

## *Chapter 8*

### *“Are You Sure You Can Last?”*

The room erupted into chaos as Sarantos stood nervously pointing at the beautiful woman with red hair - accusing her of being the shadow walker, the vampire who took him previously.



Blayke quickly positioned himself between her and Sarantos pushing him behind his back while drawing both of his weapons and quickly taking up a defensive pose. Derek simultaneously leapt to his feet and positioned his body next to Blayke, ready for combat. Although he had no bow, both of his daggers were in his eager hands ready for action.

The wizard turned to see the woman that had followed them in and instantly produced his wand directing it at her without the slightest hint of hesitation. Lightning started to extend from the tip of the wand towards the lady, but she winked and nodded at

the wizard. The wand became red hot in color causing him to drop it to the floor. His hands reflexively came back up in one quick movement to lunge a counter spell at his opponent. His face was laced with concentration and concern.

Adela reached her arm up to take his hand and steadied the action of the now flushed wizard.

Deanna burst out laughing.

The woman's eyes danced in merriment as she continued to walk with the grace of a goddess. She pulled out a chair and sat down never flinching with any sort of concern for her well-being. Obviously, she was confident enough to not feel endangered. She smiled at Sarantos and looked at his chair that still lay on the floor. It became righted in the blink of an eye.

“Please sit, Sarantos and finish your meal.”

Her voice danced around the room with an acoustic gift that fell like a gentle rain and echoed off the walls leaving all of their ears wanting more. She smiled seductively at Blayke. He bowed and sat down. Derek immediately did the same. Sarantos followed his friends.

Deanna continued, “Let me introduce you to Aurora Willow, she is an ancient one. Her race dates back to the time of Gods and Goddesses. She is a Faleian Elf.



Wallis and Blayke gasped at the same time, but it was Wallis who stood up, walked right over to the woman, bowed respectfully and then kissed her hand before speaking, “Ever since I've arrived in Ethel my experiences have been quite unique and the people I've met are most extraordinary, but now I look upon the beauty of a woman who belongs to one of the most majestic races that has ever existed. In all my life I would never have imagined that the rumors could possibly be true, until this very moment - fairest of all women, when I now look upon the beauty of a goddess made of legends, I am both humbled and honored.”

She was mesmerizing. Sarantos understood why he thought it was his seducer. Her whole being captivated everyone so easily, similar to the charm of a vampire. No one could remove their eyes from one as purely magnificent as she. It was like watching a sunset that shifted colors leaving you in awe of nature's brilliance. An Elfin Goddess - Sarantos was truly beside himself!

Sarantos said meekly, “What are you doing here, Aurora Willow?”

Her laugh filled the room like a summer garden in the waking hours of dawn and dew. “I come here often. These are my dearest of friends, but it seems I’ll be leaving them and joining you on your quest.”

The wizard shifted uncomfortably, “Surely, dearest Aurora Willow, Elfin Goddess you will be noticed.”

“Wipe that concern from your face, my newly appointed chaperon. I will be in disguise of course.”

“All is well, then,” said Blayke plainly. He stared at Aurora and continued, “Least I would not be able to protect my friends, much less myself from any foe. Your beauty would forbid it, as my eyes would be cast in the wrong direction, for sure. I had that fear today. To strike you to save my friend Sarantos, might have been the greatest challenge of my life, and I fear I would have utterly failed. I’m only human and the guardians have super powers indeed to allow you to walk among them without such notice.”

Everyone laughed heartily. It was unusual for Blayke to expand his conversation on any topic, much less admit defeat – especially by the mere look of a woman.

