

## *Chapter 2*

### *“We Accept the Love We Feel We Deserve”*

“We’re almost there, so quit your moaning,” Wallis said, raising his voice in obvious agitation. He was definitely less subtle than Leigh had been with them in the past. “Your voices will be returned to you only after we arrive in the town of Vlayd. But, believe me if you two don’t keep a tight lid on it neither of you will be able to speak until we arrive at the Caves of Color, although I still might debate about giving you back the gift of gab. Protecting others from your senseless gibberish might prove much more valuable, in the long run. Are we understood gentlemen?”

Stanley and Clancy nodded their heads in unison. Their heads shifted until they glared at each other with flaming accusing eyes, each clearly blaming the other.

Leigh looked up and grinned, “So Sarantos, don’t you think the old wizard handled them better than I did? At least his method works.”

He laughed heartily and said, “Yes, our wise friend is very efficient. He continues to teach me the ways of the world.”

Leigh had artfully convinced him she was healed enough to join them on this new adventure. She had an understanding of the creatures that had escaped through the portal, plus she could wield a long sword with deceptive speed and accuracy. Leigh, however preferred throwing daggers and was also incredibly effective with a bow. Sarantos couldn’t understand how Leigh had the ability to see the dragon on Adele’s shoulder at all times. He never noticed it unless it allowed him to see it, which wasn’t very often. He still didn’t understand a lot of the magical potential that surrounded Leigh, but was sure he would figure it out eventually.

Sarantos worried about Brad on this journey though because they traveled to the town of Vlayd to gather up Sergio, who Wallis thought would be a great asset on this journey. Wallis had informed Brad that he didn’t need to accompany them, but Brad insisted. He wanted to visit his homeland and would be okay with Muriele’s husband being on the trip with them. Leigh had expressed misgivings about it, but in the end it was Brad’s decision. Brad wanted to do it regardless.

It was just starting to get dark when their little party made their way to the top of the steeply inclined hills that were densely covered in pines. The rich smell comforted them, as they stood on the crest and looked out over the unruffled town.



“There it is, at last,” said the wizard, as he squeezed Adele’s hand.

It was a picturesque scene as the sun slowly set over the pine-encrusted hills that surrounded the grand town of Vlayd.

Blayke slapped Brad and Sarantos on the back while he suddenly proceeded down the hill at a much quicker pace than they’d traveled in the past three days. It hadn’t taken them as long as it did Clancy and Stanley to find them, because the wizard knew exactly where he was going.

“Out of my way!” Switch shouted as he knocked over Brad in a hurry to catch up

to Blayke. “Never get in the way of a starving dwarf, lad.” His voice carried far and wide, complaining loudly but all the while his little legs sprinted toward Blayke. “We have magi amongst us, you’d think they would have teleported us. Oh . . . what good are they anyway to a dwarf who needs a pint of ale and a warm meal. We’re hearty folk, but we enjoy the pleasure of food. I can smell it cooking.” He grunted and groaned as he ran down the hill toward the sleepy town.

The wizard turned red in the face and yelled after him, “That’s exactly why we save our magic and don’t waste it on silly dwarves. We enjoy the exercise and delight in collecting valuable herbs on our journey. You’d learn a lot more, dwarf... if your belly didn’t speak for your mouth!”

The rest of them started down the hill as the dwarf shouted back, “Of course it speaks for my mouth, wizard, after all, that’s where me food goes before it travels to me belly!”

Wallis shook his head, while Adele burst into laughter and Brad snickered while elbowing Sarantos.

“Don’t encourage that silly dwarf, Adele.”

“Oh, Wallis, don’t be so hard on a jolly old dwarf who enjoys his sustenance,” she winked at the wizard.

He mumbled under his breath.

“Now, who’s complaining and should have a spell cast upon his mouth?” She threw her arms around him and gave him a quick hug before she joined the dwarf in a race to the town. Mika ran along the side of Adele pouncing and sniffing fresh plants until they reached the bottom of the hill and stood on a path that led into the center of town.



