”

Harlow wanted to look away to hide the heat in her cheeks but to break away meant she’d have to stop memorizing that look on their face. And to forget that would be a greater travesty than being embarrassed as a thirty-two-year-old woman about being found wanting.

Atlas cleared their throat and smiled. “Shall we?”

They turned and pushed open the creaking gate, revealing clear lines of an overgrown path bursting from its sides with lush, flowering greenery.

In the middle of the garden was a large stone fountain filled with water now green with visible forms of life floating and swimming throughout. Whatever the stone figure was atop the fountain, it was no longer visible as vines and other creeping plants overtook it.

They stood side by side facing the seemingly peaceful garden. Atlas went to take a step and hesitated.

“OK, if things get intense... which they’ll probably get intense, I need you to get to the greenhouse and find the doorknob. I’ll deal with any distractions.”

Atlas gestured to the rear of the property and towards the left in an attempt to lead her in the right direction.

From her vantage point, she could see the very top of a black iron steeple, which must mean that it was either the greenhouse or close enough to use as an orienting spot. The height of the steeple meant this must be a very large greenhouse.

“I’ll say this first, you need to be careful where you step. I’m going to say it again, not because I think you are not paying attention or don’t understand. I’m saying it again because maybe if I say it from my own lips, I’ll find some sort of bravery from it. Be careful where you step. Things are not what they seem, and you cannot trust what you see.”

Atlas’ shoulders were tense and they were staring deep into the greenery as if taking their eyes off it would be sudden death.

“Atlas, this is still just a garden.”

Harlow spoke lightly, careful not to instill a mocking or unbelieving tone.

“No, it isn’t just anything. No more than you are just a person. You are splendid. This garden is also splendid. Splendid terror, yes, but splendid nonetheless.”

Their voice held a tone as if they were trying to convince themselves of something but Harlow wasn’t sure what of.

“OK. What do I do if I do miss something and the garden... gets me?”

She was finding herself matching tonality with Atlas, the serious becoming real.

“Find a god and pray. Hope that whatever finds you gives you insatiable fire.”

Atlas shivered.

Harlow patted down her clothing doing quick checks of her reagents. She might have enough for a few fire spells, but fire was something you had to fill an incident report and file after every use. And if you were found filing too many, you got fined for it. Fire was its own beast and spellcasters who messed around found out. An angry sorcerer threw a firespell and a town was engulfed a moment later. Fire was taught as a higher-tier skill set with water usage being tier one just because of how wildly out of control a fireball on a breezy day could be.

Fire being a last resort really was an eye-opener to Atlas’ terror. The garden, so far as she could see, was still very much walled in. But they could be in the middle of it when everything caught. Or didn’t catch and just pissed everything off. Even if the fire itself burned itself out at the walls, that didn’t mean they and their surroundings

would be safe. All it took was an ember.

Together they entered the garden. Harlow reached out to offer Atlas a quick squeeze of their hands and Atlas trailed their thumb over her fingers.

As they entered, birds were singing, plants rustled in the breeze, and insects buzzed; general garden ruckus. They only spread out as far as Atlas' reach and moved slowly. With the notion of untrustworthy plants, Harlow's hardened gaze swept back and forth over planter boxes, tree lines, and potted foliage.

They managed around the first few bends of the overgrown path, taking toe-to-heel steps and breathing slowly. Figuring out where to step was easy enough for Harlow. She had practiced being light-footed often, but when she saw one of Atlas's jeweled shoes atop a vine that snaked itself over the path, she sucked in her breath. Now distracted, Atlas looked quickly at her and without checking and before she could say a word, Atlas stepped on the vine.

Atlas's eyes went wide and their hands went to her shoulders, pushing her backwards, away from the vine that now slithered up their leg and wrenched them into the sky.

"ATLAS!"

Harlow's voice cracked.

Atlas began to yell and they shut their eyes tightly as they were flung back and forth like a whip.

"Hold on, I'm going to get you down!"

Harlow's hands shot into her pockets to find the reagents for a quick withering spell.

They had finally opened their eyes and were waving their available limbs about. “No! Don’t worry, go get the doorknob!”

Harlow winced, balancing the competing urge to help them with the urge to follow directions. Looking down the longer path, she could see the base of the greenhouse and there at the bottom, foliage was bunching and pulling itself off the path. It looked like it was creating a barricade between her and the greenhouse.

There was a sizzle in the air and Harlow felt her loose hair begin to float up into the air before Atlas managed a crackling lighting spell that struck the vine. It snapped and from two stories up, Atlas fell only to be caught by another vine shooting from the other end of the barbed bush.

Hesitating no longer, Harlow launched towards the barricade. With a quick twist of readied ingredients, Harlow cast a hardened skin spell that shimmered over her. She covered her face with her arms and barreled through. Halfway through the brush, the branches changed from gentle thwaps to sharp thorns that closed on her like prey. Thanks to her quick spellcasting, her skin was not snagged but parts of her clothing that didn’t get enveloped in the spell caught anyway. She heard small ripping sounds as they struggled against each other. While pressing through, Harlow could hear shouts and more crackles of lightning from behind her.

She reached the other side only to slam against the greenhouse glass door. It was closed and she lowered a hand to reach out blindly and pull the handle. She found it quickly enough but after a hearty pull, it didn’t move. Her fingers traced down and she found a reinforced iron padlock dangling from it. Normally she would be completely ecstatic to find a padlock, but with barbed branches encircling her and trying to get a grip on her she cursed to herself instead.

Harlow would need both hands to pick a lock like this and although she had hardened skin, that wouldn’t keep plants like this from attempting to blind or maim her in other

ways. She'd have to learn into her experimentation with arcane lockpicking. Thankfully with Atlas... busy... she could manage without them seeing. (Fewer questions later.) She dropped her grip on the handle and fished through her pockets for a feather. The pocket was almost completely filled with dust and she reflexively grimaced at the texture of it. She crushed it and quickly switched pockets to pull out the kraken-blood-smear bundle.

The call to arms, AKA the assignment to be Spellsaven Daggerroot's apprentice, was sudden enough that she hadn't prepared any more than this one bundle. And sourcing kraken blood was a pain. Harlow prepared the reagents rather clumsily around the padlock and took a few panicked breaths. So far, she wasn't able to work out a way to not have a verbal component for casting the spell. She'd have to open her mouth to say the line. With one crooked elbow blocking plant advancement, it could barely keep much away as she was overwhelmed. Leaves brushed against her cheeks, chin, and forehead.

Harlow crammed as much of her face as she could into her elbow to speak.

A steady lock holds no breath,

Let go or suffer death.

The phrase finished but it left an opening, literally, for the plant to burst a pod of pollen against her lips. On reflex she breathed in and the itchy powder coated her mouth. She coughed roughly, trying to force it back out. But that did little and instead, she felt a gentle swaying as she began to feel lightheaded. Not sure what the plant had exposed her to, Harlow reached for the lock and it pulled open. She tossed it down on the ground and pushed the greenhouse door open before falling forward into it. She noticed the crunch of pea-gravel under her and the air seemed lighter as the plants pulled back from her before she passed out.

Her mouth was dry and her eyes itched, which was what Harlow believed to have initially pulled her into waking up on the ground of the greenhouse. It couldn't have been for long because through the thick, grimy glass she could still hear Atlas yelling at the greenery. That was good, meant they were still up and active. She turned quickly to look at the door, which no plants crossed. All along the doorway were thick amber salt crystals encased in glass. It made sense to her. Of course they couldn't cross that way or even from underground. Since greenhouses were utilized for growing within, gardeners would install and request these enchanted salt rods to keep any outside plant life out. This helped keep any outside pests (looking at you, spider mites) and other invading foliage from getting seedlings in and other fragile plants from being exposed to threats.

Harlow rolled onto her back to catch her breath. She needed to find the doorknob, sure, but also a plan out. Although the plants were very aggressive, Harlow did not want to cause them damage. Perhaps it was Bethal's intentional instruction of not using magic on her plant that she was even debating it within herself. That and the oh-so-slight fear that House wouldn't like the garden to be decimated. House. She had failed to recognize its awareness. The chilled hallways, the moving staircases, all of it made sense. Was she just so stubborn that she refused to see what was right there? When had she become so obsessed with such a singular goal that she had lost sight of all else? The sense of adventure, of seeking more. She used to be so much more. Was growing older forgetting your past self or embracing it?

Harlow walked slowly to a row of very empty potting benches with various crates and boxes. She shifted mindlessly through the boxes. They contained various (expired) fertilizers, soft ties for tying up stems, metal cages to protect seedlings outside, and even labeled pickets to distinguish different plants from each other. Someone once loved this garden. Someone before her, before Atlas. Only after a few boxes did she find a few household items, including an iron doorknob plated in an iridescent metal that was carved with various ivy leaves. She held it in both hands and sighed lightly.

She had been so stubborn. So focused on the council seat that she was making deals just to gain favor. Deals that she even stopped asking questions about. Why was it that she spent her youth chasing knowledge, experiences, relationships, just to ignore it now? She thought about the younger her and the ways she struggled. The way that hope and curiosity drove her so much. That gaining all that and meeting people to make differences meant she wouldn't be forgotten. That's what this was all about in the end, wasn't it? To not be forgotten, just like how she'd already forgotten what her parents' faces looked like. Or the sound of their voices. She remembered more of the space they left than the space they had filled.

Was she like this garden? Forgotten but filled with so much potential if there was just someone to help guide them along they could be something glorious? She turned the doorknob and its plate around in her hands before using an edge of her robes to rub the dust from the crevices. Would the younger her see the garden as a nuisance or a challenge, a mystery? Didn't the younger her just want someone to listen to her? To listen to that craving deep inside to let this wondrous world inspire her? To hold her and tell her it'd be okay in the end? She could do that. This Harlow. She could do that for her. Look at where she was. In the middle of a semi-sentient house as a Spellsaven's assistant. A freakin' Spellsaven! And she had grown to be a respectable rogue, a top-notch thief. And now she was here with a house with so much personality and endless opportunities. And a companion that made magic feel fun and beautiful again.

Harlow whisked the doorknob away in her pocket and wrapped her arms around herself and squeezed. "It's going to be okay, you know?"

she whispered to herself and took a deep, trembling breath. "I'm sorry in my obsession of not being forgotten, I forgot you. I'm here. We're here."

She gave herself a gentle pat, taking a breath to keep from crying. Crying would be terribly inconvenient now.

As she examined the plant barricade from a safe distance inside, she could see in the distance Atlas flailing in the air, flashes of evident spellwork sparking even from there.

“Back to work then.”

Harlow went back to the potting bench. Atlas was casting spellwork, harming the plant for their own safety. But since the plant hadn't given them up, that meant in whatever sentience this garden had, it wasn't afraid of Atlas and it wasn't afraid of magic. Using fear was cowardly. Atlas was afraid of the plants themselves so it stood to reason that they'd lash out instinctually. But Harlow... Harlow wasn't afraid of a damn plant. If anything, she liked their familiar stubbornness.

Perhaps the garden was trying to communicate, and no one was listening. There were bags and bags of fertilizer, bottles of nutrient supplements, unused dusty shears throughout. Going to one of the greenhouse walls, she balled up the hem of her wizard robes and scrubbed at the glass to clear anything to see through. It only half helped as the surface outside desperately needed attention. But even through the grime, she could see the soil. It was dry and cracked. It needed more than just rain. The walls kept the garden safe, sure, but it also kept it from gathering nutrients from anywhere else. Likely the plants kept populating and had to fight for what they could. Atlas may not like it, but something had to be done.

With the doorknob a heavy reminder of honesty in her pocket, Harlow grabbed a sack of nutrient-rich soil and tore off the string. She hauled it to the salt line and brought her shirt over her nose just in case the flowers tried to throw pollen at her again. She heaved it over the line and let it fall on the plants. They moved out of the way and engulfed it once it fell to the path. She couldn't see through the brush but there was a lot of activity as vines moved from the path and at one moment, she saw the bag being pulled around the corner.

“I’d like to speak to all of you. I have a proposition.”

She spoke clearly and confidently. But inside she was cringing. Would plants be able to speak this same language? It was outside the translation spell from the larger port city, and she didn’t notice if Atlas had cast anything around the mansion. Yet another thing she missed.

Some plants pulled back off the path while others joined, including a stem that must have burst from under the dirt pathway. She watched it grow taller than the barricade but not by much. The leaves unfurled and they looked darker and larger than whatever species was keeping her in the greenhouse. And then a bud, deeply purple, sprouted and uncurled. It tilted towards her and waited.

Harlow stretched her neck before continuing, “I do not promise to not cut you all. I actually promise the opposite. I will cut you. I will prune you. I will harvest and I will relocate when needed. I am still learning but I already know you need help. And I will give that to you. All in time, but you will get it nonetheless. But you have to stop this.”

She waved to the threatening bushes and even gestured towards Atlas in the background.

She quickly walked back over and grabbed the bag of fertilizer, being more careful not to spill when she tore off the string as she dragged it across the ground.

“You’ll get me one day a week until I can find more help. Do we have a deal?”

Harlow put her hands on her hips and used her knee to keep the bag from tipping over.

There was some commotion as the purple bloom pulled down into the bush. There

was even chirping coming from around her – chirping that she thought earlier was from birds or insects, but it was coming from the foliage around them. Atlas was right; it was splendorous. Minutes later, the sounds quieted down and the bloom reemerged. It tilted back to her and stared.

“Well?”

Harlow frustratedly motioned to the barricade.

The bloom curled back into itself, and it descended into the bush before the barricade began to pull back and arrange itself back on the sides of the pathway. Testing the situation, Harlow leaned her head out of the greenhouse first. The bushes looked straighter and taller than before. Perhaps they were giving her a show.

Lifting the bag over the salt line, she stepped back out and looked up into the distance. Atlas screamed and fired off something towards the ground. A chill spell, from the look of it.

“That means them too,”

she scolded.

The large, overpowering vine paused, and she saw an upside-down Atlas cock their head to the side, confused but having stopped midway in casting something else. It released Atlas, who fell quickly down out of her sightline. She could hear Atlas holler as they fell. Atlas was the target of whatever this was that the Guild Master was a part of, but they were also the person who took care of her when she was portal sick. Who tucked her in so delicately, who didn’t abandon her in a strange town so they themselves could stay in their own bed. And now this person was plummeting to the ground.

“Atlas!”

She went to sprint towards them and if she did, would have tripped over the sack of fertilizer. She stopped and bit down on her lip. She crinkled her nose, cast a dispersal spell as she stepped to the side of the bag, and broke into a sprint. The bag shot across the yard and hit the trunk of a nearby blooming tree. It didn't seem to mind as it didn't react but leaves and plant life on the ground shimmied to and fro.

Rounding the fountain, she could see no evidence of impossibly large, thick-as-a-carriage vines that were so effortlessly tossing the Spellsaven around beforehand. Other than Atlas, covered in bruises and cuts laying on the ground. Their eyes were wide, and their limbs spread wide as if a starfish caught out of water. As she approached, she could see the rise and fall of their chest. For a moment, they seemed not to notice her approach and then tried to sit up but grimaced and gripped their head.

Harlow held her hands out to them as if they could survey the damage and not her eyes. She looked them over; their heavily patterned robe was torn so much that below their arms, the rest was just missing, their flowing white shirt and silken pants stained with dirt, plant material, and blood from thorns that found their mark. Atlas was even missing a whole shoe. They seemed to be more-or-less in one piece. It was the lack of damage that surprised Harlow. The garden could have easily killed Atlas and it didn't. It could have easily killed them both, even. She could have lost them. Gone would be the cozy mornings bumping into each other in the kitchen, gone would be the shy glances, the quirk of the corner of their mouth, gone would be the very best person Harlow had ever met in this world. The very thought cast a dimness around her which Atlas seemed to dismiss as quickly as it came when their hand reached out to her.

She brought her arm around Atlas's shoulders so she could sit them up before sliding behind them. Atlas leaned back with a sigh against her chest.

"You're okay, Hedgewater?"

they peeped.

“Got a bit of a dry throat...”

Harlow smirked, finding a bit of silliness in comparing something so trivial to someone who must have countless aches and pains at the moment.

“Well, we can’t have that. I’ll give you a few minutes to catch your breath and we’ll get you sorted. Can’t have my apprentice falling apart now.”

Atlas closed their eyes, taking that rest for themselves.

“Guess I can manage a few minutes.”

Harlow fidgeted, fingers finding the cuts and judging their severeness quickly. She was used to things like this. This she understood immensely.

She reached into one of the pockets inside her robe and smashed a mint leaf (dried and prepared from the shop in town, that’s where she remembered the name!) and combined it with a chicken’s claw. This opened the pocket’s hideaway where she kept healing salve. Harlow had her talents but one thing she really sucked at was healing spells. So, she banked healing salves and dressing and kept stock at all times. They could only treat superficial wounds, which was more difficult than she realized. Injuries as a thief were expected but the frequency of getting hurt learning to cast magic depleted her stocks weekly.

Atlas kept quiet as she applied the salve... well, mostly. They winced at particularly large cuts which made Harlow jump unexpectedly because the salve shouldn’t sting. After the third apology she told them to just deal with it, which made Atlas chortle. She had managed to coat needed spots on both of their arms by pinning one at a time over their head like some odd wrestling move. Now, she moved onto their chest,

using a clean... well, it was clean cloth to wipe the blood away first. There were a few larger ones here as Atlas kept their shirt unbuttoned and loose at most times so there was little to no fabric to stop any damage. She smoothed more salve almost mindlessly before they found one of two matching scars on Atlas's chest. She had been so in the moment that she almost touched them, her fingertip hovering over them.

Atlas was relaxed and still. "Salve's not going to cut it for those."

They chuckled and nodded their head to give her permission.

Her finger grazed lightly over the raised skin. Magical healing was accessible to everyone and scars were not a common thing.

Atlas shifted their feet, drawing one leg up. "I didn't want to part with them. I earned them, they're mine."