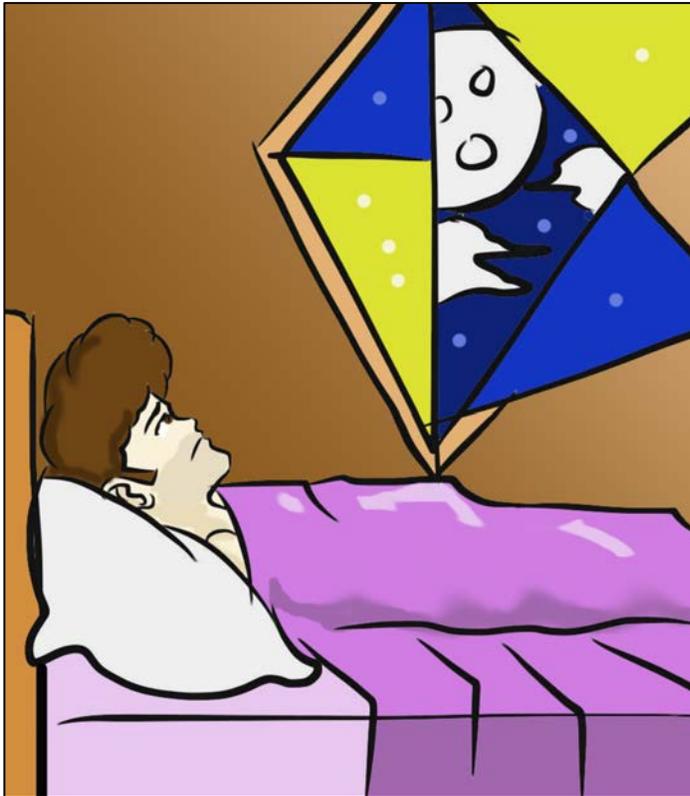
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After learning about the many talents and natural abilities of the Faleian race, Sarantos had felt entirely drained. He’d always recovered quickly from colds, but this was different. It felt very different. It felt strange.

He’d asked Blayke to assist him to bed, but wasn’t sure if he would be able to leave the conversation or specifically Aurora. He did however eventually leave. After Sarantos had lain down he was thankful, because his body rejoiced in the pleasure of being in a horizontal position at that moment in time. He was utterly exhausted.

Derek was not in the room yet, and he and Deanna had taken off from the crowd to go out on their own for a walk. Obviously in Sarantos absence, Derek had become closer to her and their friendship seemed to blossom. He was happy for him. The young lad had been through enough and deserved at least some happiness.

He watched the fire for a moment before thinking about where they'd be headed next. He wondered if Wallis already knew where they were going and what type of place it would be. He thought it surely must be dangerous, otherwise, why would a Goddess accompany them? He didn't think she would bother unless she thought her abilities would be needed. Great, that was a scary thought. He'd have fun falling asleep now for sure.



The moon shined bright tonight through the large open window. He looked up to the heavens for guidance and then watched time drift around him with the changes of the dark shadows that lingered about the somber room.

The moment of truth was upon him. The path to finding Leigh seemed to stretch beyond the night sky. The night sky settled down upon him. How long could he take it? This seemingly endless search for his love was pure torture. This search for her was lingering on and on. He did not think he would last. The climb was nothing without her though. He would do

anything for her. He would go anywhere for her. He would climb any mountain, overcome any hurdle for Leigh because the passion burned in his heart. Singing her name tamed his soul. He mused to himself how other people played no part in controlling time and he would play this game as long as he needed to. He would never give up. He would last as long as he needed to. Time functioned properly. Whether or not anyone was in the world working against him or on his behalf, it did not matter. It was a funny thing how his essence sometimes made Sarantos think he was so important. That is, until the shadows would prove him wrong. The shadows held a darkness that he did not completely understand.

He would work harder at becoming a greater part of the whole. He would not worry so much about whether or not he could rescue her and stop being so self-indulged.

Of course, he knew he needed to live out this life's challenge. He needed to appreciate this moment in time. Sarantos just needed to notice the whole picture more often, the one that included the life of others. This journey wasn't just about him and Leigh, it was about all the people who loved her and contributed to her life to make her happy and bring her guidance. Didn't Wallis sacrifice for Leigh? He needed to respect and appreciate his friend's contributions to her life more often. They all loved her in their own way. They were in this together and that's why they waited for him to feel stronger and be ready. He kept thinking that he was glad they did, but their love for her would've also encouraged them to leave him behind but they saw the whole picture. Wallis was great at that. Maybe, it was his longevity that gave him such a great perspective along with privileged wisdom, but whatever it was, he wanted some of that!