Vlayd was very buzzing with carts moving to stores filled with the spoils of the farmers’ fields of that day. Children were running home for dinner, while some were being chased after grabbing food off of the carts or stealing coins out of men’s pockets. One young lad with shaggy brown hair ran into Switch and dropped coins everywhere. The dwarf snatched him by the shirt and pulled him to his feet.

A tall seedy-looking man approached and jerked on the boy’s arms. He said, panting and in a rough voice, “Give me my money or I’ll knock some sense into ye.”

“Hey, what are you doing fellow. This boy has no money from you.” Switch emptied the boy’s pockets and said, “Now, I’ll be dealing with the lad, it was my money he took and when I shook it out of him he dumped it all over the ground. I

saw a young redhead run into that ally looking back over his shoulder. You must have got the wrong lad.”

“I don’t think so. Are you trying to swindle me, little man?”

The red-faced dwarf turned and slugged the guy in the stomach so hard he collapsed to his knees. Switch threw the man a coin and said, “Now, go pick on someone your own size and leave the kid alone. Buy yourself an ale, on me.”

The boy stood there staring at the dwarf. Switch gave him a look that could kill and said, “Kid, you pick up my coins before the wizard here turns you into a toad.”

“Yes, sir.”

The boy didn’t have to be told twice, but when he picked up the coins he slid several into his own pockets.

“I saw that,” the dwarf said in a gruff tone.

“It’s me money. I earned it.” He grinned and took off running until he was lost in the crowd.

The dwarf let out a hearty laugh and said, “A lad after me own heart.”

“Enough Tom-foolery. We need to find the inn called Midnight Oasis - there we’ll locate Sergio,” the wizard groaned.

Adele approached a young woman selling beautiful silk scarfs and asked directions after purchasing a red and gold one.

“Thank you,” she said and returned contently to Wallis’s side. “It seems we have to continue the direction we’re heading in, moving along this road, past the Lizard’s Tavern to the graveyard and then at the gargoyle headstone we head east. We keep going past the Temple of Hekate where we will eventually see a sign for antidotes in front of an old wooden cottage by a giant hedgehog tree, then we proceed south and should find the Midnight Oasis on the west side of the road.”

“Well, done,” said the wizard.

While Mika had already gone invisible, they all headed off in the direction given by the lady selling scarfs.

*“Why, are you invisible here?”*

*“I like to stay invisible in most towns that are quite large, Sarantos. You never know what or whom we’ll run into.”*

He was quite good at passing Mika thoughts, though it didn’t matter anyway. If she wanted to she could read all of his thoughts, but for the most part she allowed him his freedom without being overly prying or nosy.

The streets were still bristling with people and vendors as darkness befell on the



town of Vlayd. There were so many buildings close to each other that the candlelight indoors illuminated out onto the streets creating eerie shadows yet at the same time, a warm and welcoming feeling.

The graveyard had a heavy fog over it. You could almost feel the dead walking around inside the fenced-in area that kept them from walking the roads with the living.

When they got to the temple, it was encrusted with gems and strange symbols. An incredibly elaborate statue of a beautiful woman stood at the entrance wearing a

mysterious robe. Her eyes sparkled with bright gemstones that seemed to be peering off into the distance. She stood on top of a moon. In her hands were two torches that were dancing with blue and red flames. On her shoulder was a cat. By her side was a black hound with three heads that were turned in different directions. Magicians were entering and leaving the building. The large structure was in the center of the road where the four roads crossed and each led to an entrance of similar design.

Wallis took Adele's hand and stopping in front of the temple said, "You all go to the inn. We have business in here, and yes Brad the flames were placed there by magic. They burn all the time. We won't be very long. You know who Sergio is and my guess is he won't be hard to spot. Mika will go with you and I will be able to communicate with her in case you run into a problem. Take care." With a last wave of his staff he turned and they both disappeared into the gates of Hekate.

"Well, of all the ungrateful . . . wizards!" The dwarf mumbled and headed south toward the inn.