There was pride in their voice.

"Of course they are and they're lovely."

Harlow's voice was warm.

"They persist and so do I,"

they announced firmly.

"Yes, you do."

Harlow spoke quietly into their ear.

Atlas leaned forward just enough to twist in place, and Harlow's hand fell from its spot on their chest. Atlas reached their hand up and back to her, tilting her chin down to them. "And I'd like to persist a little more..."

Harlow looked down to them, their left hands intertwined as Harlow threaded her fingers through theirs. "And I would want you to..."

She wasn't making sense, getting drunk on the adrenaline from their earlier tussle and from the way Atlas's eyes bored into her.

They pressed their forehead against hers and closed their eyes, which Harlow followed; although their lips were not yet touching, the air between their mouths ached with tension.

"Oh, only would want to..."

Atlas was whispering against her skin.

Harlow bit her bottom lip, releasing it as she struggled to have any composure in the moment, "Do want to... do want you to..."

She could hear the click of Atlas's mouth as they clicked their tongue before they pressed their lips against hers.

Atlas's lips were warm and cupped hers so gently it was as if they were afraid that she might break or dissolve into a dream right there. Harlow shifted from around them, hardheaded enough to do so without breaking the kiss. Atlas shifted along with her, drawing themselves up enough that the hand that guided her to them left her chin and glided along her jawline towards the back of her neck.

Harlow broke the kiss to lean back and look wantonly at them. There was dirt on their

face and salve glistening across it and they looked so damn breathtaking that Harlow had trouble believing this was happening at all.

Atlas smirked, watching her. There was an eagerness she could see from behind their eyes and she desperately wanted to feed into it. This time, Harlow came to them, releasing their hand to cup the side of their face. That smile had her before she knew it. The Spellsaven released a deep breath that seemed to have been stored for so long that their shoulders were tight from it, and pressed their lips against each other.

As she shifted again, the doorknob and plate swung from one of her unenchanted pockets and wedged itself between them. Atlas leaned back, still smiling, and looked down, puzzled.

Harlow laughed nervously, and fished it out of the fabric's clutches, presenting it to Atlas.

"Ah, so you did find it."

Atlas looked at it fondly.

"Of course, I can find anything."

She looked back towards the entrance of the garden. "I bet House will love it."

"I hope so, or things will get really tense."

Atlas grimaced.

They laughed and looked sheepishly at each other and the way they were entwined on the cobbled path.

“Shall we?”

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House was quiet.

There wasn't even a shutter open, and the back patio still had no stairs.

They both stood there analyzing the house and allowing their hearts to settle.

Harlow palmed the doorknob, feeling the smooth metal before pulling it out of her pocket.

She looked to Atlas for direction only for them to smile back at her and nudge her with their shoulder.

So, she was the one to do it.

With Atlas waiting on the path behind her, she inched forward and placed the doorknob and plate gently on the floorboards, being sure not to take a step up on it.

Harlow waited and nothing happened.

No movement or sign from House.

She looked back to Atlas with panic on her face and they waved for her to fall back with them.

When she returned to the Spellsaven's side, the house buckled a floorboard high enough to slide the doorknob to the back door.

The bottom edge of the back door lifted as if it was fabric, swallowing the gift.

A few minutes passed in which Atlas swung their arms back and forth and rocked on their feet.

Harlow passed the time by picking at her fingertips, worrying them.

Atlas nudged her and pointed back to the house, where it was folding out three steps from the ground to the patio.

Otherwise, nothing else changed.

They began to take a few steps towards the house but Harlow laid her hand on their shoulder. “May I?”

Atlas nodded and bowed, sweeping an arm towards House.

Harlow took each step and mustered the courage to take those steps confidently. She really wanted to test them like how Atlas did with a few toe taps but acting with ill belief in House would surely taint any apology.

She stood at arm’s length and stopped to clear her throat. “Daggerroot Manor, I have acted in ill faith...”

Her voice fell to a whisper. The patio floor lifted behind her, and she slid quickly up against the house before the floor lowered again. Harlow was shocked and held her breath. When everything settled and it seemed that House just wanted to hear her better, she continued.

Harlow cast her head down, ashamed to be admitting this to a house or anyone. “I did know the body inside. But I cannot explain to you why. Not for any blip of my

memory or anything like that but because they're from a life before this one. A life that I would like to stay then and not now."

She said it before she meant it. As it left her, her chest ached. Could it be that easy? Could she leave it and just refer to it as her past? She swallowed it down, a little lighter already. "I didn't want you to know and even if I knew you to be... as you are, I still would not. I also do not want the Spellsaven to know. It's complicated. But what I can promise you is that if there is an immediate danger that I notice or come across, I will do the utmost of my ability to protect all Daggerroots."

Her shoes were filthy from the dirt path and whatever was in the garden and Harlow was tired of looking at them. So, she raised her head to gauge any reaction from house.

The curtains inside waved. Was that a good sign or a bad one?

The apprentice took a healthy step back and raised her voice. "I also just made a commitment to the garden. I told... them, that I would assist them once a week until I can find a more suitable replacement. I would like to extend the same commitment to you, House. Should you want it..."

The shutters opened all the way and began to shake excitedly in place. This seemed like a good sign. Atlas climbed the steps behind her and laughed.

Atlas beamed. "So that means you'll have to stay."

Harlow glared playfully back. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you'd arranged this to keep me here..."

"It is my over-the-top style, but no. Can't say I'm mad about the result, though,"

they teased with a wink.

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As they returned to the corridor, Harlow squinted, hoping that the body would be back and that it was not eaten by House. The hallway wasn't empty, but the body was indeed gone. Harlow rubbed her eyes and looked again to confirm that there was a spectral form floating near the window.

“Ah-ha!”

Atlas thrust a finger towards the specter. “Look at that! Harlow, we are in an active haunt, isn't this exciting!”

They were practically vibrating with excess energy. How they found such a thing exciting after the garden ordeal was beyond her.

“You think it's exciting to be haunted?”

Harlow shook her head.

“Of course! That means there's a mystery!”

The ghost did not seem to notice them as it began to drift down a hallway. Harlow peeked down after it, seeing nothing that should have grabbed its attention more than two humans gabbing about a ghost.

“Harlow! Quick! It's on the move!”

Atlas yipped and with still mostly ripped clothing they chased after it as it began to pick up speed.

Harlow laughed as Atlas's energy was all too infectious. As they followed, the ghost began to pick up speed. Atlas's excitement for the chase burned brightly, and they followed close enough behind it to make sure Harlow wouldn't get lost in House's halls.

"Ah, of course! I know where's going!"

Atlas pointed up ahead to an adjoining hallway that looked like any other.

"What's down there?"

"My vault!"

She almost tripped when they said it aloud. Really? Of course the ghost was looking for it, it was looking for it in life so why not now, but what she was surprised about was how easily Atlas was taking her there. Perhaps they meant to leave her at the entrance.

Harlow pressed on her belly with her hand as she followed Atlas, all in an effort to push down the growing discomfort there. They had such a moment, her insides felt like they were on the outside and bubbling and wailing from whatever place guilt came from. Her plan was always to get closer to the Spellsaven and use that closeness to gain trust and access. But now that it was happening, after feeling the press of their body against hers, their breath on her neck, it felt every opposite way of good. Her hand pressed further down trying to smother it where it lay.

When they got to the end of the hallway the spirit paused and began to lower its head against a blank wall. The wall was between two bedrooms, ones that Harlow had seen inside already – both storage for reagents of two different types. But the wall kept his head from passing through. Harlow had to admit that was interesting enough. She had seen a few spirits in her line of business. (Thieving from mausoleums, burrows, and

the like were usually the type of thing people hired the Thieves' Guild for as they were often and oddly boobytrapped.) But to stop their head from going through, that had to be a specific ward.

Atlas stood beside the spirit, resting the side of their head on the wall right next to them, almost completely in their face. This spirit truly had no boundary issues. which was not the case for all ghosts. Some reacted quickly and terribly. Harlow had a scar near her ankle removed from such a mistake. But ever-confident Atlas seemed to have an unbridled fascination with it. They were practically vibrating from excitement, so much so that their earrings rattled in a way that reminded her of a dog wagging its tail.

“So... is that the vault's entrance?”

Harlow asked smoothly before licking her lips.

“It. Is.”

Atlas answered as if through a fog, still staring intently at the spirit.

“And it's warded.”

She walked around them, giving a big arc for space as she craned her neck, looking for clues of runework without casting any magic detection spells.

“And then some.”

Still distracted, their voice dropped as if to drive home the seriousness of the wardings.

“So, what do we do now?”

Harlow wondered if she'd always have to lead Atlas through conversations. Now she had the location, and she was careful to check her tone. She wanted to sound less demanding than it came out. She had to find a way to balance the excitement before it burst from her chest.

“Well, we can't let it in, just in case... someone might be scrying on this person, and I've already let this go too long. But curious, yes... what inside does it want?”

Harlow didn't have much to say as she didn't even know what she was looking for. She was also supposed to still not know what Copperkelly was here for.

“I don't have anything prepared for this sort of...”

Harlow gestured towards the ghost, “...temporal issue.”

“I can manage something. But at least this confirms they were after a thing and not me, although,”

Atlas rolled their eyes, “I could imagine that someone finally knows about the device.”

Harlow gulped. “The device?”

While Harlow waited for any kind of additional information from Atlas, the Spellsaven began to weave their hands around and opened several smaller pocket dimensions from which to retrieve reagents. They closed some and opened a few more. Their knitted brow gave her the impression they had misplaced something.

There were several ways to settle a ghost matter; some did involve brute strength and cunning disruption of their spirit, but most had to deal with those who had sworn oaths to their gods. Not being particularly religious, she had never taken interest in

learning those, and even now considered that she could still be without that being in her skillset.

Finding what they needed at last, Atlas pulled what looked like to her, a bundle of dried herbs, a fresh orange, and something else she couldn't ascertain from this distance.

“Would you mind giving me a little bit of a hand? I need a flame, but I lack the appropriate number of available hands,”

they admitted.

Nodding quickly, she pulled the reagents from her pockets and with dust-covered fingers, she produced a flame from the tip of her fingers which Atlas held their cupped fingers over. The items forgot their assigned state of matter and blended into one another, swirling and pooling at the base of their hands.

Harlow's flame began to waver as the continued heat on their hands must be causing some sort of damage and she started to pull the flame back.

“Nnn, I'm fine.”

Atlas finally tore their eyes off of the puddle and whisked up a half-lidded look in her direction.

Harlow felt she'd melt just like that puddle.

Atlas returned to their hands and Harlow brought the flame back to its placement and intensity. Without notice, as far as she could tell, the puddle dried out and hardened into a colorless lump.

“Ah, perfect, thank you.”

Atlas scuttled back to the spirit whose head was still pushed against the wall. They crouched and brought the dusty ball into their hand and squeezed, breaking it into two. Then darting in an arc around the base of the ghost, Atlas crushed the ball further and sprinkled a circle around it on the floorboards.

With an outreached finger, they began to draw runes with the dust. They stopped and looked up at Harlow expectantly.

A slight panic ran through her and then she understood, she should be writing this down. She pulled out a small bound journal and the pen that Atlas gave her earlier instead of a quill and stood behind Atlas enough to see over their crouched shoulder.

It was interesting spellwork. A de-summoning spell. Usually these spells asked whoever's deity to allow the spirit to continue on to wherever it was destined to be and usually to a plane associated with that deity. But this spellwork was not asking a deity for anything. Instead, it was asking their plane of existence itself to not interrupt the pattern of death that this spirit was originally on.

She wrote a note to herself to look into more spells that asked things of the plane and not deities. How much more could be obtained like this? Could all paladin and cleric spells be reworked like this for those who did not have a faith tied to a deity? It had to work similarly since there were so many who followed a philosophy of respecting the land instead of a deity.

Atlas stood when the spellwork was completed and the spirit raised their head off the wall. Its head then began to turn in a new direction, the eyes beginning to clear. This would be the perfect time to stall its exit and cast a spell that would let you still communicate with it. But Atlas did not move and so she did not either. Perhaps it would crash in that moment. And if it spoke it could easily reveal her position.

It then began to disappear slowly, and took about ten minutes to finish. A beautiful but short ten minutes in which Harlow and Atlas gravitated together. Atlas reached for her hand, not looking at her but holding onto her as they watched the spirit complete its journey from this plane. All that was left was the pair of them holding hands over an ashy circle. Romantic in its simplicity.

Atlas cleared their throat. “Ahem, House, if you could be so kind.”

The floorboards shifted and separated just so, each board tilting at one side to have the dust disappear back inside the house’s void.

“Thank you.”

They bowed.

“Where does it go?”

Harlow questioned.

“Honestly, I’m not too sure... just further into House.”

“So, you’ve never been... down there?”

“No...”

Atlas shuddered. “I don’t think I want to...”

Harlow was nodding when Atlas continued.

“But...”

They tilted their head in rebuttal. “It would be fascinating.”

She watched the interest grow as Atlas leaned towards the fallen ash. “Other time, okay?”

They nodded and agreed, breaking the floorboard stare down.

Atlas took a step forward where the circle had been and turned to grab her other hand with excitement. “Shall we see if anything is amiss inside?”

She didn’t trust her throat not to make words that might betray just how excited she was to get the chance.

Releasing her hands, they turned and knocked twice politely on the wall. In reaction, the wall shimmered into a perfect seven-foot rectangle and Atlas just stepped casually through.

Harlow looked around, as if there would be anyone else, but more so to check for any standout aspects of the location so she could build a mental map of it.

Of course, House could move it around all it wanted to but, if it was another dimension, which was highly likely, House wouldn’t be able to move that – it would always be there.

All that House could do was make it appear to be a cabinet, a mirror, a wall, or the entrance to another staircase.

But the portal would be grounded there.

Holding her breath like she was passing through a tunnel, she passed through the shimmer and appeared in a large, open domed room.

Very much not a ceiling she could place within House.

Not to say it wasn't, but she at least hadn't seen such architecture there yet.

The room was full of warm golden light and the size of it was like a small warehouse.

Just completely open.

Which might be overwhelming in its grandeur if it wasn't filled with so much stuff.

There were layers of different intricate rugs all over the floor. Only here and there could she see polished stone as the base. Not baseboards like House.

There were rows and rows of racks holding boxes, mostly unlabeled, and crates with packing details stapled to the side.

Short columns were placed with no discernible pattern throughout and objects of wonder and mystery placed on them.

Mostly mysterious because their place cards were blank or scribbled on with the worst penmanship Harlow had ever seen.

She wanted to stop and look at everything.

The ache of what wonders could be there was intense and she felt that wondrous itch of imagination strike within her.

Sure, she was a thief and any one of these items would be worth a lifetime's amount of work, but Harlow had never been in it for the money.

This was a feeling completely powered by the "what if".

The curiosity that was inside everyone usually pushed away by monotonous routine and from society to tell you to dream only sooo much, that you should keep your feet on the ground.

Harlow felt, what if this was her life.

What if she decided to hell with the council position? What if she gave herself completely to her position as apprentice AS an apprentice and nothing more? How freeing that would be.

She could spend a lifetime down here and never uncover everything.

She allowed herself this reprieve knowing that if she did, the Guild Master wouldn't let her go so easily.

He'd remind her of her dreams of building a legacy, one of her own, and not one built on the shoulders of Spellsaven Daggerroot.

She followed the noises of moving items, of boxes falling, and the occasional "hmmm"s that could only be spoken from Atlas's mouth.

She found them towards the back in a row of objects that appeared to be miscellaneous shaped gargoyles, all frozen in time, nothing animated, to Harlow's disappointment.

Some were covered in greenery as if ripped straight from a garden like theirs, others looked like they were chiseled this morning, and some looked so worn that she couldn't tell what creature or person they were made to resemble.

Those gave her an uneasy feeling and she gave them a wide berth as she got closer to Atlas.

As if just in time, Atlas whirled around with a small trinket box in their hands.

It was pewter (not impressive) and...

was that carved bone...

(kind of impressive)? And when she looked closer, with hands behind her back, the painted pattern appeared to be recessed.

On closer inspection it was intricate runes.

In Dragonspeak.

A language she had not even attempted to learn yet. Only a few people outside Dragonkin learned it, as it was not taught freely. One had to prove themselves to Dragonkin through a set of trials. The details of these trials were not released and when inquired about were told they changed with the challenger. You couldn't even record or have a translation scribe spell when near someone speaking it, as its very nature was too magical to be decoded.

She could recognize the runes through the delicate curves of the handwriting but nothing else.

And here Atlas had a box covered in it.

Did they know Dragonspeak? It was nowhere in her research of them beforehand.

“This...”

Atlas's smile was forced. She wasn't used to seeing it on their face. Atlas performed all sorts of various grins and smirks, but this made her uneasy. She wanted to reach

out to them, but their stiff posture made her rethink.

“That’s what he was after? Are you sure...?”

She looked around the hall of gargoyles but gestured widely enough to suggest the entire vault. “Just that little thing.”

Atlas nodded, serious. “This little thing. “

“What does it do?”

She leaned closer to it as if it would declare itself what it was.

“Inside is a device... like a ring.”

Atlas was staring slightly off in the distance and then shook their head to reorientate themselves. They paused their explanation to give a sigh and then, with gentle fingers, creaked the box open.

Harlow noted that Atlas did not say incantations or call forth any spellwork that she could tell to do this. Did the box not require one or did Atlas find other ways of casting without verbal components?

There was a simple gold band carved to look like a strip of feathers in which a ruby gem poked through, carved to look like an eye. She could not sense any arcane magic on it, but it must have some. To have such a designing spell on it was impressive, something very Spellsaven indeed.

“If this stone is pressed, it will revert time back five minutes.”

They spoke quietly as if talking about it aloud would announce its function to the

world.

“Only five minutes?”

She was a little shocked. That wasn't a lot of time.

Atlas's face scrunched into offense and then they laughed. “Yes, only five minutes. There's a lot of mischief you could do or undo in five minutes.”