He felt confident and relaxed while picturing Leigh's face laying on his chest. That was the way he liked to sleep and it helped soothe him. As he let his eyes grow heavy and eventually close, he could almost feel her against him. He could feel his breathing go steady and he left the shadows to move with time, while he drifted off to sleep.

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He heard Derek come into the room and opened his eyes. It was still dark outside and the moon was in full force. Yes, time had changed the shadows.

"Hey, you finally return, my friend."

"Oh, you startled me. I thought you were sleeping. Yes, my talks with Deanna are incredible. She is amazing and her thoughts are the same as mine about so many things, even though we are from different worlds."

"Yes, I found that to be true, as well, in my world. Most of the time people are basically alike and wanting the same things out of life. You know, happiness, love, good health, and...to be romantic with an adorable woman with blue skin," Sarantos laughed.

Derek chuckled, "Well, I won't deny a word you said, my friend. I think I have fallen in crazy love."

"Well, then you'd better get some sleep - you're going to need your strength!"

“Indeed.”

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Morning seemed to come quickly as Sarantos made an attempt to get out of bed on his own. He eventually did. He felt much better. He stretched, stood up and did some deep breathing.

Wallis came into the room and smiled, “Well, well, I see you are feeling better, after all.”

“I feel amazing. I think I should be ready to travel in a few days.”

“I think so, too. The food here is healing your body fantastically. You’ve been

attended by some of the best healers around and the mere presence of Aurora has instilled health and confidence in everyone here. What a gift she is to us, my friend. It couldn’t come at a better time. We leave in two days then.” He turned and headed for the door. Looking over his shoulder he commented, “I’ll let them know to prepare your breakfast.”

He shut the door quietly behind him.

Derek was sitting up looking at him, “Good morning. Breakfast sounds great and what’s most important, is you finally getting up and about. That makes me feel grand, my friend. Let’s go eat.”

Sarantos was moving faster, but Derek was washed and dressed by the time he was done with his stretching and walking about. The young lad waited while Sarantos

washed and dressed, in case he needed his help. He didn't.

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The past two days had gone by quickly and Sarantos was feeling his best when the morning of their departure arrived.

He'd spent some time working on his music, polishing his sound and felt confident he was physically and mentally ready as well.

Wallis had already shared information about the world that Villmah, the vampire, had come from; not surprisingly, it was a world of complete chaos. The world itself functioned in a rhythmical system and was structured within everlasting pandemonium.

Her very nature as a creature of that world would be in sync with its gloomy rhythm. It would be innate.

Wallis had informed them that they would travel there to learn more about her origins and hopefully get some idea of why she left a comfortable habitat for her kind. He had explained her world in three simple words, 'very dangerous indeed.'

Sarantos didn't find that explanation very helpful, and only a little informative. He didn't like the sound of a world alive in only chaos and wondered how that could possibly work without some sort of balance. He'd hoped they wouldn't be there long, but he was ready to stay as long as necessary. He was willing to go the distance.

He looked around the room. He had everything he needed; grabbing his guitar, he eagerly headed to join the group that was certainly already gathered downstairs.

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The party was there and ready to go, all except for Aurora.

Derek patted him on the back and seemed happy that Deanna would be joining them on this journey, although, last night he'd expressed his concern to Sarantos about her safety. Derek knew she had a ward and thought Sandwort would keep her from harm, if he couldn't.



Sandwort stood next to her left and was quiet and reserved, as usual. His hair and beard were neatly cropped. He wore a lightweight chain mail that had inscriptions on it. It could only be made of magic. Sarantos saw no weapons on the shifty looking character, but that didn't mean he wasn't carrying several. Derek stood to Deanna's right side and looked proud.