The streets had cleared and the night was quiet by the time they arrived at the Midnight Oasis. The buildings had become larger and more prominent in magisterial structure leading up to where they now stood. An oasis, it was. The door was inlaid with what could only be gold and the wood of the building was carved in different shapes of beautiful trees hanging with fruit as vines wrapped their way around windows embracing naked bodies of both men and woman in a very discrete manner. The sign glowed with an unearthly magic. It was an inn you couldn't help but notice.

Blayke chuckled.

"What's so funny, Blayke," asked Brad.

"Well, of course this would be the type of inn we would find Sergio residing at, don't you think?"

Brad nodded and looked at Sarantos.

"Arrogance."

Sarantos said, “Brad, be nice. I think he just likes to live heartily.”

“Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s get some ale!” The dwarf pushed past the others and went inside.

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The entrance was magnificent offering three different directions one could possibly follow. When you stared straight ahead, inside a circle stood three elaborate pots with interesting scenes painted on them as exotic plants rose high into the air bearing red and yellow fruits. Standing around the trees were two handsome men and one beautiful woman dressed only in vines that wrapped their bodies in a sensuous manner - they almost resembled statues. A very attractive elderly woman with long black hair had used her silver hair to weave braids at the sides of her head as it all fell loose to her waist her hair glistened violently in the dim lighting. She was clothed in a very tight fitting golden material with a white diamond belt and rings between her toes while she stood barefoot on a red tiled floor. She smiled at them and turned her head allowing her earrings to flash like starlight around the room.



“Welcome, to the Midnight Oasis. My name is Staci, and I can guide you on your journey if you desire?”

“Where’s your food and ale?” the dwarf bellowed.

Blayke moved forward, “Pay him no mind madam. We apologize for our friend who lacks the proper etiquette for such a prestigious place. We would like some nourishment, if you please.”

The woman never flinched and smiled again, “Zulu, take this group into your hall please.”

One of the men came forward and led them in the direction he had stood facing. It was quite a robotic scene, as the party followed him into a very expansive and dimly lit room filled with many tables, waterfalls, candles, and of course people. He led them to a corner adjacent to one of the many roaring fireplaces and offered them seats around a round table with an angry red table cloth hanging to the floor while a smaller cloth in blistering gold covering the top. The dwarf sat down and laughed.

“Well, in a place like this I definitely need to use my particular appeal and charm, just like when I’m at court.”

“What charm?” Blayke blurted out smacking the dwarf on the back and almost knocking his chin into the tabletop.



“Watch it, Blayke or I might have to use me axe on that thick skull of yours! You nearly caused me to eat wood. I’m hungry, but not that hungry,” said the dwarf.

Leigh said, “Boys, kindly mind your manners.”

Both men nodded and sheepishly apologized for their antics.

The man who led them to their table stood there like a statue waiting for them to decide what to eat. Sarantos thought he couldn’t possibly have any emotions intact, otherwise, he would have had to at least grin at the silly actions of his table mates. They kind of reminded him of The Queen’s Guards at Buckingham Palace in England on Earth, where time and time again people would make faces or do weird things to distract them, but usually to no avail. This made him seriously wonder about them...detached and with no emotion. Either they had been brain washed into an unemotional existence or they were trained in a very zen-like manner to live up to the scrutiny of so many observers. It didn’t matter how they did it though, it was impressive to witness firsthand.

Without warning, Wallis and Adele casually came into the room. Their business must have been short.

Wallis was looking around the room rather nervously which made Sarantos suddenly uncomfortable. Adele broke the uneasy silence of the now reserved group, as she turned to the waiter.

“I’d like a strong coffee and some broth with markin bread. In fact, please bring us a basket of markin bread for the entire table and a bowl of your finest steamed vegetables. Thanks so much dear.”

The rest of the group then ordered their dinner. Sarantos loved markin bread. The soft insides had just a hint of rosemary and a tasty powdered cheese, similar to Parmesan, but with infinitely more flavor.

They sat waiting for their food and chatting in low tones, as Wallis continued to scan the room. The food was laid out on the table without much of a wait.