Harlow sat with this and thought about all the things that a simple five minutes could achieve. About how many times five minutes was all she needed to get into any building, into any chest. And if she messed up, she could just press this and try again? She could see why the Guild Master would be so thirsty for such an item. She wrestled with difficult feelings on how she felt her bedtime storyteller would utilize this and to whose benefit.

Like the push and pull of wants and want nots, Harlow struggled for the first time. Here, it was right here. She could lift it from them this very moment; she knew her sleight of hand was good enough. And if it wasn't, she could likely silence Atlas permanently. The very thought of that made her stomach sour. She had prepared for years. Years of study to get to this moment for it to come so quickly. She has access to the vault and now the device in Atlas's upturned palm. So, why was she so sad?

“Yet you keep it in here. It seems to be a valuable thing that one would want to keep with themselves.”

Harlow didn't even like her favorite things to be out of reach, let alone in a whole other location away from sight and sound.

Atlas closed the box gently and covered it in a cave of their hands. “I used to, but...”

They used a hand to nervously comb through their own hair. “I found myself using it every chance I got. The littlest indiscretion, the most minor inconvenience, I would go back and do it again. I found myself using it during spellwork; I’d be working on a new spell and use up the reagents I’d prepared and then just use this instead of getting off my ass and prepping more. Times even when I didn’t get the answer I wanted from someone, I’d use it to try again, to practice being tactful.”

A blush of embarrassment crossed from one cheek, over their nose, and onto the other cheek.

“I can see how that would be hard to give up...”

Harlow spoke softly, understanding.

“Yes, and it took a lot for me to stop. So I really keep it here to keep it away from myself.”

Atlas turned and placed it among the gargoyles on the shelf as if it was just another sculpture with the rest.

If the world’s most creative and joyous Spellsaven could be tempted to such a degree, what would that lead to with someone as flawed as Kob? Hells, even she was under no delusion that he was a good man, but she always left it with him just being a man. Flawed to a degree as anyone else, including her. The Guild Master had already sent Copperkelly only days after she arrived; what kind of outcome would there be if he had this device? She always told herself before that a weapon is a weapon but it’s the hands that are held accountable. Harlow knew better. That wasn’t really how it worked and now she was standing in a place that in any other way shouldn’t exist with a device that shouldn’t work. She would be just as accountable if she gave it to the Guild Master. The indecision she struggled with even in this moment felt like it would drown her.

“Why not destroy it?”

Harlow could never, but if it caused such problems, why not? If Atlas created such a device, why couldn't they just destroy it and if need be, if in the future they changed their mind, they could just do it again. She asked in such an inquisitive way and if Atlas was listening carefully enough, they'd be able to hear a low level of pleading. If they'd destroy it, then there was nothing Harlow could do about it. The decision would have been made for her.

Atlas chuckled but it was sorrow, not joy, leaking through. “If I only could. I keep it here to keep it from everyone else. It would be too dangerous out... there. I keep it here to keep it from me.”

They must have noticed the pity in her eyes because Atlas looked away and cast their gaze downwards, shoulders slumped. Even the fabric of their normally billowing clothing lost life in its movement.

Harlow took a tentative step towards them and reached out a hand for them to grasp. “Then that's where it is and that's where it stays.”

Gah, it hurt her so much to say it. She meant it, wanted to mean it. But she couldn't promise it would stay. She had so much to think about, so much to weigh, and it wasn't going to be something she could process now. Without saying the words “I promise,”

she willingly let them believe that she would in fact leave it where it was. One day soon it would be missing, and by her own hand. And another day, surely not today, Harlow would have to decide to break her word against the only “father”

she knew or the one person that made her want to be a better person. A better person wouldn't be a thief. To be a better person meant changing so much of herself and that

was too much to dwell on for now.

Atlas grinned and bore through it, looking over their shoulder to her, and noticed her hand. They smirked and took it timidly.

Harlow tilted her head, needing to change the subject for both their sakes. “So, you know Dragonspeak.”

The glow that normally followed Atlas was back and they sparked alive, twirling Harlow in place.

“I cannot say that I do, but I can tell you about this Professor Jenkelstrum, who if I do say is quite an intense individual. Come, I’ll show you his spell book. He allowed me to copy down most of the spells in his book and they are fascinating.”

Atlas took off with a quick fluid motion and dragged her behind them, very much not stopping to explain any of the other wonders in the vault.

Perhaps another time for Harlow, as even in the vault, she felt the most wonderful thing was them.

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Seeing the copied spells from Professor Jenkelstrum was intensely inspiring.

The fact that Atlas was just as excited as her brought her to a new depth of magical appreciation.

J's spell book was not available at the Grand Library and Harlow could tell why.

Well, other than Atlas also commenting about how much of a hermit this professor specifically was.

There was also a rumor they didn't turn in spellwork often so that they could never ascend to the title of Spellsaven.

This way they could avoid having a required apprentice.

Within the pages were several simple spells: threading a needle, fixing flyaway hairs (which was even more interesting considering Professor J was Dragonkin so he didn't have hair), and even a quick prevention spell to keep blisters forming on the back of your heel when breaking in new shoes.

But there were also things that were WONDROUS.

This professor had theories that Dragonkin originally existed on a different plane of existence altogether, and not only that, but that they experienced time in a non-linear fashion.

Perhaps this was where Atlas had gotten the idea for the relic in the first place.

Personally, she wanted to make her own copy but there was something about the secrecy of it, the personal nature of the professor's musing in the margins, that kept her from it.

As far as she knew, the professor was still alive and well.

If she wanted to copy the spells for study, Harlow felt she should have to earn it directly through him and not Spellsaven Daggerroot.

Atlas did not comment on her lack of note taking.

She didn't have an interest in messing with anything to do with time.

She was haunted enough by the relic's existence and that was more than enough for Harlow.

But it did make her crave to work on her own projects in between the Spellsaven's challenges.

Today, particularly, she had woken up early, swept out her workspace (which it desperately needed) by hand thanks to Bethal teaching her the value of doing things by hand, and gathered various locks stashed in a crate in one of House's storerooms.

The state of the room was so abysmal that she spent a whole hour there just managing a path from the door to the shelf.

There were other interesting reagents and tools like an unspillable decanter (which thank gods it was, or Harlow would have been soaked in rusty rainwater.

How that rainwater got there, she would never know), dried mushrooms from the other side of the continent, and a whole pile of compounded coal used for

summoning.

When Harlow reentered her workspace, she gained a new appreciation for it.

Lacy curtains hung over one rod that extended the length of both windows.

Although not ideal for direct light, they did diffuse enough that even when the sun first spilled inside, it became a warm glow upon the floor.

Her furniture there was as mismatched as the rest of the house but most of the fabric was in various shades of green.

Her favorite chair had a faded pattern that felt like leaves but after a thorough cleaning was revealed to be several different hands.

Only slightly creepy in retrospect.

But her workbench was large and sturdy.

She wasn't sure what wood it was originally carved of, but it reminded her of the same wood of House's staircases and that gave her comfort.

Initially when she went into this room, it made her upset as the staircases were constantly elusive, but now, with her mended friendship with Daggerroot Manor, it just meant stability.

Harlow hung her wizard robes on the corner of the one pair of oak bookshelves in the room.

In front of her she arranged various bowls of needed reagents and spell ingredients.

Set upon a thick sheet of reinforced velvet was a singular lock.

It looked more or less like any other lock; gentle divots from its smithing and the core were intact although it looked as if it had seen better days.

It appeared to be a bit eroded, and it smelled of fish.

She could assume it was a lock from a ship or from a coastal cove, but the sand which fell from the inner core poured out black – she realized she could assume nothing.

There were no black sand beaches anywhere on this continent.

She didn't even know on what continent there would be.

She had an itch to go down that rabbit hole, to find out more about this sand specifically.

Her first test was to take a few grains and see if they were flammable.

Thankfully they weren't so she ruled out spark powder.

If this was how excited she got over a random lock in a supply closet, what kind of intrigue awaited her in the vault? Perhaps, if she could tweak her studies enough, she could convince Atlas to let her go in and look for one... or several.

Harlow cracked open her stiff, heavy bound sketchbook and clamped it open.

She spent the next few hours making her best attempt at replicating the image of the lock on one page; on the other, her previous observations.

She had detected magic on it back in the storeroom, but she wasn't able to figure out

which class.

Which made the lock perfect for her.

There was no one around.

Not even Atlas here to check on her, to question her apprentice duties.

No Guild Master to ask why she wasn't in the vault yet.

It was just her and a lock.

Finally, something that she could do, something she could use her skills as a thief and magical knowledge for.

Something that she considered fun.

Fun that didn't need another person to witness, fun that didn't need to be approved or facilitated by another.

Just something Harlow genuinely enjoyed, a moment of something that was only for her.

Several beginner-based unlocking spells were completely ineffective.

Her already learned personal concoction would be a shoo-in but Harlow wanted to find out ways that could be more sustainable.

It would be like summoning gale force winds just to cool your food. Overkill.

Hours had passed and she could feel it in her lower back.

Perfect consistent posture was a virtue she didn't have.

She had gone through several locks now and had successfully proceeded without needing to dip into the dwindling tube of kraken blood in her robes.

Jellyfish toxin seemed to help a great deal but her real goal was to leave all animal-based reagents out of it.

For some reason, a lemon mint crushed with a single shaving of triton root was showing promise.

She adjusted the ratio just slightly and on the first pass, her last lock she grabbed from the storeroom popped open.

There was a wet sucking sound when it was released.

It was not a pleasing sound and Harlow would have to find a way to make no sound if she wanted this spell to be practical for fellow rogues.

“Wow, that was a good one!”

Harlow startled and sat up quickly in her chair, dropping the paintbrush she used to coat the lock. It rolled along the desk and fell to the floor with a splat.

Atlas was sitting on a matchstick of a chair near the door. They were leaned back with a leg over their knee and a teacup balancing on that. The Spellsaven had wrapped their hair up in a neat... okay, rather messy, pile on their head and had it pinned with what looked like a random dried-out smooth branch. They had on pink fluffy house slippers, loose beige linen pants that tied at the shins, and a black loose tunic that was as see-through as cheesecloth. Their usual highly patterned robes were nowhere to be seen.

“How long have you been spying on me?”

Harlow cast them a faux-heated look.

“Mmm, for a few hours now. The door was open though!”

They pointed over their shoulder quickly as if to direct her fake anger towards it and not them.

She did remember leaving it open and she rolled her eyes playfully. “Well fine, if that’s all it takes for your attention, then I’ll have to keep it in mind.”

Atlas’s eyebrows shot up and they leaned forward, ignoring the clinking of the teacup and teaspoon on their knee. “See that you do.”

Harlow blushed before remembering to jot down her success in the journal before her. As she scribbled away, Atlas stood and set the teacup in the doorway. (It was whisked away, whether Atlas approved or not, by House.) They bent over to retrieve her brush and placed it delicately on the tabletop, careful not to displace anything else. With a wave of their fingers, the spill left on the floor was no longer and they towered behind her, looking at her sketchbook.

“This is really incredible work; how long have you been working on this?”

Atlas sounded generally impressed as they squinted to read more of her handwriting.

It had only been a few months and even the Spellsaven was aware that was not enough time to develop what she had in this practice.

“I started... oh gosh, it’s got to be three years now?”

Harlow was slightly embarrassed by the professional awareness of her mentor but also it felt extremely rewarding to be recognized.

Lock picking via magical spells wasn't new. It was arguably one of the oldest tricks in the magical book. But, as wizards expanded their skills, more and more sorcerers were born with magic in their veins, and mages stumbled across questionable magic sources, there were other ways to skin the proverbial grokenuit. Roguish individuals like herself made up for any gap and thus furthering the craft was left by the wayside.

Atlas began to quickly shift their weight from one foot to the other, like a cat ready to pounce. "Say, would you like a little... challenge?"

There were multiple lines of thinking, or one very distracted one, whisking inside Harlow. Yes! Yes! She wanted a great challenge. Did they have a legendary lock to practice upon? Would it be in the vault? Or was this challenge actually something unrelated to locks and more about her growing ability to find substitutes for reagents? Some "challenges"

imposed by Atlas were ridiculous child-like games centered around concentration and not breaking it no matter the distraction but others were problems very similar to those in the wizarding finals at universities.

She nodded, as opposed to spilling forth a million questions. Atlas took three large steps around her workbench and darted out into the hall. "This way, Apprentice!"

They were practically shouting with excitement.

Harlow broke out into a wide grin. An adventure of sorts, then! She grabbed her robes, flung them on and quickly stuffed what was left of her prepared ingredients into her pockets, being careful not to place them in the same one should that trigger a change in their intensity later.

The apprentice chased after her mentor, who was rather quick today, through the halls of House only to almost crash into them when cutting around a corner. They were stopped in a short hallway in front of a large gilded-framed painting of a black, long-haired cat sitting on top of a castle-shaped chess piece.

Atlas looked solemn and crossed their chest quickly with a flourish of their hands as if saying a prayer for a deity. “So regal, yes?”

Harlow looked them over, careful to pay attention to if this was some changeling copy of Atlas or not. They seemed unaffected by her staring and took a step towards the painting. With a long, lanky arm, they booped the nose of the cat and the painting gained an intense shimmer. The vault entrance – it had changed since their last visit.

She followed and curious if that part was required or not but decided to not risk it, she booped the nose of the princely cat. The vault was still very much the same, entirely filled with odds and ends, weapons, and... wait, was that half a hull of a ship?

“This way!”

Atlas called for her further down an aisle of various cores of wood.

Of course they were not simply at the end of the aisle, there were a few twists and turns to get to them, but after navigating House for so long, it seemed second nature for her that nothing could be straightforward.

She slowed as she met Atlas, who was standing at the wall of the vault. There was one thing confirmed, the vault did have at least one end. But inanimately staring at her was a door. It was simple at first. A white rectangle with a deep brass pull handle. But there was a latch about a foot up from the handle where a padlock hung. It was painted bright blue at one time but now was scuffed in random places, revealing matching brass underneath.

“I present to you, the unpickable lock!”

Atlas leaned against the wall next to it, looking mighty smug with their find.

“Is that what it’s called?”

“Oh, I have no idea.”

“Where does it lead?”

“I have no idea.”

Atlas leaned off the wall and looked around as if someone would hear them. “It just appeared one day and I couldn’t get the lock off myself but you, you might be able to.”

“When did this door appear and why are you saying that so casually as if doors just appear in private vaults for no reason?”

“Because sometimes doors appear in vaults for no reason. Are you telling me you don’t have randomly appearing doors?”

“No, that’s not normal.”

Harlow had to laugh at the ridiculousness of it.

“Pff, normal is not normal.”

Atlas dismissed the idea. “So, what do you say, want to take a crack at it?”

“Yes, absolutely I do.”

Harlow laughed, just as giddy now as Atlas with the prospect of this mystery. She shooed them aside and they disappeared down an aisle for a moment only to reappear with a rather sturdy iron end table.

“For your things.”

Atlas gathered her sketchbook and arranged the reagents she handed them in orderly small piles.

Harlow tumbled through the various methods she’d been working on and perfecting that day. But each time, she had to drench the lock in a spell removal liquid and try the next thing. She had one last option and that lay with the kraken blood spellwork.

Hours had passed but Atlas was just as eager as when they started, and that helped her push through. She painted the final rune along the padlock’s core and stuffed the paintbrush above her ear. She murmured her incantation again, and the lock simply opened with a pop.

She reached for the lock and hesitated but Atlas took a step towards her and spoke. “Go ahead, you should be the one to get the first peek.”

She swung open the lock plate and let the padlock dangle aside the frame now and pulled open the door. It was difficult to do at first but with a little more muscle and leverage she managed to pull it open.

On the other side of the door was a wide and impossibly long skyline peppered with dark clouds but blue as any other day. In contrast, before them was an endless beach filled with black sand. Seafoam frothed and gathered on the shore as the waves pulled and pushed.

Together, holding hands, they both stepped through the doorway and carefully to the

rocky ledge that the door seemed to be built upon. There was a deep growl in the air that she attributed to the sounds of heavy wind cascading through deep caverns. There must be some nearby. A green-tailed sea warbler landed on the beach. It pecked at an airhole under the sand, looking for clams, she guessed. She and Atlas and laughed their amazement at watching life play out upon the beach.

Then the bird began to squeak and scramble, its wings kicking up black sand as it tried to fly away. In a snap the bird was pulled under the sand and the beach filled the tunnel left by its body. Harlow leaned forward, trying to see better, trying to see what happened, and the paintbrush from behind her ear fell and tumbled to the sand. She hesitated, wanting to grab it, but then a large, sickly pale leech stretched its way from under the paintbrush and the whole beach began to tremble.

Atlas held onto Harlow, who was having trouble keeping her footing on the rocky ledge. Further down the beach, a large chasm appeared, and black sand rushed down to where she couldn't see. They realized that something wasn't breaking through the sand but instead something that neither Atlas nor Harlow could see was carving through it from above. Something giant – something that was source of what she attributed to cavern wind howls.

In a panic of limbs, the two wizards dove back through the door and they both fought to slam the door shut. Atlas threw their back against it and braced their feet on the floor. The door rumbled and swung slightly open, more of those leech-like beings trying to get through, and Harlow scrambled to replace the lock. It only took a few seconds for her to wash the lock and replace it on the lock plate. When it engaged, the thumping and roar ceased.

They both slid to the floor and Harlow moved to lean back against the wall. Atlas leaned over to grab her hand and give it a squeeze. "Perhaps we should wait until we both have apprentices, and they can keep up with House to explore that a bit more."

They chuckled nervously.

“So... you see us together down the line, mmm?”

Harlow teased, enjoying any distraction to process what the hell just happened and why a door leading to such a place was in Atlas’s vault.

“Gah.”

Atlas scooted off the door and to her side, facing her. “Are you saying you don’t?”

“I might need a little convincing.”