Wallis, Mika and Adela were next to a small elderly woman who looked to belong to some religious order. She had several heavy crosses hung around her neck that draped to

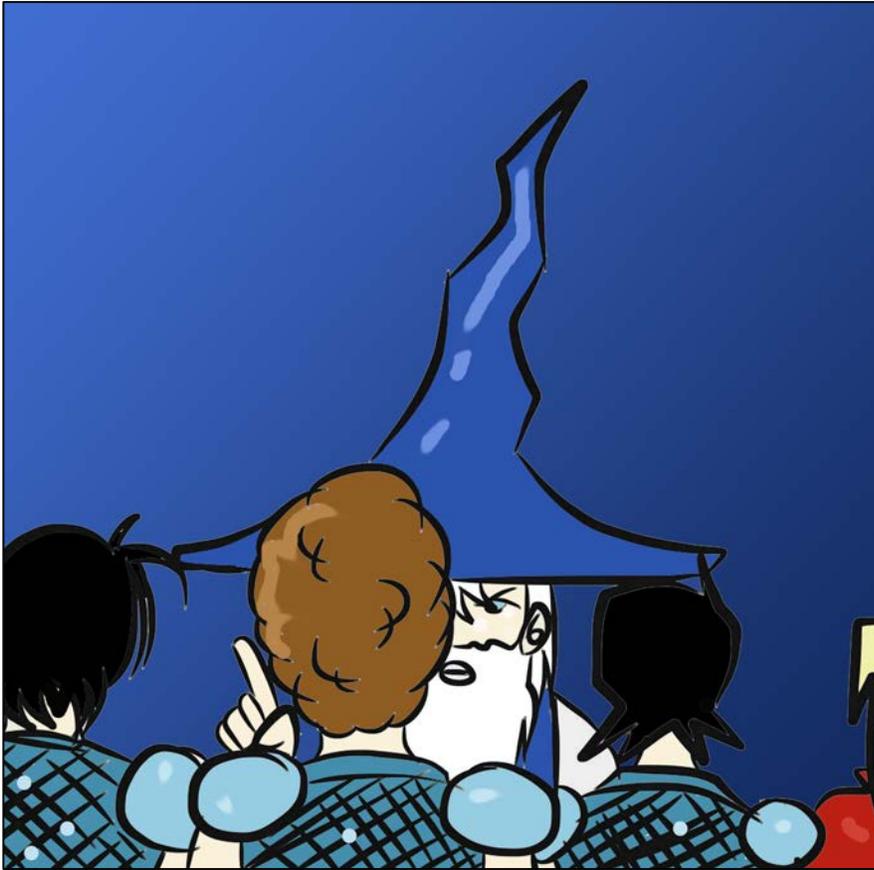
her waist on delicate looking chains. The flowing brown robes she wore had gold writings across the hems of the long sleeves as well as the bottom of her robe that touched the ground. Her feet were hidden. A thick belted rope tied her robes together and several pouches hung casually from it. He could tell the trio was in what appeared to be a heavy conversation, one without words nonetheless.

Blayke stepped forward and slapped him on the back, "Friend Sarantos how good of you to join us, hey Switch?"

"Aye, wonder what made him finally decide to attend our little party," he replied in a rather rough voice, causing all three of them to burst into a belly aching laughter.

"Alright... enough you rascals," Wallis said in a serious tone with a silly grin attached to his face. He looked to each of them and said, "This challenge falls upon us and we need to strengthen our resolve to succeed. We cannot fail Leigh. We cannot fail each other. We cannot fail ourselves. My friends, it's a long way down if we fall, but it's a longer way up to return to where we started."

Sarantos yawned; he felt great but was still recovering.



Wallis fastened another pouch on his belt and continued, “Stay close and avoid direct eye contact for long periods of time. This world’s name is Bedlam and for good reason. The Bedlamians will think you challenge them if you hold a connection to their eyes for any length of time. They will attack without warning or challenge you to a fight to prove their skill. There is one race that demands you look them in the eye until they have

disengaged the contact. They are arrogant and you will do well to show them they are worthy of your attention. You’ll know them by their scaly skin. Their color varies with their race, but they require your obedience.”