Sarantos kept watching the wizard’s serious expression until a twinkle appeared in his eye and a slight grin shined across his face. His head began nodding. Sarantos could only guess that Mika had gone in search of Sergio and was successful in locating him. Wallis didn’t like this new portal and was afraid of the consequences, and those possible outcomes made him more spooked than normal. He was usually quite together and very seldom showed any anxiety whatsoever. The wizard finally sat back and started eating.

Stanley tapped Wallis on the arm and pointed toward his mouth.

The wizard turned and said, “Oh, yes . . . yes. Sorry about that.” He waved his hand. Stanley touched his mouth, as though afraid to actually test it out.

Stanley coughed and said, “Thank...you.”

That caused a response from Clancy, “Hey, you can talk again! Wait a minute . . . so can I! Did you hear me, Stanley?”

“Unfortunately yes, I heard you, Clancy.”

The chattering started up again as did the constant badgering.

“Well, I have to hand it to you Wallis, you certainly got them to stop a lot longer than I did. However, to permanently change who they are would take a much longer time and a greater strength of character.” Leigh said, just before she popped a piece of markin in her mouth.

“I could change who they are if I wanted to and it wouldn’t take me very long at all. In fact, I believe it would be pretty instantaneous,” the wizard grinned quite evilly.

Leigh laughed, “Well shame on you wizard for having such nasty thoughts!”

It was enough to cause Stanley to quit talking and ignore the constant yakking of his counterpart. Clancy wasn’t a quick study.

They’d eaten dinner and the place had almost cleared out before a dark shadow appeared behind Wallis.



“Come and pull up a chair, Sergio. Join us. You know I dislike you stalking around behind me.”

Sergio’s warm laughter lifted into the air and fell like a gentle rain around them. By the time they’d finished basking in the trance-inducing sound, Sergio had pulled up a chair next to Brad and was sitting there with his hand on Brad’s shoulder.

“Good evening, everyone. Leigh.” He said her name with affection and leaned over the table in front of Brad to get a better look at her.

She was sitting to the other side of Brad

and turned to smile in his direction. He took her hand and pulled it toward him, kissing it gently. He had a hypnotic effect on everyone, and it was his gift, his elfin gift. His charm seemed to reflect off of everyone at the table bouncing its way endlessly in a continuous circle. Brad couldn't help but to stare in admiration. Sergio was smooth, witty, charming and his handsomeness broadcast uncomplicated perfection. He hadn't changed a bit since their last encounter. Wallis was right. This man would be very helpful in the material world Sarantos came from and on Earth where the egos were out of control and a Hollywood physical appearance meant you could have anything you ever wanted, yes, he would come in very handy indeed.

"Your beauty is intoxicating," he whispered to Leigh.

She blushed and politely thanked him while leaving her hand in his. Sarantos knew that if anyone else said that to her she would have brushed it off, but Sergio made women weak. Sarantos almost burst out laughing while thinking of Sergio on stage at a concert with women passing out all over the place. The Sergio invasion would certainly have worldwide appeal! He would be the ultimate rock star. He found himself wondering if this man could actually sing, but then again, with everyone passed out he would only have to moan once or twice, then the rest of the song could just be music. He didn't even have to be able to carry a tune or sing with pitch.

He gently dropped Leigh's hand and turned to Adele and nodded. "Adele, how are you. It's been a long time, my lovely acquaintance."

The pure magic of this man bypassed the race belonging to The Sixties. They were undeniably a different breed.

"I'm great, my dearest Sergio. You're still a handsome man I see, and your charm does not go unnoticed by my kind as I'm sure you can sense."

He bowed his head in acknowledgment, "Thank you. I see you and the wizard have hit it off. I should have foreseen that myself and could have introduced you years ago. No matter now, you have found love on your own it seems."

For a brief moment, a sadness shadowed his face and his beauty dimmed slightly.

“Welcome to the group, Sergio. You understand this is mayhem,” asked the wizard?

“Yes. I’m prepared.”

“Very well, then. Let’s get some sleep and set off early. The cave is not far from here, about another hour of walking.”

They were then led to their rooms. Wallis and Adele had their own room this time.