Harlow winked and scooted even closer; she could feel their still slightly panicked breath on her skin just as they likely felt hers.

“I think I can manage a little convincing.”

Atlas’s hand trailed against her cheek, bringing her to their lips. It was gentle and soft but they didn’t stop with one. As Harlow leaned more into their kiss, both of Atlas’s hands trailed down her sides, past her waist, and cupped underneath her to pull her up on their lap.

Fighting to not quite break their kiss, Atlas spoke. “Is this... okay?”

Harlow adjusted herself, her legs and knees stabilizing her position while sitting slightly upward, bending Atlas’s head back as her kisses gained aggressiveness. “Yes and perhaps we could find a way to use up all this extra adrenaline...”

she teased.

Atlas moaned when Harlow broke the kiss to nip the side of their neck. “More, Harlow. Please, I’m begging you, more.”

Her teeth clamped down on their neck and Atlas spasmed under her with a deep moan. She released the already blushed skin and leaned back. Her hands found the front of her blouse and her fingers toyed with the buttons there. “How much is too much, Atlas?”

Atlas struggled to answer, and she heard several attempts at replying die before they left their throat. Instead, they responded by pulling off their own mesh-like tunic.

“I am infinite space; I will take whatever you can give me, Harlow. And when you’re tired and on the verge of burning out, I’ll show you just how much I can fill you.”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:47 am

Months had passed but it had seemed like only yesterday Harlow knocked on the front door of Daggerroot Mansion to only find a dead body, make a deal with a garden, follow a ghost, and find out exactly what the Guild Master wanted.

These six months Harlow had been sending written updates with fake information about her standing with Atlas and being able to find the vault.

So far it seemed to satiate the man and there were no more guild members sent...

or at least none that House would admit to.

Although any signs of others attempting entry were nil, Harlow felt frayed.

She was constantly worried that around any corner could be a new corpse, every letter could be a summons back, that Atlas would find her questions about the vault a little too convenient.

She was happy there but when her thoughts ran away from her, the world would get darker, and the guilt would get heavier.

House's walls felt like they pressed in more and more each day (they didn't really), acting like her conscience – looming, moving along with her but never leaving.

Thankfully, events had slowed down for a bit as she focused more on her studies and Atlas continued to challenge her with various outlandish scenarios in which she should think of a spell to cast and then perform it correctly.

They seemed outlandish to her on paper but now, having lived such events, it was indeed good solid prep.

When she wasn't catching up on her spellwork, which was mostly self-discovery, she kept up her bargain with Garden.

It took a few weeks to manage, but she was able to get the fountain to work (Atlas assigned this as her first outlandish problem but declined to be present when she cast those first spells).

Now, she walked the grounds every day to keep the path clear and check on each group of plantings.

She then worked every day with her hands, harvesting, replanting, and pruning.

She found solace in the tasks, and she preferred to do this alone as it gave her time to be more-or-less on her own.

Time to reflect and also time to let her thoughts be empty.

Atlas stayed very much away from the garden so in a way, it was hers.

After the experience – and she wasn't even the one who was whipped about – she couldn't blame them for never looking at a leaf again.

However, she had walked in a few times on Atlas spritzing her potted plant.

Even talking to it occasionally.

The moment they noticed her, they'd jump and spin and act like they were doing anything but.

It was this particular morning that Atlas didn't back away from the plant and stood with their hands braced on the countertop.

Curious, Harlow circled around the kitchen island to the dedicated spot around the herb window.

Harlow's brows drew together as concern rose in her.

"Atlas, what's wrong?"

Harlow wove a hand behind their waist.

Atlas gulped and turned towards her, face apologetic with wide eyes and stern lips. They looked back from her towards the plant and that's when Harlow noticed, the stick, stem actually but it resembled more of a stick now, seemed a tad yellow. Harlow had planted a stick into its dirt to track its growth and it had not grown in a few weeks.

Now Atlas's worry was contagious. "Do you think it's okay?"

Instead of answering, Harlow pulled the plant towards her and probed the soil with a finger. Not too dry, still moist. She checked the area for pests, dry spots, anything, and nothing made sense. She had done everything right. It was growing well.

"What do I do?"

she groaned.

"I'm not sure... I can send a message to Betha,"

they suggested.

“No, don’t. I...”

Harlow didn’t want to admit failure. She had been so damn close. And although she’d have to agree with Bethal that it wasn’t hard to appreciate plants without the use of magic, which she did... mostly in the garden. But this was her original task, the only thing that anyone from town had asked of her, and she couldn’t complete it. She felt defeated.

Atlas reached gently to her chin, turning her to them, and smiled warmly. “It’ll be okay. Asking for help is not a bad thing. Besides, Bethal never said you couldn’t come to her for help.”

Harlow nodded, nuzzling into their hand. Atlas pulled closer and rested their forehead on hers. “Come on, I’ll go with. It’s about time to head into town again.”

Just like before, they geared up for a walk and not a port. Harlow was anxious and fretted with her bottom lip, causing it to swell and almost split as they walked. She was so distracted that she didn’t even notice Atlas wrestling with something of their own.

She paused halfway to town still on the dirt paths and looked at what the fuss was about. “What. Is. That?”

All that she could see was Atlas struggling with their clothing, a tiny fur thing climbing about from inside causing Atlas to wince but not react otherwise. “Just a little mewling.”

“A what?”

What was a mewling?

“A mewling... a kitten.”

Atlas opened up their shirt wider to expose the white kitten with brown-striped spots clinging to their shoulder and chest.

“How the hell did you get that?”

Harlow laughed at the image of Atlas with arms up and outstretched, desperately not trying to cause the cat any duress while the cat was certainly distressing Atlas.

“Oh, the groundskeeper found it, and perfect timing too.”

Atlas smirked and continued the trudge to town with their hands up, unsure of how to handle such a best.

Harlow went through the list of names in her mind, desperately trying to recall a groundskeeper but came up with nothing. “Wait, what do you mean groundskeeper?!”

Harlow ran after them while holding the pot to her chest and blocking the stem with her other hand. “I haven’t met a groundskeeper, Atlas!”

The Spellsaven laughed as if it was a trivial thing and Harlow decided to ask them about it later... maybe when there wasn’t a pin-needle-clawed mewling assaulting them. Besides, they seemed to like to uphold the mystery of the house and now its grounds.

As before there was a group of children, some missing from the group and other ones Harlow had never seen before. They all gathered around them, but it was Atlas who stepped carefully through the children to stand next to Sophia.

The wizard got on their knees and reached into their voluminous shirt, all while Sophia was wide-eyed and waiting. Harlow winced when Sophia squealed in excitement as Atlas presented the mewling.

The kitten clung to the little girl ,who seemed unafraid nor impacted by the same claws that rendered Atlas into a defensive state. She held it close to her and tears pooled into the corners of her eyes. Frantic at this, Atlas padded their clothing to discover a collar hidden there previously.

“Quick, Harlow, a bonding spell please.”

Atlas held the brown leather collar up to her.

A bonding spell was easy enough and something well within her abilities. Sophia would be able to locate the mewling whenever she wished and if the distance between them got too much, she would be alerted. A very standard spell that needed no prep; just the animal and person with the collar used as a non-consumed reagent.

As Sophia walked away with her pet, Harlow leaned her head on Atlas’ shoulder as they watched the group of children volley around them begging for a change to pet the mewling. “So, she asked for a kitten, hmm?”

“Oh, not at all.”

Harlow shot them a look of confusion. “Then why did you give her a cat?”

“Because she asked for a best friend. “ Atlas leaned over and gave Harlow a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Oh, and her parents were okay with that?”

Harlow fought off a blush from the moment of affection with her question.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I didn’t ask them. Why would I?”

Atlas asked this genuinely. They seemed like this was an outlandish suggestion.

Harlow’s stomach dropped, the Spellsaven was truly out of touch sometimes.
“Atlas...”

“Did you ask your parents if you could have a best friend or did your best friend happen upon you?”

they challenged.

“I don’t think that’s the same.”

Harlow scoffed.

“I don’t see how it’s not.”

Atlas huffed and trailed off, distracted by the general shop’s outdoor display.

Harlow noticed their body was tight now, far different from the hilariously posed juggling of a cat.

Their shoulders were stiff and they were poking around the stand outside the shop without a clear direction.

She wanted to go up and wrap her arms around them.

Perhaps even pull them into a series of gentle kisses.

But they never had that conversation on where they stood, on if there was a relationship of any seriousness.

It hadn't even occurred to her to think of it as everything had been so easy.

Atlas would come up behind her in the kitchen and lavish her neck with kisses.

Harlow would come in from a longer session of gardening and Atlas would be there with spirits and a message.

A massage that stayed a massage.

They were attentive.

Harlow would occasionally, and only occasionally due to Atlas's generally very easygoing mood, see their eyebrows knit together, and she'd take a finger and smooth them out, which would distract Atlas enough that it would pull them out of whatever bothered them.

Or, enough for Atlas to begin telling Harlow everything that frustrated them.

Usually, an attempt to widen social skill spells.

Atlas was dead set on a spell to make learning languages easier.

They were perturbed that everyone relied on citywide translation spells and did no more work.

A lover of all languages, Atlas wanted to make languages accessible to the individual.

Years and years ago it was put up to vote upon having a designated language of the

major cities.

A few mages and wizards banded together to strike down the deal but the compromise was that a translation spell would be in effect in any major city.

She had read that when Atlas was an apprentice, they were on a list of signatures signing in the compromise but voting for all languages to continue.

But there would be little she could do at the moment, as no massaging of their brows would work.

Would Atlas care for public affection...

in earnest, would she? The kiss on the cheek was sweet but could easily be left up to interpretation.

It was not lost on Harlow that she was...

in some sort of relationship... with her mentor and that naturally there could be power dynamics in play.

Would she want the townspeople to know there was something more intimate in their relationship than apprentice and mentor? It would not be a shock to anyone, it was common, and many spouses were from similar bonds.

Even people married before the apprenticeship would take on their partner to further their knowledge.

Harlow took a few steps forward and placed her hand on Atlas's upper back, and she felt them relax in response.

Atlas turned and looked toward her with a strained grin.

“How about I go see Bethal and you check on everyone from this list?”

Harlow brought out the old list that the Spellsaven had given her before and handed it over.

Atlas laughed and nodded. “That sounds like a great plan.”

Harlow nodded and smiled gently before turning towards the street.

“Thank you.”

Atlas said it so earnestly that Harlow smirked without looking back.

The walk was quicker now that she knew the location of the infamous Bethal.

The creature was still something she couldn't see from the road.

Yet again she knocked and was unanswered.

This time, however, she made her way around the house to the back garden.

She noticed Bethal immediately, dressed in a yellow kurta and light blue linen pants.

But between her and Bethal, she noticed a few plants turn towards her.

She might have missed it before but now that she was so present in the Daggerroot Garden, she knew what plants with a little more awareness looked like.

Her chest tightened and she surveyed around her in the backyard.

Should anything reach towards her, she would be surrounded.

Her best bet for escape would be to run to Bethal and hope that she was truly the great person that Atlas had referred to months ago.

Her fingers clutched the pot and before Harlow could take a testing step forward, her concentration was broken.

“Ah, don’t worry, they don’t bite.”

Bethal waved a trowel in her direction to beckon her closer.

She didn’t respond but took a few steps instead; indeed they stayed within their flower beds and all but one bunch turned back their direction to the slowly setting sun.

“There you go.”

Bethal dusted Harlow’s shoulders with a clean rag from her gardening apron.

Desperate to break the silence in her throat, Harlow stammered, “O-oh, did you raise those yourself?”

She had trouble when referring to plants who were more aware and if they were grown or raised or what the appropriate terminology was. Atlas was useless for information on this topic.

“For the most part. Not from the seed though, just from cuttings.”

“Cuttings, from where?”

“Daggerroot Manor of, course.”

Bethal’s head fell back as she laughed full-heartedly.

“You’ve been to the Daggerroot gardens?”

Harlow was shocked – how did this woman survive?

“Yes, a few owners before the young Spellsaven took over, I used to tend to it every weekend.”

She looked wistfully at the no-longer cuttings. “A truly enchanting garden, I must say. But, look at me going on about nonsense. How are you holding up, Apprentice?”

Harlow must have hidden the pot behind her back when she approached and now she sheepishly looked to Bethal, about to break the dam of frustration and admit to her that she failed. “I’m sorry, Bethal, I killed it.”

Harlow brought the plant out in front of her and for the first time in a long time, she felt so inadequate. If anything happened, perhaps Atlas would treat her to another massage; that would be something to look forward to.

“Oh? Well, let me see.”

She motioned for Harlow to hurry up.

She produced the plant and refused to look down at it; instead she analyzed Bethal’s face.

“Ah, I see.”

Bethal's face was unreadable. Of course, the old biddy had mastered a blank face.

Harlow opened her mouth to utter more apologies but was interrupted when Bethal raised a hand to cut her off.

“Well, it looks very healthy, don't know what you're going on about on it being dead and all.”

Bethal scoffed at her with a shrug.

“But... it's a bit yellow...”

She stretched a finger towards the plant, trying to pinpoint the yellow's location as if a scout in the woods.

“Barely.”

Bethal waved her off with a hand.

“And it's stopped growing altogether, for three weeks...”

Was it truly no big deal or did Bethal not take her that seriously. This was a serious matter! A plant's life was at stake, damn it!

“Of course it has.” Bethal laughed.

This must be some trick. Surely. Was this even a plant that Bethal had given her? Harlow could feel the edges of her ears burn with embarrassment.

Bethal's blank face melted, and she smiled encouragingly. “We're through fall now and it's going dormant to store energy for spring. Your soil looks great, and I don't

notice any pests. The yellowness is just an indication of it getting ready...”

“So... it’s okay?”

“Yes, Apprentice, you did good.”

She laughed and reached out to lightly squeeze Harlow’s shoulder for comfort.

Harlow stood there with the pot still slightly outstretched, and she gazed down on it.

“You’re okay,”

she whispered before bring it back to her chest. She poked the stem with her finger,

“You’re okay.”

“Yes, it’s okay, and you’re okay.”

Bethal placed a hand on her shoulder and gave another gentle squeeze. “You did good. You did it, and without any magic at all. How did that go for you?”

“It felt like nonsense at first but... I admit, I looked forward to spending time with it every day.”

Harlow uttered silent goodbyes and held the pot back out to the gardener. “Here you go then.”

“Oh, I’m not taking that. “ Bethal pulled back and shook her head.

“But...”

Harlow took a small step forward; did she need to chase the woman down?

“It’s yours. It likes you; I can tell. And besides, when I sent it with you, I sent it home.”

Bethal raised an eyebrow.

“What do you mean, home?”

Harlow’s interpretation of home was loose. A figment of imagination she desperately wanted to fill but each mention of it, each room she’d talk about, wasn’t really home. Home was an ideal. One that Harlow thought was unachievable.

“Well, the mother plant that the seed is from is from Daggerroot Manor, of course. I do hope she’s still up and kicking.”

“Oh, you have no idea.”

Harlow relaxed, bringing the plant back against the safety of her chest.

“Well done, Apprentice, I’ll have to schedule you to assist with the wheel in spring.”

She gestured back to the location of it as if Harlow could forget that day.

She nodded affirmatively. She was about to go but something still weighed on her.
“Bethal?”

By the time she found her tongue, Bethal was already back on her knees in a planter.
“Yes?”

“Why did you say this plant was appropriate for me?”

Bethal smirked and leaned back on her feet. “Because of your heart, my dear.”

“What about it?”

Her expression was on the border of glaring down Bethal, ready for some insult or wild speculation.

“Your mind, your form, your progress is all very impressive but I could tell, young apprentice, that you’d been neglecting matters of the heart.”

She looked her up and down before continuing. “But I see that’s no longer the case and now your seedling is no longer a seedling.”

Harlow nodded, feeling uncomfortable enough to not want to continue the conversation but comfortable enough to know that the answer to that was the budding feelings between her and Atlas.

With only slightly embarrassed rosy cheeks, she went to leave, taking a paving stone with each step.

She was studying the stem, wondering just how long it would be dormant, when she ran straight into something or someone in front of her.

Whatever she ran into was firm and steadfast so she had bounced back a bit but managed nonetheless with quick feet.

Her gaze went from the ground, where a bit of dirt from her pot had spilled out, up a set of deep purple robes, stitched by hand in golden thread.

Familiar robes. Her head tilted back to take in the full form of Magdalanous.

“Oh, shit.” What have I done to summon the Librarian after me?

“Ah, Apprentice Spellsaven Hedgewater, what brings you to my home?”

The Dragonkin’s unreadable face peered down to her.

“Your home? I was just...”

She checked for exits, which were, well, everywhere. They were outside she could run off in any direction. But there would be nothing to block the view unless she ran further back into Bethal’s garden.

“She was giving me a little visit, love.”

Bethal appeared behind her and slipped her garden items into her apron.

Magdalanous took a side step around Harlow and held those dirt-covered hands and brought them to her lips, bestowing a kiss each. “I hope it was a good visit... no harassing of the apprentices again, hmm?”

Bethal shot her a wide grin. “I never promised, and no, I wasn’t harassing her.”

Magdalanous looked over to Harlow for confirmation which, she quickly gave with a nod.

Harlow looked away as the two showered each other with quick kisses, a rather adorable thing she frankly would have never thought either one capable of.

When the kissing noises ceased, Harlow turned back to greet the Spellsaven Librarian appropriately with the respected hand across her chest movement which was, for the first time ever, returned.

They seemed lax enough for a question, or hopefully five, on this whole situation.

“Your partner is a Spellsaven... but you don’t trust magic?”

Magdalanous rolled her eyes and hugged Bethal teasingly.

“I trust magic. I don’t trust people. Anyone who doesn’t do the work in the first place makes me wary; to profit off others is a travesty,”

she said simply.