“Great, what if we screw up,” asked Sarantos?

“Don’t, as you say, screw up but if you do we’ll be there to help. If that happens we’ll need to attack quickly, finish them off and leave swiftly, displaying our power. Never linger even if you’re injured. It could mean your death. You all have a potion that will take you back to your homes if you become lost or severely injured and need to escape. Keep it with you at all times.”

He nodded to the small woman and she handed out to each of them a small gold vial.

Wallis spoke again, this time with some concern on his face, “This can be used to teleport you back here for immediate assistance. Drink it all. You might be able to return back to the party after you recover, but only from this exact location. If you return to your home, Blayke, Sarantos, or Derek, you will have to await our

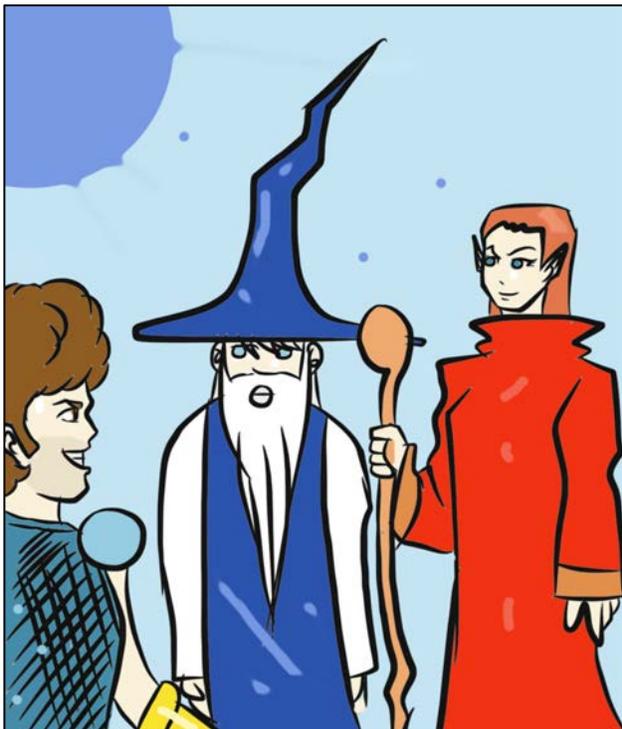
return.”

He took out a jug of ale and took a long draught before continuing, “Fights will break out all the time. Expect it. They have no actual laws – remember stay close because we are the only ones that can help each other. No one will stand up to defend you, but you will find many groups such as ours that travel together and fight jointly as a unit. It’s a better survival rate; however they will still fight amongst themselves, sometimes even to the death.”

Derek questioned the wizard. “If we can’t look directly at them for long, how will we come by information about the vampire?”

“Good question. You will have to be quick with your questions and dealings, otherwise look around and seem pre-occupied. This world has buyers in it. They buy and sell information. It’s a goblin race of unruly, yet very informative and chatty folk. They’re called Spotters, all of them are born with a bright red spot in the middle of their foreheads. Them you can look at. We can speak her name in that world freely and it helps that the locals know we’re not interested in them, but someone else. Our business is open and not questionable. Let Adela and myself do the talking. Any questions?”

“Yes, isn’t Aurora joining us,” asked Sarantos?



“I’m sorry, Sarantos, you weren’t here when she arrived. Meet Halo, the cleric from the lands of Isadora.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me? Can she actually stay in that form for long? If I forgot to mention, though, very cool,” said Sarantos slyly.

“Yes, indefinitely if needed, just another talent of her race. Only refer to her by the new name given and everyone should follow our lead. Look to us.”

“I will transport us to a secluded woodland outside of a town called

Lancaster. If things become bad at any point during our journey, I will transport the whole group somewhere else and instead of looking down the sword of an army of hobgoblins you'll find a creek with fresh running water and flowers growing along the edge of its banks. Compliments of me," smiled Halo.