Blayke, Brad, Switch, Stanley and Clancy shared a room. Leigh and Sarantos got their own room too. Sergio said farewell and would meet them all for breakfast. The rooms were huge and followed the theme of the eating room with fireplaces and waterfalls. The bed was king sized with silken sheets and a handcrafted thick quilt. There was a tub filled with warm water and lavender sitting conveniently



right under the waterfall. Sarantos said a prompt goodnight to his friends and eagerly locked the door taking off his clothes, then removing Leigh’s and then they both determinately sank into the relaxing water.

Leigh smiled at him. He pulled her foot up. He played with her big toe while tickling her. She giggled like a carefree child. They enjoyed the warm and fragrant bath for quite a while before getting out and wrapping themselves in the fluffy soft robes supplied by the inn.

All Sarantos could think of was that he accepted this love. Leigh was his love. She was the love he deserved after all those years of waiting and

waiting for the right one. In spite of any and all struggles, this was the love in his mind he thought he rightfully had earned.

The bed was comfortable and they quickly drifted off into a deep sleep.

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The next morning was cool and rainy, but after a hearty breakfast the group set out in the direction of the Caves of Colors.

Wallis said, “I had Sergio gather information for us in regards to any unusual beings or creatures that didn’t seem to belong here. The only information he received was about a man and woman with their children, but even though they were dressed very unusually and seemed confused it doesn’t necessarily mean they came through the portal.”

Adele added, “With any bit of luck the other side wasn’t noticed yet by any earth bound creatures and we can quickly get to the other side and return the creatures of the cave to their natural habitat, then seal the portal.”



“With a bit of luck, indeed.” Wallis said as he picked up speed and moved quickly to the front of the party.

Leigh pulled her cloak over her head, as the rain came down harder and harder threatening to drown the group as they moved closer and closer to the home of Stanley and Clancy.

“Why do you live in the caves?”

Clancy looked at Leigh and grinned. “It is like magic. I love magic. Right, Stanley? The whole place is beautiful, besides we help our friend, Shadow. He is good to us.”

“Yes, you love magic, Clancy. That’s what got us into this big mess to begin with, duffass. Remember?”

“Yea, I remember. You don’t have to remind me. I can remember some things, after all.”

Wallis turned and gave Leigh an eerie stare with a crinkled brow.

She just threw back her head and laughed. Oh, how Sarantos loved her laugh. It was good to see her in such a beautiful state of being. This journey has so far proved therapeutic for her spirit. She had a great sense of humor and he thought she got a kick out of Clancy and Stanley . . . not to mention, teasing the robe off of the wizard, so to speak. Sarantos loved her witty sense of humor and down-to-earth manners!

The trek to the Caves of Colors had been quick and easygoing. They now stood in front of an unusual hillside with twisted and creatively carved rock formations. Some of the rocks looked like heads of animals while others appeared to be turrets of long destroyed castles. It looked like cubism art interwoven with realism. A heavy fog suddenly appeared out of nowhere and shrouded the hilltops. It hung over the area delivering an eerie, almost haunted look upon the land.



“Follow me,” said the wizard as he headed off in an eastwardly direction. He obviously decided to lead the group, even though this was the home of Stanley and Clancy, but none of them questioned him and followed close behind.

The wizard took them over an easy path for about an hour and then leapt onto the

rocky hillsides. It wasn't easy to maneuver through the rocks, but Adele, Wallis and Brad managed to stop here and there picking plants for their small sacks that hung from their belts at their waist.

"I don't see a cave opening. Do you?" Sarantos asked Leigh.

"No, I don't, but Wallis knows what he's doing. Always trust that."

"I'm sure you're right. The wizard is very seldom wrong."

The wizard turned, "Never wrong."

"Ok, then, 'never wrong'. Where do you suppose Sergio has gone off too?"

The elf had disappeared several times during this journey only to reappear next to one of them chatting like he'd been there all along.

"Oh, who knows, but he is elfin kind and they do check the area for any mischief makers or hidden surprises. It's their nature - remember, Muriele did the same thing."