Harlow didn’t have much to say in response to that. Her very profession was a profit off of others, she’d say, although she put in work in a different way. Harlow said her goodbyes and walked off before Magdalanous leaned over and asked her to meet her out front.

Harlow was nervous. What could the Librarian want from her – did she do something wrong, did Bethal say something she wasn’t aware of?

“Bethal, hey, I’ve started work on Daggerroot Gardens, perhaps you’d like to come for a visit, I’m sure the garden would love to see you again,”

she nearly shouted, trying to walk straight while also looking back towards the lovebirds.

She hoped it was at least. She had no idea if the garden would treat Bethal the same as it did Atlas and her initially but in the last few months it had calmed down, and it stood to reason that someone who was respected enough to get cuttings from the garden would fare well now.

Bethal brightened more than Harlow had ever seen her. “I’d really, really love to!”

She squeezed Magdalanous’ claw and even from a yard away, Harlow could could

see her wheels turning.

Harlow waited out front, shifting the small pot from one crook of her arm to the other. She watched the two embrace again and kiss more gently before they released her and brushed the hair out of Bethal's face.

Magdalanous reached Harlow's side and that same nervousness from her library visits was back. It seemed distance from Bethal was what melted her cold disposition and now that Bethal found her way back into the house, the Spellsaven was as they had always been known to be.

"Walk with me."

A suggestion and not quite a demand. "I've left my apprentice at Buttons and I need to retrieve him before he wanders off."

She said it like it had happened before.

She knew the type, obviously. She didn't think one could pin down Atlas and it stood to reason there were others just as freeform, just as spirited away as them.

They walked in silence. Harlow more so spent from any social spoons she had left for the day and Magdalanous didn't seem to require anything else. It wasn't awkward, nor was it warm like the silence between Atlas and her just existing together.

Up ahead she saw Atlas manically waving their arms about talking to another robed figure...

the robes were a combination of class designation.

Mostly sorcerer, which of course there would be one to travel and strike up

conversation with Atlas.

She was curious about the different magical classes through the Spellsaven's eyes.

Atlas did seem to be 100% wizard, having worked for every bit of magic and not at all naturally gifted (although their flourishes may make it seem to be) like sorcerers and mages.

As they approached and Atlas moved aside, Harlow could see the person's face and she stopped in her tracks.

Fuck.

Of course.

Of course, it couldn't just be fucking easy and stay the way it had been.

She knew it was possible that this daydream of a life would be shattered with reality.

Could guarantee it even.

But here now, this person was the manifestation that her responsibilities, her commitments would never just go away and solve themselves.

With this person here now, it meant that any plans and the backup plans for those plans were now out the window.

She'd run out of time.

Magdalanous approached, and the person bowed and Atlas nodded respectfully to kher.

“Ah, Magdalanous! I was just talking to your apprentice...”

Apprentice!? Oh, for fuck’s sake.

Lithon didn’t meet her eyes until Atlas gestured to Harlow. “And I see you’ve already touched base with my apprentice.”

Lithon now looked to her with a wide smirk. He crossed his chest with the respectful greeting she had issued earlier and he swept low, too low in a formal bow.

“Apprentice Headgewater to Spellsaven Daggerroot, a pleasure to see you out of the classroom and out on the grounds. I have missed your presence on drills.”

He smiled with all his teeth and Harlow fought a deep sigh. “Apprentice Lithon. How great to see you. Congratulations, I had no idea that you gained apprenticeship – and to Spellsaven Magdalanous, that’s very impressive. Especially for a sorcerer.”

“Wonderful!”

None the wiser, Atlas brightened and gestured back down the path. “You both must visit for tea! It would be great for my apprentice to have a known visitor and not my stuffy old acquaintances.”

Oh gods damn it and that heart of theirs.

Lithon’s eyes narrowed and he smirked widely. A smirk that often made people swoon but Harlow figured was only villainous and only because this time it was directed at her.

Which was fitting since she was well aware Lithon was on the Guild’s payroll as a sorcerer informant.

And now, they were coming, invited even, to Daggerroot Manor.

She was in a difficult position but she was thankful it was Lithon above anyone else.

It's possible that the Guild Master felt Copperkelly's disappearance was her doing and so he sent Lithon knowing that she would not kill him.

OK, well, it would take more than professional rivalry for her to kill him.

It was a smart move on his part.

However, she'd be lying if she didn't feel some relief at the familiar face.

Harlow worried her bottom lip, biting a layer of skin clean off.

She knew how she felt about her old... friend... but how far did Lithon's loyalty to their Guild Master go? And how far would the Guild Master let him go with unlimited means to cover it up?

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:47 am

It took two hours of solid nonstop arguing with House to allow her to clean up before this...

tea party.

In the end, she was only able to convince House to clean up the entranceway, dining and living rooms.

The kitchen had been decently scrubbed but House wouldn't do it herself, although Atlas did mention House was capable of triggering several self-cleaning spells.

The Spellsaven had backed up Harlow just enough to not get on House's bad side.

They had done the work of procuring a few extra teacups and saucers as well, although none of them matched and all but one was chipped.

There was no time now to order a new teacup and she was quite aware that was something she hadn't packed.

It was possible that there would be more in storage somewhere and Harlow would be lying if she didn't admit it was tempting to go to the vault and see what was there.

Surely there were some enchanted teacups or mugs in one of the crates.

Likely nothing too dangerous but she had not found anything in her semi-regular trips to the vault.

(Always sure to look down the gargoyle aisle to manually confirm the small Dragonspeak-inscribed box was still sitting where it should be.) If anyone was going to loot those shelves and directly break Atlas's spirit, it was going to be her.

If Atlas was going to have the one item they couldn't trust themselves with taken away, it wouldn't be because she couldn't protect the vault or because Atlas put their trust in anyone else.

It would be because she herself would snap those bonds. If anyone was going to do it, it would be her, and she'd do it so terribly well.

Rearranging a vase of feathers, bones, and dried-out sprigs (Atlas held a firm "no"

in response to fresh cuttings from the garden. Apparently, their trust was still a work in progress), Harlow cooed to the house, "Are you excited to have some guests, Daggerroot?"

The house didn't respond.

Odd, since she was growing used to the way House spoke even with gentle movements like the appearance of her own teacup ready at her side although she had left it in the kitchen.

Sometimes House would even open the doors to rooms she was heading to before she got there.

But with this question, not even a curtain moved in response.

Atlas was rearranging pillows, not outright offering as it was a task needing done but because they wandered aimlessly around the home trying to think of what Harlow wanted.

Once they had given that up and asked Harlow what they could do to help directly.

After being asked for something to put in the vase and coming up with...

these things, Atlas left them bunched up.

Which was no surprise, Atlas was a lot of things but artistically creative was not one of them.

“Daggerroot is shy, I’m sure it’s not looking forward to it.”

They held a square pillow with only three tassels directly out in front of them, tilting it various ways as they tried imagining the best placement for it on the settee.

“Oh...”

What to say? Should she compliment their willingness to allow visitors or offer reassurances? Ones she wasn’t so confident of herself, as the presence of Lithon in the house was enough to put her on edge.

Since the night out in town, Harlow had been stressed.

Atlas had drawn her many baths with her favorite snacks and even hauled a phonogram into the large completely tiled bathroom in an effort to help keep her stress down.

What they didn’t do however was cancel tea.

Atlas had asked why it was bothering her so, and apologized for not consulting with her as well since she was also a resident in Daggerroot Manor, but Harlow dismissed it.

Atlas was Spellsaven and she was just an apprentice.

Although their relationship was something beautiful and comforting to her, she still wanted the experience of being an apprentice.

Sometimes that meant putting trust in the other and seeing what happened.

Harlow had asked why the tea party in general, to which Atlas only responded, it was the respectful thing to do and Spellsavens so rarely got to entertain each other as company.

Magdalanous hadn't been to Daggerroot in years and Atlas admitted to being a bad host.

They ventured out of the house to town often enough but inviting anyone back, shy house or not, was something that they wanted to work on.

Atlas used the garden as an example.

That it wasn't like that when they first got there.

They just stayed away because they lacked a green thumb, and the fear of plants, of course.

And without visitors and such, the garden grew unruly.

They'd seen Harlow's care of it, and it was changing Atlas' outlook.

She had also seen Atlas posting letters back to the academy, answering inquiries and comments from students there.

Something they were notoriously not doing within her tenure.

Atlas scooted forward and bent at the knees, looking very much crab-like, to place the pillow exactly in the middle of the settee.

Harlow would not have chosen that placement but Atlas was incredibly proud as they placed their hands on their hips to survey their work.

She had told Atlas a half truth.

Or more so one truth and not the extra one.

She was stressed because of Magdalanous.

Someone who had been a silent statue in the Library, but consistent and never questioning of her habits, was going to be here, in her home.

Another Spellsaven that would also be watching the pair of them.

Harlow was not worried about kher opinion on House.

House was wonderful but she had an intrusive thought that what if a Spellsaven thought that Harlow wasn't doing her apprentice duties and reported it back to the Wizarding council, requesting replacement? It was completely absurd.

But the intrusive thought stuck and there was no dislodging it until the tea party was finished.

Atlas understood, having been an apprentice in their time as well, and eased off, giving Harlow space to process, but they hadn't left her side.

They were always down the hall in another room but in the same wing of the Manor wherever Harlow went.

Close enough to come if called but far enough to still have privacy.

Harlow still didn't know how she felt about it.

But preparing the house would give her no time to update the Guild Master or even sneak another peek at the device.

So, perhaps Harlow miscalculated, and everyone was a little stressed, a little on edge, over visitors.

But none of them knew about Lithon.

That was the biggest stressor.

The Thieves' Guild had him on the payroll for over a decade.

The natural born magic user was very gifted at casting and fire was their specialty.

They could guide any fire spell as finely as a pen stroke or as wide as a tidal wave.

They were frequently used even as a student to assist in many larger heists, a perfect distractor, and their charming demeanor meant they got away with it every time.

Seriously.

With every fire spell, one had to submit an incident report, but the governing office was so overrun by Lithon's casting that there was a preprogrammed spell that would auto-submit castings.

The office was so flooded with them that they barely looked at the details of each, which was why the Thieves' Guild found him so valuable.

He was never questioned why he was at a masquerade of powerful people in a place that had a vault of, let's say, the most sought-after imbued items on the west end because COURSE Lithon would be invited, if anything he was a guest of honor.

And not just because his net of lovers was wide and he, a perfect social example of how to have multiple partners and maintain healthy relationships, did not use his partners to gain him influence.

They had been and were still his partners.

Lithon was simply a great listener and had infectious positivity.

He was not a con man, he was not malicious.

He was just a good man.

She admitted to herself that she liked to pretend that his niceness was so grand it rotated all the way back around to being villainous.

A joke to herself and nothing more.

So, although her heart dropped at seeing him, if it had to be yet another person from the city to try to gain entrance to the vault, she was glad it was him.

There was a knock at the door and House refused to open it.

Not surprising.

And immediately upon hearing it, Atlas sat down next to the pillow they just placed and pulled it onto their lap, leaning back with limbs placed generously around.

An attempt to look...

natural? Harlow, unable to not watch whatever was going through that mind of theirs, noticed realization cross their face and they shook their head.

They stood and replaced the pillow on the settee and turned to her, dusting themselves off.

“Ahem, shall we?”

Atlas scooted off to the entryway, but Harlow beat them to it.

“Please, allow me.”

Her voice broke, betraying her nervousness.

Atlas nodded quickly with a gulp. “Yes, yes. Of course.”

Harlow opened the door wide enough to reveal both people.

Lithon stood slightly behind Magdalanous and looked dazzling in his star-studded caster robes.

Magdalanous was in a yellow tea-length sundress which had Harlow’s mouth agape.

Every single day for the years she had known Magdalanous, khey had only worn black and various shades of it.

She had assumed it was all khey wore at all but here khey were defying that assumption with such a wide declaration of color.

Kher scales were glistening, recently polished, and the Librarian looked refreshed.

Was managing the library at the university really that draining, or perhaps it was that khey really need to see kher wife.

Covering Harlow's silence, Atlas stepped forward and gestured widely in the direction of the living room.

“Welcome to Daggerroot Manor! Yes, yes, this way.

Mags, you look fantastic, has anyone said that it really brings out your shoulders? And Apprentice Lithon, always good to see a fellow caster in the flesh.

Please, please, this way.”

Atlas turned on their heel and led the way, taking extra-long steps that Magdalanous seemed to be able to keep up with, but Lithon and Harlow were left to themselves.

Lithon bowed to Harlow, and she dipped her head in response.

Could she close the door right now? Just leave him out there and then call it a day? No, that would cause more alarms than needed and besides, Atlas would likely come back for them.

Which was also to say, she really, really didn't want to be disrespectful to another Spellsaven.

If she let him in, would it mean she was an accomplice, that whatever he did and

whatever the outcome, she let him in the house.

If she closed the door, he would likely report, one way or another, to Kob and then Kob would pull her from the job.

It was a shit feeling.

Lithon took it upon himself to pop his head in and looked around.

He stepped in and closed the door behind him.

Harlow rolled her eyes but moved aside for him to do so.

“Oh, ‘ello, Kips. How’s the day going?”

Lithon smiled widely while using the childhood nickname.

Harlow glared but smirked her way through as by using her old nickname, it gave her clearance to use his. “A little long already but I’m sure it’ll get underway. You look fantastic, Dogmeat, you shouldn’t have dressed up so much.”

He seemed unaffected. “Oh, this? Well, I thought you might appreciate a little pizazz and I had to find some way to be seen next to the Spellsaven...”

He jutted his neck forward and spoke in a whisper. “Can you believe it, yellow? I would have thought khey were allergic to color.”

Harlow fell quickly into reacting like old friends. “Khey must actually be allergic to us. I don’t think I could tell anyone else, they wouldn’t believe me.”

Lithon nodded his agreement and looked briefly at the state of things, and his gaze

fell to the vase she and Atlas worked so hard on. “Oh, I see you pulled out all the stops.”

Harlow chuckled and took a few steps towards the living room. “If only you knew.”

Lithon, used to the banter, really could not know the extent that she could influence any more “stops,”

that it was highly likely that if Harlow even whispered to House that she wanted him removed it would likely comply,

It went rather smoothly. Harlow had always dreamed that when two Spellsavens met up, it would be anything but casual. That there would be spells flying, experimentation notes shared, or collaborations on solving society’s problems. But no, unfortunately for Harlow it was boring as ever. Like going over with a parent to a family friend’s house for a “visit”

where you, the one dragged along, just sat there desperately trying to disassociate into something else. But she couldn’t do that. She had to keep eyes on Lithon.

Who did certainly not make it easy. He had a great ability to predict when someone was about to run out of tea, it was almost like magic itself. He had excused himself to the kitchen several times to the refill teapot, to put the kettle on, to find more sugar. Any excuse he could find, he tried, and it was driving Harlow lowkey mad.

The first few times, she got up with him, as he had never been there before, but soon after he’d get up and audibly tell Harlow to not get up, “he could manage,”

and then with a wink and flourish, he’d be off.

Atlas didn’t seem to notice these multiple excuses as they were intensely in a

discussion on whether deckled pages were fancy or looked like the book was fighting for its life.

Atlas liked them, said it was easier to turn the pages and they liked the texture.

Magdalanous debated that the texture was exactly the problem.

More edges meant more places for dust to hide, for discoloration, and as a librarian, dust was something khey battled day in and day out and no cleaning spells or dust deterrent seemed to keep books with deckled edges clean.

Something about how a spell had issues determining what a book page was versus a shelf and then THAT sparked the ranges of vocabulary between languages.

Lithon finally stood and smoothed down his robes, asking for the bathroom, which was no surprise due to all the tea he was packing away.

Before she could stand to escort him, Atlas motioned over their shoulder.

“Just down the hall and to the left.

I’m sure you can manage, chap.”

Lithon grinned mischievously.

Harlow stewed in place by crossing her arms and nervously tapping her foot against the couch leg.

As Atlas and Magdalanous continued conversation, now on the level of floppy books and what constituted a suitable flop and what didn’t.

Whatever that meant.

Harlow was focused on counting the minutes.

After fifteen minutes passed, she had reached the end of her patience.

Harlow stood and was about to explain herself to the other Spellsaven but they seemed in such a degree of discussion that they hadn't noticed or at least reacted to her standing.

She muttered that she'd be back real quick.

Following in Lithon's footsteps, Harlow found the guest bathroom.

Its door was closed, but when she got closer House opened it for her.

It was empty with the sink slightly on.

House turned that off too when she entered.

So, no Lithon.

Of course. She would have passed him on the way back. So now he was alone and loose within House.

At least his mission wasn't about targeting Atlas...

which still could happen, but he'd likely only be looking for the location of the vault.

Standing within the dusty blue tiled bathroom, Harlow cracked her neck by rolling it around and took deep breaths, stretching her arms over her head like she was about to

start exercising.

Instead of taking off after him this second, she spent time opening various portals in her pockets to gather reagents.

Mostly they revolved around creating traps.

She couldn't risk spells that would hurt him in any way.

Even if he deserved it, damaging a Spellsaven's assistant would be grounds of her own dismissal.

She'd have to be tactful and deliberate.

Lithon wouldn't know what hit him.

Harlow closed the door behind her and set off down the hallway, heading deeper into the house.

She didn't run or panic.

She trusted House to bring her to him or vice versa.

One way or another, she'd get there in time, but she couldn't have him find anything.

There was always a chance he could prepare against House's defenses and tactics with certain navigation spells.

Atlas had blocked these as it was the first thing she tried, but what if they'd been working on updating the spell or finding a way around Atlas's spellwork?

It was after two turns of a hallway that she decided to gently take off her boots and set them aside, not wanting any footsteps to give her away.

With House changing constantly, detecting and avoiding any creaky floorboards was just about impossible.

With freshly darned socks (sure a spell could fix it but there was something calming about mending things by hand), Harlow stalked her prey.

She came across him easily enough with House's assistance.