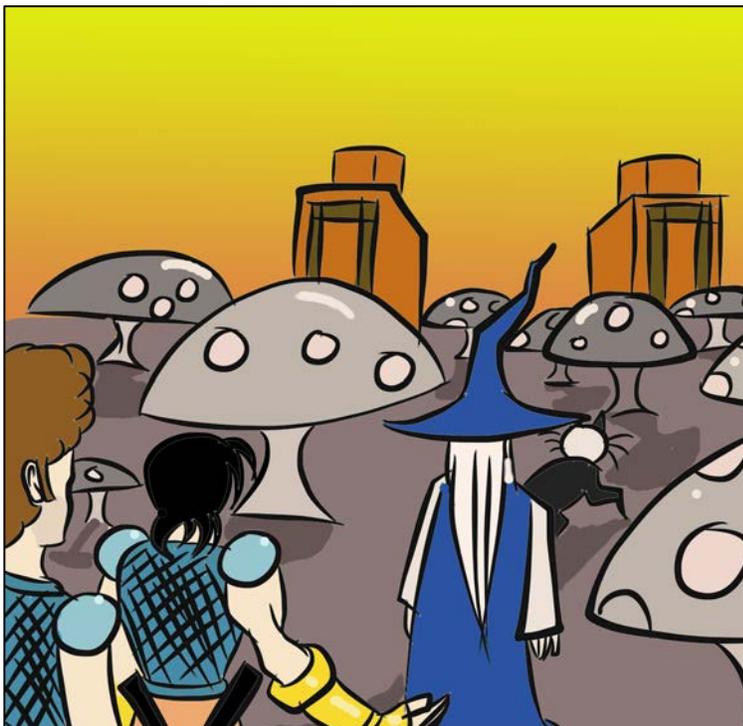
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Sarantos didn't even bat an eye and found his face staring at a dark set of trees with twisted branches and strange brown leaves. The smell of mushrooms made him smile. Well, Halo certainly knew how to travel properly - Star Trek Style.

"One thing I forgot to mention. There are many other races that travel here as well with loads of different reasons and interests, including just plain curiosity. Oh, and it's always dark and damp. Daylight is a lighter shade of dark grey really," Wallis said.

Mika, moved toward a path that broke off to the east and west. She headed west and Wallis fell in behind her with Adela and Halo following closely. Derek went next and then Deanna and her ward. Blayke motioned for Sarantos to go next and he stepped in behind him, with Switch watching the rear of their small group.

They walked for about three miles through the dark grey woods before a small opening revealed a lighter sky about ten feet in front of them.



They were fortunate, Sarantos thought because the only thing they encountered were mushrooms of every size, shape and color giving off the most wonderful pungent smells. A couple of large snaps of branches were heard, but exactly what caused the noises couldn't be deciphered.

As they came into the clearing, shades of brown, black and grey were genuinely dominating the scenery. The path continued off in the

direction of a small city. No buildings were more than two stories high and the place looked oppressive and ominous.

“The city of Lancaster and it’s just now early dawn,” Wallis murmured and followed Mika down the tangled path, until the big cat disappeared.

“Where’d she go?”

“She’s invisible, Sarantos. We can’t trust others to see her and recognize the great cat as my familiar. It would only cause problems. Some may actually try to kidnap her, but they would be in for a treat. We don’t have the time to play games with the locals,” he chuckled.

“Right,” he said shaking his head.

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They arrived in town just as the seemingly sleepy place was starting to awaken. Having already eaten, Wallis still led them into a local pub called, ‘Harpy’s Tongue.’

The inside was well maintained and boasted many rooms and an over-abundance of wooden tables. A tall man with a muscular physique immediately looked up. His beard was partially grey and well maintained, but his dark black hair hung to his shoulders and was wild upon his head. His eyes bored into them with a fierce blue.

No one else was in the place, but he fired some verbal attacks at them, “Well, look what we have here, a bunch of scum. We won’t be seeing the likes of your kind uglying up this prestigious establishment. I have just the place for strangers of your craggy sort. Follow me. It’ll be off to the back room for you all.”