"Oh, sure. Thanks Leigh. He's just a little more obvious, that's all."

"Why do we come this way, wizard?" The dwarf complained. "Over to the west is a nice easy path. The only thing we'll find on this path is trouble," he griped.

Blayke patted him on the back. "Too much for you dwarf? Shall I carry you?"

"What?" Switch jerked around pulling at his axe which caused him to tumble over backwards, but the quick and agile Blayke reached over and grabbed him standing him upright.

"Dwarf, you're the laughter I hear inside my gut before it moves out into the air!" Blayke bellowed.

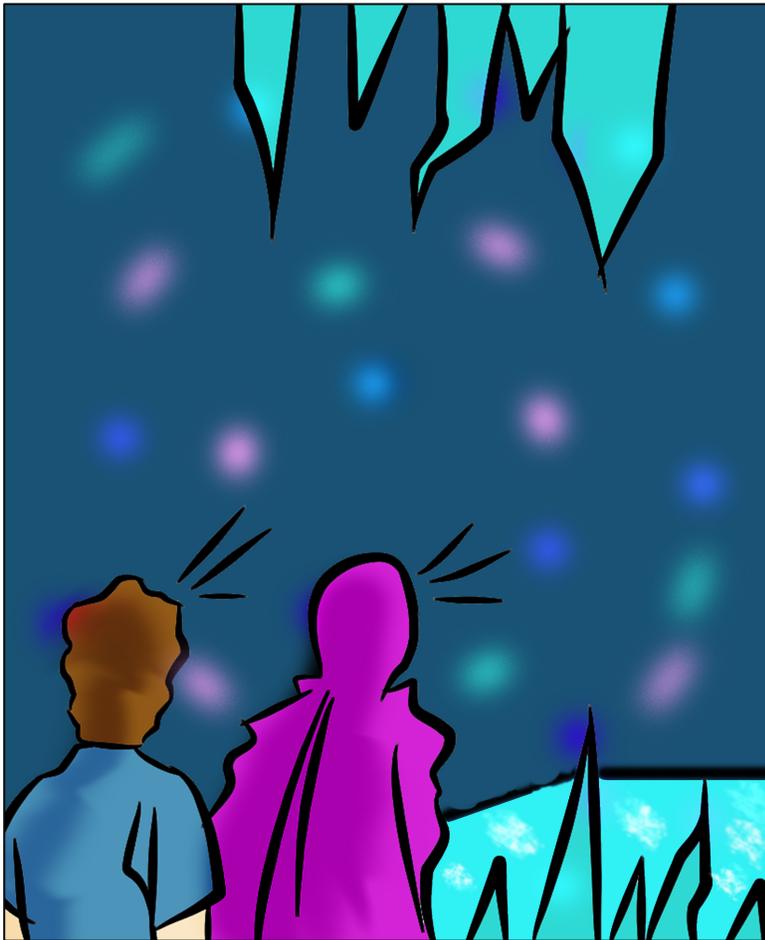
"We're here!" The wizard yelled out. He said several magic words and an opening appeared in front of them.

“Didn’t know that was there? Did you Stanley?”

“No, never saw it until now.”

They all started to go inside when Sergio appeared next to Leigh and locking arms with her, he walked with her through the entrance.

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Sarantos stood in awe as a multitude of blues, pinks, reds, yellows and purples bounced wildly around the cave. When the colors reflected off of an icy looking pond, they played amongst the stalactites and stalagmites. He could understand why this could be home and why magic would fill your heart eternally inside these caves. Clancy had the fever.

“Wow!”

“Leigh, you took the words out of my mouth. Nothing describable could compare to this beauty. I have no words.”

“It leaves one breathless,” sighed Adele.

“Quiet!” The wizard said in the loudest whisper he could conjure without being too loud. “Mika, to me.” The big cat immediately appeared at his side in solid form.

The wizard continued, “There are things in here that are confusing. Do you feel them, Adele? Sergio?”

“Yes,” said Adele.

“What is it you feel?” Sergio asked as he faded into the unnatural darkness of the caves.