He looked slightly frazzled but she could only get small peeks around corners or from open doorways so she wouldn't give away her position.

He rubbed his face with his hands a few times, even messing up the quaff of hair that framed his face.

It could be fun to see him try or to see if he could locate it himself.

Harlow's curiosity got the best of her and she continued to follow instead of interrupt.

To his credit, he paused a few times and shot a narrowed gaze down the hall in her direction.

Paranoid people had a naturally high perception.

Not that they could interpret anything they found very well but they could notice things better than most.

And he must have noticed something was off.

The air in the hall began to chill and Harlow didn't even notice until the breath in front of her face was visible.

Damn, House, that's cold...

and actually cold.

To his credit, Lithon no longer pretended that everything was just fine and he took off. Jogging down the halls, he made turns at random and House was more than eager to keep him going in circles unknowingly.

There was a change of wallpaper which threw Harlow off enough for her to slow down and inspect it. Was this a hallway she hadn't seen before, or did House do this willingly?

That was her mistake, as she looked back after Lithon only to see him paused at the end, near a staircase with wide placed legs and a pouting look on his face.

They stared each other down right there. Neither one moving first. There would be no "oops, didn't see you there."

They both knew each other well enough to know what the other was up to.

Lithon was caught not in the bathroom and wandering the halls.

He'd likely know that Harlow was there as a plant and she knew what he'd be up to.

He could come quietly, admit defeat, and follow her back, likely to try again another day, OR he could try to lose her, which would be a mistake and just about impossible.

But then he moved and sprinted two stairs at a time up the staircase.

Harlow sighed and rolled her shoulders before launching after him.

Missing her boots, it took a slight amount of concentration to not skid across the wood floors but she did gain on Lithon, also thanks to House making hallways extra short and forcing Lithon to have to continue turning and losing a quarter of his momentum.

With his steps around the corners more erratic, likely due to getting dizzier, Harlow reached out for him and grabbed two handfuls of his robes.

She pulled back but he struggled forwards.

Harlow wrapped her arms around his waist and held on, dropping her weight down to the ground as quickly as possible.

Lithon was yanked downwards, and he yelped.

The sorcerer put his hands in front to catch himself against the ground and shouted. “Harlow, knock it off!”

She held on and Lithon continued, not wanting to stop, so the only way he could move was to crawl with his arms and strain to drag the both of them.

“Seriously, Harlow. Let go, I’ll call for Spellsaven Daggerroot!”

Lithon dug in a pocket and held a calling chip. Calling chips, when broken, would notify the spoken name of their location, which was usually for help and worked within 100 yards. So, it was a credible threat.

“Oh, you need a Spellsaven to save you, Apprentice?”

They paused and held each other like two children about to call for their parent. Harlow growled, "...you wouldn't dare."

Lithon stopped crawling completely and looked over his shoulder to her clenching around his waist. Moments passed as she could see his lip twitch as he decided. "Gah."

He tossed the chip to the side of the hall where it skidded to a stop. "Only because I don't want Mags to know I'm down here."

"Good. Now. Let's. Go. Back."

Harlow spread her knees in an effort to gain more traction so she could pull Lithon back in the direction they came.

"No chance, Harlow... I got to find it."

Lithon was getting angry. Not something she could say she'd ever experienced before with him.

"No. You. Don't."

Harlow made a quick jerk, shoving her feet under him and leaning back as far and quickly as she could, flipping him off his crawling posture to being now entangled in a pinned position in which Harlow wrapped an elbow around his neck and a leg around his, keeping the leverage.

She threaded her other arm between his arms and his back, keeping them pinned between their bodies.

Lithon struggled in place before sighing and going limp. "Harlow."

“Lithon.”

He said it softer. “Harlow.”

Harlow didn’t loosen her grip but she did adjust to make it at least slightly more comfortable for him. “Just stop, okay.”

The sorcerer drew in a deep breath and sighed. “Fine. But only for today.”

Harlow weighed her options and figured this was the best she’d get other than straight up kidnapping him and holding him away from his task, which would only bring Magdalanous’ wrath upon her. “Fine.”

She released him and Lithon flopped to the side. They were both winded from struggling and now lay side by side, catching their breath, limbs splayed around them.

“Kips?”

“Hmm?”

Harlow closed her eyes, silently thanking House for whisking away the frigid air.

“I thought you wanted this?”

Lithon was quiet spoken.

He didn’t need to explain anything more. They’d known each other too long.

“I thought I did to,” she said.

“What changed?”

Harlow shrugged, knowing he 'd have to infer with the sounds of shifting fabric and not a verbal response.

“Why do you want it so bad, Dogmeat?”

she teased.

Lithon groaned and she could hear him changing his weight to lay on his side. His voice was easier to hear now. “Because Kob said he'd buy out my contract...”

Those on payroll had their own contracts as unique to them as their required services. Lithon's was years and years old, since he was still a young street urchin. He got paid well, and was taken care of by the guild, but there were clauses that were in these contracts that implied there was no end date to their exclusivity. Harlow hadn't known that Lithon wanted out. She felt guilt pang her side. She never asked if he was happy with the arrangement. Harlow peeked an eye open. “Hmm, fair enough.”

Lithon nodded and laid back on the ground, using that same arm under his head. The two of them looked like they belonged in an open field staring at clouds passing, not in the hallways of an old manor.

“Harlow?”

He sounded just as tired as she felt.

She murmured, closing her eyes again, “Hmmm?”

“What the fuck is up with this house?”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:47 am

Harlow wasn't sure what had awoken her, likely just her body informing her it was time to turn to another side or her back would make her regret it in the morning. She'd have to consider informing Atlas they needed a new mattress or some sort of spell to make her side a bit more firm. Her side. She couldn't believe she was thinking like this. She was making plans, long-term ones, and it gave her a warmth that rivaled the cocoon of heat from inside the comforter. She turned ever so slowly from facing the edge of the bed to facing them.

They slept so deeply that even the laugh-lines on their face seemed to disappear. Their limbs were spread wide and covered most of the bed. Mahogany hair spread across the pillow every which way and even trespassed across to Harlow's pillow. She brushed it aside so she could scoot her face closer, to look upon them a little while longer. The house was chilled and it had started raining after they fell asleep, as Harlow could see raindrops hitting the glass window. The curtains were left open and she could fully see the night sky. She considered that Atlas was closer to the window and the morning sun would shine directly in their face.

Moving as slowly as she possibly could, Harlow pulled back the blankets and slipped one leg out at a time while keeping her eyes plastered to her partner, seeing if they would stir at her movement. Once successfully out, she walked on the balls of her feet to the window to gaze out. It was so peaceful. How often had daydreams of a rainy night sleeping next to someone she loved tempted her? And it was happening now, right now. Harlow slowly closed the curtains, making sure they overlapped to not risk letting even a shred of daylight through.

She turned to survey the room as it was, everything grayscale as her eyes adjusted without the outside light's influence. It was perfect and it was quiet. Atlas was so, so

tired and now that she knew they slept like a rock in a crate full of feathers, she noticed she had a glaring opportunity. The vault.

Harlow could go right up to it at this very moment. House trusted her, it had shown that to her many times. If she told House she needed the button, it would believe her and Atlas wouldn't be awake to intervene. The warmth she still had from snuggling in bed was quickly leaving and yet she still stood.

What if she didn't get the button? What if she gave it all up and said no? Who needed a council seat when you could live here? And happily. Harlow began a new daydream. She began to play out different scenarios in her head.

She'd say no, she couldn't find the vault. But then the Guild Master would send someone else. Would he find a way to remove her from her position? Would he tell Atlas she was a charlatan all along? No, how could she face them after that? The Guild Master never told her directly what she was after so she could bring anything from the vault. But that was yet another risk. What if he did know what it was and it was that old idea of being a test of loyalty? Then all the other consequences could come into play AND she'd be removed from the Thieves' Guild. The only place that was as home as home could get for her. The only place that she had let define her over all these years.

Harlow toyed with the idea of just waking up Atlas right now. They'd sit up in bed and she'd snuggle close and tell them she had something that she'd been hiding. They'd listen and they'd understand, right? What if they didn't? The chill of the room and the scenario were making her shiver. She crossed the room to grab her house robe and she pulled it tight around her. What if they didn't understand at all, what if they got upset and sent her packing? Then she would have failed Atlas and the Guild. She'd have nowhere to go.

Her chest began to feel more and more tight. What was she doing? How did she think

this would all end? That the Guild Master would be like “Oh, Harlow must have not found anything, all good then, guess I’ll move on?”

Come on, Harlow, she thought. When has any professional thief given up anything like that? Especially someone who is at a station to not even have to do it themselves. That brought her to a whole different part. If she told Kob she gave up and stayed here, he’d just send more people. At what point would she outlive her use and be expendable? Not worth her keep?

The Guild Master wanted it enough to have a top-tier rogue train as a wizard to infiltrate the home of a SPELLSAVEN. Copperkelly was already eliminated. Natural selection, she’d like to say, but it wasn’t that easy. At what point would it be easier for the Guild Master to just kill Atlas?

As if reading some sort of disturbance via their name thought in a horrible scenario, Atlas, still asleep, sucked in a foot that had been left out of the comforter. Harlow held her breath until Atlas settled fully. She’d like to think she was the best in the business, that no one could sneak up and harm Atlas. But that wouldn’t be true. The thing about aging, even only being in her thirties, was the realization that you were and maybe never would be the best. The best was fluid and always changing. There would always be someone, sooner or later, that could best you. Hells, that was what their culture was built upon: further learning.

Harlow began to spiral more and more as all the possibilities became a vast ocean sucking her into the depths where she could only look up and see the light fading or down into the darkness that was welcoming her with open arms.

She loved Atlas. Always would. How could she say that she loved them so when the first chance where she could figure out a way to protect them, she had given up? It was so effortlessly easy to love Atlas and to be loved by Atlas. They took her as she was and never asked her to change, just to be beside them. And that ask, Harlow

realized now, might already be too much. Harlow craved to be pulled into Atlas's endless warmth but to keep them and House safe, what would she do? Anything.

Harlow picked up her clothing from the plush, high-backed chair and tiptoed quietly out the door, moving as slow as possible as if that alone was a measurement of how loud she could be. Once the door closed, silently likely due to House, Harlow dressed in the hall. She balled up the maroon robe and crushed it against her chest.

She had to leave. She had to go back to the Thieves' Guild. What would she tell them, damn it? The lies needed to be close enough to the truth. Something that could be believed by herself even. She couldn't lie exactly about the button. Harlow could not risk that the Guild Master knew what it was. She'd have to go back and say she found it. And what? It was broken? He would want her to bring it to him regardless. Plenty of tinkers worked in the Thieves' Guild, and there was likely a different Spellsaven connected as well that could verify. If they could reverse-engineer the button, that would be just as bad as giving it to them outright.

Harlow could say that Atlas moved it after the incident with Copperkelly. That they didn't trust keeping it in the house. That would at least mean that they'd be forced to not kill Atlas. They would need the new location. Yes, that could work. But she'd have to know the new location or they'd send her right back to Atlas or... hell, someone else.

The only thing she could think of to save Atlas from more trouble was more deceit. Deceit upon deceit, and here it was exactly what she needed to do more of. It got her into this mess and now it would HAVE to get them out of it. Harlow recalled an enchanted alarm clock from her pockets. It took a few other reagents to cast a few more spells upon it. Layers of enchantments, ones that she knew Atlas wrote themselves. When they were well woven on another and made no sense per se, she crushed the clock into a leather pleated coin purse. She reached in and flung a few parts away. As those pieces clattered about the room, she sloppily disenchanting two

of those layers. Harlow would bring this to Kob, tell him that this was the device, and it was broken. Her fault. In her folly, she broke the one thing that would promise her the future she always told herself she wanted. He would have it looked at of course, and hopefully with the skills she learned here, it would be enough to resemble an item that messed with time in some way and had Atlas's spell signature. It would have to be enough. Have to.

Harlow found herself in her room with her back pressed up against the door. House had turned on her side table lamp but only barely. Before her mind could catch up to what her hands were doing, she found herself packing her things. Feather. Dust. Feather. Dust. House must have opened her bedroom window because there were raindrops falling on her skin. As she gradually began to notice she could see less and less, Harlow realized it wasn't raindrops but her own tears. She had found love and home and she knew she had to leave. And she had to do it now while she could barely overthink any more. If she hesitated even one moment, she couldn't trust herself not to run all the way back to Atlas' room and wake them up and just sob into their arms. If she gave herself one minute, she'd give up going back and just let events happen around her.

Harlow was so tired. Tired of reacting to these things happening to her. She had thought she was actively making change but it was just a fool's lens. Part of her was dancing out parts of society's scripted dance and the other was her casting delusion on herself making her think that if she thought of it first or if she could put her hands on it in a tactical fashion that she could sculpt results out of hard work. Like this whole charade. She was ordered to go into wizard training, so she fooled herself by committing herself fully to it. As if that would change that it was her, not some man with a power imbalance, telling her what to do. It was just like when she was a little girl and fellow foundlings turned to other professions, to other helpful programs, and when she was told the only way society worked is if you had something to trade, all the skills she had were formed on selfish thoughts that by choosing to be the best she could at that, it was like she was choosing that life for herself.

This time she could say no. Oh, she could shout NO from the rooftops. But, as she found out now, it would cost her. And the cost: love and happiness. Harlow used the sleeve of her robes to clear her eyesight and sucked in a sob from escaping. Fighting herself from crying made her chest ache even more but she pushed through. Giving up her chance at love and happiness would be worth it if her love could continue in their unbridled happiness. Harlow thought of the way they whipped around corners as if there was something unknown on the other side, the way they spent hours fashioning a flower crown to place on a child's head that would only last half an hour before wilting, the way they looked at her when they were just about to sleep, switching peeking out of one eye at a time as if she'd disappear if they didn't look.

Fuck. And now that's what was happening. Harlow finished packing her things and twisted the doorknob. She pulled gently, hoping the door didn't stick, but it mattered not. The door didn't budge at all. She released the knob and used a swipe from each arm to clear her face and tried again. The door didn't open.

"House... please,"

she chirped. Her voice cracked as it fought against holding back full force crying. "I need to go."

The light next to her bed burned brighter. The wallpaper began to shift, turning into a pattern of green leaves. It even looked brand new. The sconces began to shift from tarnished bronze into polished gold. The House was making itself nicer.

"No... House... it's not you. It's not... any of you."

Harlow cleared her throat and gestured around. "I shouldn't be here... I don't belong here, I never did."

There was no change in the house.

Harlow took a deep breath and went back to the door and tried again. Nothing.

“I’m sorry, Daggerroot. I need to find a way to stop all this. I have to go, but my heart... will always lead back to you.”

Harlow released the doorknob with slumped shoulders, giving up. Her fingers flitted around to a side pocket and reached down inside, cupping her hand around what was inside.

“Goodbye.”

Her fingers traced the outline of the cookie’s shape before she hastily slammed her eyes shut. It snapped in two and she uttered, “Quarkosh.”

Her figure grew warm and one moment, one with the heaviest of hearts, she was in Daggerroot Manor and then next she was gone.

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Checking the post had never been an exciting time for Harlow.

Throughout her life she didn't send letters let alone receive any. Reflecting now, she understood that she wasn't meant to have anyone close in her life. That she built a wall. One only tall enough to look over, communicate, give people a glimpse of you but never the full view. It was a wall without a gate.

With age came clarification... usually of your own behaviors, and this was no exception.

Those times she thought others were pushing her away...

it was her.

She'd look for a fault in a relationship or any reason to distrust and then take off.

Although Atlas gave her no such sign, Harlow didn't allow the chance to see it.

This way she could selfishly live forever with them and Daggerroot Manor in her head where nothing bad ever happened.

Where communication was free and easy.

Where there was no pending fallout of being a charlatan between the sheets.

Until the letters came.

Every week, there'd be another addressed to her from Atlas.

And every week she pocked them and refused to read them.

The penmanship on the outside became more ragged...

less elegant and more chaotic.

Sometimes there would be whole words missing but by this time, the post people knew the general sense of the letter.

She couldn't stomach the feeling of disappointment, of the anxiety building on what was inside that letter.

What did they have to say to her exactly? How angry they would be...

how disappointed and most importantly, to Harlow, how brokenhearted? There was a possibility that the letter was positive, understanding, and saying "no worries, Harlow.

I'll wait for you, I'm thinking of becoming a rogue myself,"

and then in that moment, with the letter unopened, there was still hope.

To open the letter was to acknowledge.

So instead, she sided with living together with high anxiety for the rest of her life.

She'd hide when the postman was near, peeking between curtains or refusing to answer visits to her quarters; they'd just leave it with someone.

Borne from that anxiety, her health also slipped and reflected in an equal pattern to the mess of script on her letters.

Her stomach always ached, she couldn't find an appetite, she didn't want to venture out in public any longer; home was safer.

Occasionally she'd get a letter not from Daggerroot but from Bethal.

Who seemed to refuse to acknowledge the griffin in the room and instead discussed plant life or hacks she learned at gardening club (Magdalanous signed her up for a local community class and she was enjoying spreading her knowledge to the point she was entertaining taking on an apprentice).

She'd inquire about Harlow's Bleeding Heart (always capitalized as if to ensure that she was not asking about her love life) which Bethal had sent few weeks after she left and freshly pruned to boot.

Now it sat on a ledge in her bedroom, full and branching out.

It was a Bonafede plant, and it was the only reason she found the energy to get up in the morning.

First Weekday was spritzing, Second Weekday was aerating the soil, another was checking for bugs and applying neem oil if need, the other was rotation day and so forth.

However, neither of the two would visit her.

Not to say Harlow did not have visitors.

There was a particular charismatic sorcerer who would stop by...

usually with a bag of food for them to share and encroach on her tiny studio.

So, a nuisance, not a visitor.

Lithon had brought up Atlas and how Magdalanous and he visited often now.

Not because the Dragonkin Spellsaven wished for more of their company but because Atlas was SO DEPRESSED.

He said this bit with a sigh and melted onto an understuffed chair, pointedly not taking the much more comfortable couch which Harlow may or may not have been sleeping on just so she could put off washing her bedsheets a few more days.

Harlow couldn't bring herself to respond; she took it in and Lithon would watch her through lidded eyes, almost pretending to be almost asleep.

Cunning as he was, she could tell when he was asleep versus not.

(His biggest giveaway was loud snoring, a boon granted by whatever deity gave him the gift of being able to go into deep sleep in an instant.

Harlow would give up all her magic spells just for THAT ability.) So, Harlow was forced to practice a more deadpan face.

The lack of expression became easier when one learned to check out just enough to hear what the other person was saying but not allow yourself to process any of it.

There would be some visits where Lithon would say nothing.

Those were almost even more awkward as Harlow couldn't fathom why he would want her company.

But he persisted, through rain, shine, and even sleet season.

Harlow wondered if the Librarian knew he was here that often if it was an assignment.

Or did Magdalanous have such private business in the Library that even her apprentice wasn't privy?

She would write back to Bethal, slow updates on her plant, sometimes inquire about other issues.

And even a few letters out of pure panic when Harlow had orchestrated the plant's revival out of its winter slumber extremely early and then a cold snap in the room began to revert the process.

Lithon delivered those directly.

But now Lithon's visits were even more frequent as now was the week of the council voting.

Any foothold she had from the years of her work had been undone in an instant.

The moment she arrived back without the device working, she had been finished.

She had been summoned to the Guild Master once and when she arrived, he read her clean.

She didn't even have to say anything, Harlow just spilled the contents of the bag out in her open palms and showed him.

He had such a hopeful look when she stepped into the room but once giving her that

quick look over, he knew enough.

His face dropped with such disappointment, one she hadn't seen ever on his face even when she was a child, and he just shooed her off like she was a bother.

They hadn't communicated since.

The next day, he was pasting posters up of another candidate.

She didn't even know who it was, but it didn't matter.

How easily she had been picked over and for what? This new candidate didn't produce the relic either and yet she had been cast so far down. Better this way, better to be removed from it all.

Lithon had been visiting every day that week.

He had no vote to give but had been reprimanded for spreading gossip that Harlow's campaign removal had been a breach of their democracy, a manipulation by someone who had too much power, which their whole council was created to avoid.

Nothing came of it.

Except now Lithon was invited to slightly fewer parties.

This didn't seem to bother him much, as Harlow noticed that Lithon seemed to be more tired lately as well.

Perhaps she was rubbing off on him.

Today was voting day...

well, it would be speeches first and then voting day tomorrow, but it was an event that was celebrated so hard that it acted like one long bender.

Lithon had convinced her to leave the house, stating she needed to get out of the “visual display of her sadness.”

That she had more supporters than she might even realize. That didn’t matter to Harlow. What support when?

To what end? Lithon even went as far as to say that they should go out of spite to the voting parties.

To let the Guild Master and new candidate see her.

This sparked, admittedly, a little flame in her belly.

Something of an old saying demanding that “if you would not be there to nurture the fire, you’d learn to fear the flame in me.”

Lithon must have noticed her weakness, the slightly lowered defense of her armor, and before she knew it, she was being pulled by one hand out the door and into the streets.

She had just enough time to cast a door locking spell with only one hand.

The weather was decent earlier but now the cold drizzle that would slush instead of build into snow trickled from the sky.

Once under the skies, everyone and everything was coated in a shine of wetness.

Harlow hated it but it seemed fitting.

It also seemed fitting in that spiteful way where you might see someone trip one person in front of you only for them to get splashed by someone driving a large carriage through a puddle the next.

A redemption of instant karma balancing.

They were far, far from Daggerroot Manor.

The capital was several days, other than a port of course, of travel away but distance did NOT make the heart grow fonder.

Instead, it put a constant ache that reeked of despair upon her.

Perhaps it was because there was an intention of coming back.

The phrase “out of sight, out of mind”

was something else Harlow felt was incredibly incorrect.

If anything, she always thought about it.

She’d go to disassociate from, well, everything only to be pulled back to the only things she couldn’t see.

How many times had she not noticed her pencils right in front of her, looking everywhere else and then finding them right in front of her nose? More than not!

Lithon led the way and she followed like a sulking shadow.

When she dared to look up, she would occasionally find a pair of eyes that met hers, and like the celebratory happiness in the people around her, they’d offer a quick

smirk, a look that read to her as “hang in there, it can’t be all bad”

without having to say a word.

She found herself offering that quick smirk back if anything to be polite.

Lithon made an excuse to pull to the side and say that he had to go instead, post her letter to Bethal and then gather a few more things for their adventures later.

Likely more reagents for the communicable sorcerer smoke that they found an excuse for every celebration whether it was their guild or not.

Harlow chose to wait outside, to wrap her thick felt cape around her.

She could cast a spell, but with the realization they were closer to the Thieves’ Guild than she would have liked but still enough she could slightly relax, now even that was upended as she was surrounded by magical casters.

Wizards, mages, and sorcerers.

She didn’t know who did it, but it didn’t matter in the end; someone had released to the whole web of wizards that she was just a thief and not a good one apparently as she had been dropped by the guild (untrue but socially the same).

Earlier grins were now flowing into recognizable grimaces and raised lips of disgust.

She avoided them and from outside, lazily looked through the window.

The common area where anyone could technically go of the Wizards’ Guild.

A lot of wizards did business in this large foyer (its size reminded Harlow more of a

bank, cold and lacking personality).

Harlow did respect that business was done out in the open, something thieves rarely agreed to, but yet that was the reason.

There were several witnesses and always another person available to listen in.

From her gaze from outside, she looked for Lithon's cerulean iridescent cape and didn't spot it.

Something else had caught her attention.

It was Kob, standing almost facing her direction.

He had ceremony ribbons placed on his epaulets and his eyes were SO LARGE he was shocked, surprised about something.

A rare feat.

But he was talking to someone, facing away from her, in an incredibly busy patterned yet dusty set of robes.

It struck Harlow as amazing that you could memorize someone's face by looking at it so much, thinking about them all the time, but that also made it easy to spot the back of their head.

She hadn't particularly remembered memorizing their noggin from the rear but there they were.

Atlas stood with slightly hunched-over posture, too close to Kob than she would suggest, holding something between them, cupped in their hands.

Harlow rubbed her eyes, clearing the sleep from their corners before looking again in disbelief.

They were here.

One moment she wanted to yell out for them, bursting with all the words left unsaid.

The next moment, her knees ached as they wished to dip down from the window.

They were here and their stop was Kob... not her? She disgusted herself a bit that she cared about that, it was rich coming from her when she had refused to reply to a letter, to demand their attention when she'd been dodging it the whole time.

Atlas reached out and for just a moment, the Guild Master was about to take it from them.

But they raised their hands slightly, palms facing up, Atlas and looked around nervously.

They said something she couldn't hear.

For all the public display of business transactions in the wizarding guild, their windows were incredibly soundproof.

Atlas nodded slowly and followed the Guild Master further back into one of the hallways of the Wizards' Guild.

Before her denouncement, Harlow knew that hallway.

Private offices and meeting rooms.

Places for consults with citizens who wanted privacy or just needed a rest from the long trek into the depth of Quarkosh.

Wizards would also use the rooms to arrange further travel from this port.

So, anyone who used an open room was often never bothered.

You simply unlocked the room and left the door open when you were done. Automatons would come by routinely to cast ritual cleaning.

But these halls were endless.

And something didn't sit right.

Anxiety and depression left her with such low energy but this was a tug at the string.

She had done it all to keep Atlas from the clutches of the Guild Master, no matter her conflicted feelings on the man who had also raised her.

Harlow drew her robes around her more.

She was sidestepping exiting people left and right as she fought with just how best to go about looking for them and only observing, she promised herself.

Her "targets" were both people who were perfectly capable of spotting her personally and professionally.

Could they detect either of her set of skills? Most likely.

And this location where the trading of secrets, services, spells and so forth was its entire purpose meant it was exceptionally warded.

If she cast anything, it would be noticed.

If she attempted any of her usual subterfuge, it would also be picked up. She was already headed down that hall when she had to do this as cleanly as possible, with little evidence of anything to draw back upon.

But, damn, they moved quickly.

Harlow followed that tug early enough to still see them slip into a large meeting room, a little much for what it looked like they were prepared for in the foyer.

She wasn't fast enough, however, to catch the door or be able to go in after them so this was a time where Harlow was bested by a door.

Many people found themselves in a similar situation; a door being so simple that the possibility of just OPENEING it was too much.

What would she say even if it was unlocked? "Hello there, just dropping in to see the two people I have hurt and disappointed because...

I don't trust what's happening?"

What was there to say?

Business must have wrapped up quickly for the door opened minutes...

hours...

no, minutes, later and Harlow, still dripping from the slush outside although once the water hit the ground, it disappeared with a permacleaning spell cast on the floors for safety.

She was right in the middle of the fucking doorway with a hand up as if gripping a ghostly doorknob.

Face to face with Spellsaven Daggerroot of Daggerroot Manor.

Their eyes widened in surprise and their mouth fell slightly open.

Gods, that mouth, she missed it so much. from the taste of it to the words and wonderful noises that spilled from it.

“Har-Ms.

Hedgewater...

what are you doing here?”

they stammered.

“A GREAT question indeed,”

Kob bellowed from behind.

“I’m sorry... I just... I saw...”

The corners of Atlas’s eyes pulled down as the sadness on their face was so heavily mixed with happiness. One she was sure she must be reflecting. “I’m sorry... I should go.”

She shook her head nervously and took a step back further into the hallway.

She was confused and there was nothing like when a bully finds someone who’s

confused, when someone with power senses a moment of weakness. Kob stretched his bulking arm over Atlas's shoulder from behind them, grasped onto the front of her robes and pulled her forward towards them with a mighty yank.

Having never been accosted like this by him, Harlow had no composure to accept it. She flew forward into Atlas and Atlas quickly wrapped their arms around her, protecting her from the moment and possibly losing their footing.

Kob now had his back against the closed door and his chest heaved with deep, intense breathing. "What. Did. You. See. Harlow?"

Atlas righted her and hastily looked her over, making sure she was able to stand firmly on her own two feet before releasing their arms from around her. They looked away as if embarrassed by this reaction.

Harlow, still a bit shocked, pulled through. "I don't know what I saw... just a normal business transaction in the wizards' foyer. Perfectly normal and unalarming."

"No, don't act stupid, girl," he said.

Girl? The power move of someone othering another through infantilization was something that easily got on her nerves. Here she was her age and still fucking up royally, still making mistakes she thought she was long past. Growing older did come with learning but your learning never stopped. There was no secret age that you met and you stopped fucking up. And that also counted for people who attempted to make people feel like children just to have something over them. No matter how close or how much a part they were of her own foundling family.

She ignored him, turned just to face Atlas. The satisfaction of a response for further rise would not be a gift she wrapped for that man. Atlas was her only concern. What could a Spellsaven, specifically the Spellsaven Daggerroot, possibly need with just

the Guild Master?

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“At-Spellsaven, Mx., I’m so, so sorry. I can’t say it enough, I can’t say it in a more elegant manner... I just...”

Harlow felt close to hyperventilating from the stress and dump of emotions she was experiencing.

“Harlow, stop.”

Atlas raised a hand to silence her, a first in their relationship.

Shocked, she did stop, and she worried her lip in the only response. What would they say to her? Would it mirror anything that she theorized was in those unread letters?

“You have nothing to be sorry about. Really.”

Atlas’ throat was tight, but she couldn’t read anything more than Atlas being uncomfortable with speaking.

“I-don’t know if you know everything... if...”

Would Atlas know she was a thief, did it get revealed, and when and by who?

“You were caught between two places, two aspects of yourself and I certainly should have helped you, should have made you more comfortable with discussing things outside... us.”

Atlas tilted their head and managed to put on a gentle smile. They were searching her

face and she was searching theirs.

Was that it? No yelling, no disappointed stares. They took on her problem as their problem too. It didn't feel right for them to feel in any way responsible. She was the problem. But to hear the dip in the tone of their voice telling her that they wished she was more comfortable? More comfortable than losing herself in their sheets, in their arms, and in their infectious spirit? She wasn't sure where it would go from there; she held onto the hope deep in her chest, right behind her heart. Equipped with hope she could imagine a future where she came clean.

The Guild Master must have felt uncomfortable because Harlow could hear him shifting his feet around. She had to admit having Kob as a witness to all this was not... ideal.

“But I didn't do that for you, I went on because I was just so damn happy, Harlow.”

Atlas broke up in a wide grin as if drunk on the memory of them.

“I didn't know what to do... I... he asked for something, and I couldn't... I just...”

Atlas couldn't know everything, right? Harlow had so much to admit to that not just one statement could really cover. Surely one statement could not explain the depth of her feelings.

“I know, Harlow.”

Their glow started to return to them and that effortless smile eased the tension in her chest.

“When... when did you know?”

“When we found the body for sure... when we had that misadventure in the vault... and then when Apprentice Lithon kept bothering House...”

Atlas ran a hand through their hair, tossing a bundle of it over their shoulders.

“Oh gods, I didn’t know you knew that he was looking for it during tea.”

Were both Spellsavens scrying on their apprentices, wondering why they weren’t back yet or what they were up to? Did they see them wrestling like children in the hallway?

“Wait, our tea?”

Atlas laughed. “I meant after you left, he kept trying and kept bringing House presents. I wasn’t worried until House started liking those presents. The relic, though? I left it out for you if you wanted to take it.”

Now it was Atlas’ turn to act shy by breaking eye contact and shifting their feet.

“I couldn’t just take it, Atlas.”

Harlow thought of all the different paths that split from that moment. Atlas brought her to it, showed it off, and constantly gave her tasks inside the vault. So, they weren’t tests to see if she’d lift the relic but to give her chances to do so. Why couldn’t they just have said that earlier? In the end, she didn’t think it mattered. She could picture herself standing in front of Kob with the relic in her hands and how HARD it would be to give it to a man like him knowing despite their history, he was not a man who should hold such a thing.

Atlas sighed. “I know. So, I brought it.”

Kob took a step away from the door and it creaked loudly, betraying his movement.

Harlow looked back towards the Guild Master. “To him?”

Atlas fought a grimace, but the corners of their mouth wrestled against it, desperately tugging down. “Yes, I exchanged it.”

“Exchanged? For what?”

she questioned as her mouth grew dry.

“So, you could get your council seat.”

They said so with a slight laugh as if it was the simplest thing.

“How did you know...”

She allowed herself a few moments to imagine a reality where Atlas knew of her ambitions, what would have happened if she just told them from the very beginning. Would a Spellsaven’s endorsement outweigh Kob’s?

“Lithon.”

“Gah, Dogmeat.”

Of course. He had told her just as much with the reminders of Atlas’s depression and generally mopey disposition. It was so easy for Lithon to tell them her secrets, the things she kept away from them.

“Why... do you call him that?”

Atlas nervously laughed. Perhaps they were wondering if they really wanted to know or not. It wasn't a nickname she could see catching on.

Harlow laughed and went to explain but she was distracted by a hefty click as the Guild Master slid the deadbolt across the doorframe.

With slight growing distrust, she turned towards him. He took a step forward and they took an equal step back together. The atmosphere around them was thick and the world felt so quiet and yet so damn loud in its silence.

“What are you doing?”

Harlow cut into the stillness.

Kob patted his breast pocket. “Well, now that I do finally have the relic, I won't be needing... well, either of you.”

He said it so simply as if it was an everyday fact or a conclusion so natural that it breached being considered human nature.

“You can't be serious...”

This was Spellsaven Daggerroot. This was her, one of his foundlings.

“‘fraid I am, Kips. ‘fraid I am. See, it's nothing personal, but this.”

He patted it again, “only really works if no one knows I have it.”

He gestured with palms up indicating a lack of options. “If anyone knows I have it... well, I'll be just as hunted as your wizard lover there. I'd be so busy keeping track of all that, I would really lack in my performance as Guild Master. And I can't have

that, now can I?”

Harlow’s lip turned up in disgust. “How could you do this... you helped raise me, you were like a father.”

“Like a father and being a father are two vastly different things, Harlow.”

He looked down at her in every sense of the phrase.

Atlas reached quickly to grab her and spun her behind them without warning... that she could tell. The Guild Master lurched forward. The patting of his pocket might have indicated where the relic was but it was also a distraction from him drawing his short blade with the other hand. Misdirection was a rogue’s greatest feat and it was dizzying to see it on this side.

Defensively, Atlas had cast a small shield; it was as tall as them and twice as wide but it was not a permanent solution, just a reaction.

Sirens from the building sounded around them, too shrill to be silent even through these thick walls. Atlas triggered it with their reactionary spell and now everyone knew there was some trouble happening somewhere within the building.

Kob cursed under his breath. “Really wish you’d hadn’t done that, Spellsaven.”

“You’re outmatched here, Kobby. Not only do we each hold more skill than you could ever dream of, we are both also equally more charming than you.”

Atlas spoke brightly but their face was serious, watching his moves, but Harlow could see the Guild Master tracking her.

Were they checking on her deception, who she would back up? Unlikely, but just the

thought that they could be thinking that...

Kob dove again but this time out of the way towards Harlow; instinctually she summoned a razor edge leafed dagger, launching it towards his neck. She missed as Kob turned with realization from her physical announcement of which side she was on and it buried itself hilt deep in his shoulder. Just like he taught her.

“I gave you that knife,” he sneered.

“Yeah, and you can have it back.”

It felt like a childish retort to Harlow. Still felt good though.

There was a pounding on the door. The Guild Master flinched for a moment but ignored it and the muffled yells behind him. The wizards had security and they had already narrowed down the room of the disturbance. But why the hell could they not open the door already?

Fucking arcane locks. See, this was why she was so passionate about it before, why even though she was pretending to be an in-depth, lifelong wizard that she did find something that was not only fascinating but **NEEDED. THIS WAS CASE IN POINT.**

If she could get to the enchanted deadbolt, she could throw it open, but the mountain of a man between them and the door was not something easily avoided. She had also been stubborn enough to not share her arcane knowledge with anyone, and see where that got her.

The Guild Master reached his left hand into his duster and retrieved a set of throwing knives before patting the pocket again with the back of his hand. “See, I can do this all day. I can do it until... damn, till you’re both dead.”

“Sure and then they’ll eventually get in here...”

she rebutted, aghast.

“And what? They’ll prosecute ME for a lovers’ quarrel? For a Spellsaven’s apprentice being so brokenhearted and filled with rage over not being an apprentice that she attacks her very lover and blames them for why she did not secure a guild council seat? Please. I won’t even have to say a thing. Funny thing is you’re the most untrustworthy person in this room, Harlow.”

More dust fell from Harlow’s pocket. Damn, she kept forgetting to clean that out, as she frantically pulled reagents from their pockets. Kob rolled his eyes. “See, this is why you’ll never succeed. You were a great thief, legendary even, my dear little Harlow, but you make a shit wizard.”

The man vaulted toward her only for his wrist to snap back behind him and a loud crack fill the room so loudly that Harlow’s shoulders instinctually went to her ears to cover them.

He was suddenly on his back and being pulled back by a white cord of lighting. She followed it to a rather pissed-off Atlas. Whatever source they used, it was not one built on gathering infinite pieces of reagents like Harlow. They were floating slightly off the ground, the tips of their boots ever so slightly drifting off the floor, and their hair was frizzy and floating around like a feathered crown. There was no wind in this room but their clothing was whipped about in a frenzy.

Fighting for his fucking abysmal life, Kob flipped to his belly and dropped all but one of the knives. He sliced at the bolt and it severed. An enchanted blade that acted in ways that could counter spells. Harlow had a few herself but spells cast outside the typical range of power were usually unaffected. This blade blocked one of Atlas’ spells and it surprised her there was even anything capable of such a thing.

He launched himself off the floor towards Atlas and together there were fists and legs and all a giant ball ebbing between violence and defensiveness.

Harlow could choose to open the doors right now; there would be enough time, but not to also help Atlas. Yet again, that waterfall of choice was before her. She had to choose one, for nothing at all was death for them all.

The door shook suddenly and there was a point of bright light surrounded by a tense red and yellow glow. It was traveling slowly around the frame of the door. A sorcerer or wizard was using a molten spell to breach the door. Help was coming.

Harlow sprinted towards the others, her foot finding placement on a table, intended for peaceful discussion, that was now a launching point for her to jump towards the rising battling foes. She brought out her first blade.

It was ugly and slightly misshapen. She found it when she was younger, learned how to shape with it, used it to eat with, sharpened her first quill with it, she lived with it. She had also been ashamed of it as she dove into wizardly studies. It was one also equipped with a spell counter. There was no way the Guild Master would go anywhere near anyone without some sort of magical thickened armour or shielding; it could be something to pierce through that.

And as she sprang and brought both of her hands to its hilt, preparing to bury the hooked end of it into her previous mentor's back, Harlow noticed she was crying. It was almost dizzying as her body fought to process all the conflicting feelings, the adrenaline, the shock, the grief, and the love she had for Atlas.

The tip of the blade hit between his shoulder blades but didn't pierce him until her body swung against them both, adding to the chaos. That momentum must have been enough and with a sharp snap, whatever protection he had before was gone, and the blade of her youth found purchase.

Kob bellowed and flailed. She could not have possibly stayed with them, they were their own moving force, so she was flung around the pair and Harlow crashed against the empty corner, her hands burning from holding so tightly to the hilt.

The man fell to his side, pushing his feet along the ground, arms unable to assist in his crawling away. But Atlas.

Atlas fell.

They fell onto their back and held the collar of their linen shirt in their hands.

Harlow was slightly mesmerized by the fact Kob was moving, he was still alive, she hadn't landed the shot. How had this man made her feel so inadequate when she was anything but? Reeling that Atlas wasn't moving, she pushed off the marble floor, scrambling quickly to their side.

Her head shook quickly side to side. "Atlas..."

She moved their hands and noticed blood seeping from their chest. Kob had managed to land a blow, and a fatal one. She unclamped their hand to hold it, failing to find any more healing spells to come to her mind and she beat her head with a closed fist, as if she could knock some memory from it. She wanted to hold their hand and as she unfurled it, she found the relic.

Confused, Harlow looked back over her shoulder to the mewling Guild Master and back to Atlas. Atlas's eyes were half opened and they managed a grin. "...surprise."

They were weak but still managed a half music fingers wiggle.

Harlow gasped and pulled the relic from their hand, slipping it on her finger to use it, but Atlas clasped a hand around hers.

“Harlow...”

They begged.

“No, no don’t worry, I’ll just use it once, it’ll be fine... don’t worry. Help’s coming... I got you; I got you.”

She pulled from the very core of herself to be steady. To be that person she knew was calm in a storm. She could do that here. It would work out if she could just control the next few events. Control given readily with the relic upon her finger.

“Harlow...”

“Not really the time to ‘Harlow’ me, my love.”

She used her other hand to peel Atlas’ fingers off hers. “I’ll just do it once.”

She paused to think more. OK, if I can go back, I need to focus on pulling Kob back my way BEFORE they even get to Atlas. I don’t know when he actually stabbed them but yes, I could also cast something and we could pull back and forth...But what, I don’t know the lightning spell. But...

“Harlow...”

They uttered her name so reverently.

“WHAT?!”

Why were they stopping her, why couldn’t they just let her help them?

“It’s only five minutes... and it’s already been eight, Harlow.”

To give them credit, there were no tears in their eyes, but the sorrow was so intense, Harlow knew that it would be etched throughout all time. If time were to slip, the universe could ground itself on this one look.

A sob broke from her, one she wanted to fight until her own last breath to keep it from escaping, but now she couldn't stop.

“But then... I could have five more minutes with you.”

They managed a sweet smirk; their eyes still held a sparkle. A sparkle not as bright as the last time she'd felt it warm her heart.

Harlow's sobs slowed and she managed a weak laugh, her attention pulled from Atlas to the relic and she slipped it off her finger, holding it in her hand. Atlas waited patiently, letting the silence between them speak loudly.

Without warning, she dropped it to the marble floor and picked up the dagger that had been dropped by Kob, smashing it to bits with the hilt. It was so much more fragile than she anticipated.

Tears blocked her vision so when Atlas lightly cupped her jaw and slid down to gently turn her chin to face them, they whispered, “That's my Harlow.”

She leaned forward.

The sounds around them were muffled, non-existent.

This universe could have stopped but she wouldn't have noticed because all there was was her and Atlas.

Harlow didn't dare close her eyes, not wanting to lose sight of Atlas and the life

within them.

Her tears made it difficult, and anger mixed with despair as her vision blurred.

Her own body not wanting her to watch, to see life drain from them.

Her lips went to kiss them goodbye, a lover's kiss to remind them that they meant something to her, that they were always and would always be hers.

When her lips met theirs, she startled.

They were not cold yet but the presence of what she could only determine having been their essence had left.

She had just missed them.

Harlow wailed and clutched at the fabric of their blouse, balling it up and tugging it around as if handling it roughly would bring Atlas back.

This life, this life she built trudging through discontent, pulling through the mud of what everyone else wanted of her, not for her, had been for nothing.

She had waded through the hells and for what? Two sides of her collided as she knew that it was all built upon deceit and if Harlow could have been honest with herself long enough to actually make a damn choice for herself, then she and Atlas wouldn't be there.

They'd be with House.

It was love that tales were written about and it took now, when it was gone, that Harlow finally realized it wasn't adoration but the love she always thought she wasn't

allowed to have.

She knew it.

And it was all her damn fault.

Harlow released the shirt only to lay over Atlas, pulling them into her lap as much as possible.

She bent over, shoving her face in the crook of their neck, desperately memorizing the smell of them, the way their hair felt on her cheek, memorizing what she could before all she'd have left was the ghost of them.

There was a mighty bang as the door with now molten edges flew forward into the hallway and Lithon ran into the room, hands still burning white from casting.

Followed by security he paused, seeing the scene before them.

“What’s going on!?”

a voice croaked from the hall and finally a woman pushed their way through. Bethal shouldered more than one security wizard to come to Lithon’s side. “Ah fuck.”

Bethal and Lithon avoided even acknowledging the Guild Master, which was no small feat as he had turned on his side, reaching for assistance from anyone close enough but unable to lift more than his fingers. He was begging and there were already people casting stability spells. Unless there was a complication, he would live.

Bethal knelt beside Harlow, who was hunched over Atlas, her head resting on a chest no longer rising and falling. Lithon stood; his hands had cooled and now were

found clenching his own hair in despair as he seemed to process the scene.

The room was in chaos, but Bethal was steadfast and gentle. She placed a hand on Harlow's back and rubbed it. Harlow slowly sat back so Bethal could see the mess upon her face, tears and blood, grief and despair.

Bethal pulled out the hem of her apron. Yes, she was still wearing it, but instead of gardening supplies, there were various pipes, rolling papers, candies, and a slew of coupons. Bethal must be who Lithon got his sorcerer's smoke from.

She pulled the hem of apron up, smearing around Harlow's face, more an in effort to calm her than clean her up judging by the absolute mess still left behind.

She reached for Harlow's hand while the thief wiped her eyes with the other. Bethal pulled them both to her and held them. She jutted her chin to direct attention back to Atlas. "What good is the plant I gave you if you won't utilize what's gifted to you?"

Harlow, fucking offended, shot a look that could kill towards Bethal, who only smiled warmly. Bethal opened her hands and slid something into Harlow's.

With shaking hands she opened her palms and revealed a dried cutting of Bleeding Heart. The colors were of her plant. Bethal's hands wrapped around Harlow's and pressed them together.

Harlow felt the stem, leaves, and bud crush between them with her tear-slicked palms. Bethal leaned forward, still holding them, and placed Harlow's hands over Atlas's wound.

The gardener leaned on her knees to press Harlow's hands harshly down, causing Atlas' body to shift. Instinctually, Harlow pulled back but Bethal held her hands tightly. How did she get so strong?

In a voice only spoken for spellwork, she whispered in Harlow's ear.

“Crush the bleeding heart flowers and tears,

And hope the fucking wind is with you dear.”

Behind them, Lithon's earrings chimed as he must have been shaking his head.

“That's a terribly written spell.”

“Shut up.”

Bethal's words were as curt with him as they were with Harlow the day they met.

Lithon reached into one of his breast pockets and pulled out a small trinket box. Joining him, the gardener pulled out a rolling paper from her stained apron, handing it to the sorcerer. In silence they rolled a stick of sorcerer's smoke and took turns to calm their nerves. This did not happen without a few wizards murmuring about it being inappropriate or that this was “hardly the time for sorcerer nonsense”.

Atlas' chest heaved and Harlow leaned back on her feet, hands outstretched, completely worried she hurt them further. Their eyelids fluttered open and Harlow was frozen in place.

“Ahem...”

They coughed. “And just who might you be?”

The color drained from her face. This spell? It-it erased their memory. But by how much? Did they know who they were, did they even remember magic? Forgetting her would be a different pain but all Harlow could ask the gods, time, and space about would be that they would be okay. So, if this is how the universe answered, then so

be it.

Atlas lifted a very weak arm and their hand wiped away at the tears held hostage on her face. “Oh, there you are, my Harlow. There you are.”

Breath left her lungs heavily and Harlow felt so frail she almost collapsed. She had been holding on so hard and now she could finally let go. She leaned over them and buried her head into the side of their neck, sobbing heavily. Atlas wrapped an arm around her and the other hand held the back of her head. They were complete.

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Bedsheets rustled and Harlow's cooled skin flushed when a warm hand slid from its place upon her back and across her stomach, pulling her backwards. She let out an "it's too early"

groan and grabbed a fistful of linen comforter and pulled it over herself and Atlas.

"I don't want to go."

Their voice was husky and the sadness in it made Harlow' turn in her spot to face them.

Atlas leaned into Harlow's palm when it slid to cup the side of their face. Their arms wrapped around her and gave a squeeze as if to never let go.

Harlow' placed her forehead upon theirs and closed her eyes with a sigh, "Then who will feed the dog?"

"I should really spellweave something for that...or let House do it..."

"That would be a mistake. House doesn't know when to quit."

Harlow' smirked, shoving her hands underneath Atlas's shirt, warming them on their warm skin.

"Gah!"

Atlas shrieked from her cold hands but didn't move away, instead pressing their arms

against her hands as if to quicken their warming.

As if to interrupt anything from continuing, the door began to rattle in place with an impatient cadence.

“OK, I’m coming.”

Atlas groaned and began to pull away out of the covers but not before placing a gentle kiss on Harlow's forehead.

Atlas spent the next few moments not getting ready but instead circling around the bed to nudge a pair of slippers to a very particular spot next to the bed and proceeded to tuck the comforter under Harlow'

“I’d say, all snug like a bedbug... but no. Bedbugs, are terrible. They’ll shred the flesh off your bones in three seconds flat.”

They placed their hands on their hips while cracking their neck. “And we like your flesh exactly where it is.”

There was a muffled sound of agreement from beneath the sheets.

“Yes, yes, exactly.”

Atlas responded to the sleepy language of Effie’s grunts.

The door rattled with an attempt to open it. “Oh, come on, I’m awake.”

There was a sigh from behind them and Harlow' unfolded herself from the carefully crafted package Atlas tucked her into and her feet slid into the perfectly placed house slippers.

“I get it, I’m coming too.”

“There’s more than enough time for you to sleep in a bit more...”

“No chance. House is right, it’s a big day.”

Harlow' cleared the sleep out of her eyes and smiled.

“Absolutely, you ready?”

Atlas pulled the door open which House had finally allowed.

“Just a few more things to adjust.”

“You know, if something is off, it’s OK. Nothing must be perfect.”

“You are.”

“Take that back! I am absolutely flawed and will hear no such thing!”

“Fine, fine, you are riddled with various levels of skills and muddled characteristics.”

“Ah much better, my love. Thank you.”

Harlow's brandished a silken robe with exactly two moth holes.

There was an argument with House where House wanted to keep the moths fed but Harlow' was insistent that she didn't want to have to keep replacing and repairing every article of clothing she wore.

So, they settled for two moth holes each.

When together, hand in hand, they reached the kitchens, they found their pup feasting on a mound of food larger than it, which was saying something now that its height reached Harlow's knees.

Atlas stepped forward and with a wave of their hands dispersed the food back into its container, save half the bowl. House sadly whistled through its windows. "Getting better though, you'll get it!"

As Atlas continued to greet the dog, Harlow gave them both a kiss on the cheek before continuing down the hall to the workspaces.

Workspaces.

No longer just one but two.

Her door was on the left and Atlas' was on the right.

The door opened for her, and she stepped through.

House ignited the sconces for her and pulled the curtains open.

Dawn flooded the room, giving it a pinkish glow.

She stood there as she tightened her robe around her.

Along the walls and the room were organizations of spell reagents, stacks of various paper types.

You could never have too much.

Different inks and different pen nibs.

But also, unlike before there was a rivaling amount of lock picks.

All different shapes and made from different metal types.

There was a slew of practical locks and arcane locks resting along a peg board on the far wall.

A mound of bells in one corner and even a self-healing combat dummy.

It was a space that melded all facets of her.

In between tools of her trades were the paintings she'd traded for around town for her services.

Knickknacks from neighbors and tokens from Atlas. It was her space where she didn't have to hide anything from anyone and surely not from herself.

Off to the side, near the door was a smaller desk.

Cleared off save for a tray of the very basics: pen, quill, lock-picking set, and a feather.

There was no chair and Harlow rubbed her forehead.

She'd been putting that part off.

Sensing the sensation of her frustration, House slid two different chairs from out in the hallway into her room.

Slide was being generous; House was quite loud in its delivery.

"Ah yes, thank you... umm."

Harlow stared at the differences between stool and wingback chair. “I guess... stool? Perhaps they should pick their own, mm?”

House maneuvered the chair with a ripple of its floorboards while also replacing the wingback chair somewhere else in the house.

Harlow gave the room a final nod before exiting. She flicked her wrist followed by a snap of her fingers and her nightclothing was replaced with dark satin pants and a wispy violet blouse that Atlas gifted her last week.

She found Atlas in the foyer waiting for her. There was a gentle, slight knock that one would almost miss if they were any deeper in the house.

Atlas quickly covered Harlow’s mouth with their hand and placed a finger over their own lips. Harlow’s eyes went wide, and she turned her face towards the door. They both paused long enough to make whoever was on the other side uncomfortable.

There was another knock, louder this time.

Atlas whispered, “Seems they got the hang of it now.”

They dusted their hands off and took a breath. “Shall we?”

Harlow smiled and felt jitters radiate through her. On the other side of the door were strangers. Their names were known and their presence expected, but still strangers.

Harlow felt nerves she hadn’t felt in a long time. Those nerves fueled her into action, and she reached the door before Atlas, throwing it open widely... quite opposite of Atlas when she was the one on the stoop.

Two people with packed bags at their feet jolted up straight and then bowed together.

“Spellsaven Daggerroot, I-I’m here as your new apprentice.”

They beamed but the corners of their mouth quivered. Nerves were fickle things.

“Of course you are, how would you be anything but?”

Atlas zipped forward and grabbed their bag, after waiting with an outstretched hand for consent, before leading the dragon-fleshed young man inside. “This way...”

The other, a young person dressed all in black and hair shorn down to the scalp, took a deep breath before making eye contact with Harlow, doing their best not to break it.

“Councilor Daggerroot. Tavorian reporting for apprenticeship duty.”

They bowed again but much more stiffly than before.

Harlow dropped her wide grin to a smirk and tilted her head, “Most wonderful, you can use a pen, correct?”