He escorted them to a secluded corner of a back room by a blazing fire. Then he leaned over the table and whispered, “Wallis, bless my britches, what’re you doing here in this crazy world? Where’s ye big furry cat, Mika?”

“Invisible, we can’t have any trouble. It’s so good to see you Harry. I’d heard you’d taken up residence as a pub owner and worked to assist with keeping things tidy around here. I miss you old friend. “I’m looking for information about a woman named Villmah. She’s a sorceress-vampire. Harry, she has Leigh.”

He cringed and tried to keep his voice down, “Oh me poor princess. What good is that woman? She should’ve been born in the world of evil; even chaos wasn’t her cup of tea. She overextended her welcome here. Made a lot of enemies, she did, so many that she can never return. I hope you destroy the witch. Ah, hello my dear friend, Mika.”

“Do you know what part of Bedlam she came from, Harry?”

“No, but I know who does. I have two rooms upstairs in the back with a couple of good-sized exit windows if need be, but you’ll have to share them. It might take a few days or so to contact him and I can’t be sure how quickly he can actually arrive.”

“Thanks, it’ll have to do,” said Wallis.

Everyone else sat there quiet and looking bored while the two men whispered back and forth.

“Quit with the chit chat,” said Blayke after some scruffy looking characters came inside the pub. He stood up and put his hand on his sword and yelled, “Just bring us some of that thick and slimy stuff you call coffee and throw some ale in mine.” He slapped Sarantos on the back so hard his chin almost hit the table.

Sarantos played the game. “Keep your filthy grubs off of me, ya slime.” He turned to Harry, “I’ll have double shots in that dark thick liquid that’s more like mud water, that should make it tolerable,” he growled and slapped Blayke on the back just as hard.

“You can go elsewhere if you don’t care for my drink,” Harry replied in a huff and started to walk away.

“Just bring us our drinks and give us your last two rooms and be off with you, then,” the wizard said in a huff.

The five companions that just arrived watched the confrontation and when Harry left they found a table in the main hall by a large window and one shouted, “Bring us a round of ale and your finest morning grub.”

“Hold your horses, I’ll bring it when I’m good and ready,” Harry replied.

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The group drank their coffee and talked in low whispers while Wallis explained how he knew Harry and they were old friends since their youth. They grew up together and shared the same heritage. Harry had decided about five years ago to spend some time in Bedlam as an informant and go between the different worlds assisting in finding criminals and lost persons of interest. A lot of them like to escape to Bedlam; a place they can easily blend in at and possibly go unnoticed.

Harry came back with a woman who looked to be about fifty with a kind face and eyes that danced around the room. She brought food for all of them and had a talent for balancing without ever spilling a drop. She sat the dishes on the table and started to serve them to the group.

Suddenly, Wallis grabbed the woman and pulled her on his lap, “Come here wench,” he bellowed.

The place was full and some of the men started hooting and hollering. “Take the wench upstairs...take the wench upstairs.”

She tried to wiggle from Wallis’s hold and leaned in close enough to whisper something in his ear, as her tongue licked the ridge of his ear, he grabbed her and kissed her hard on the mouth.

She jumped up and Wallis said, “Share the goods, woman.”

She slapped him across the face and he went red.

Then Harry started calling her a tramp and told her to go mind the tables. Sarantos noticed everyone else at the table started eating the food that was put in front of them, like they were starving. He decided to join them. He lifted his ale and started to drink a swig when his arm got hit from behind and it went all over Blayke who jumped up and started cursing and challenging Sarantos to a duel.

The man that hit his arm was a sleazy looking man who was now trying to accost the woman who gave them their food.

He was with a group of four other sleazy looking men who watched the confrontation closely. Sarantos ignored Blayke in the hope that it would show he wasn’t worried about what he thought. Blayke kept pushing, until finally Sarantos said, “Back off big clonk and let me finish my meal.” He turned and pointed to the guy after the woman, “He did it.”



Well, that might not have been the smartest thing for him to do.

The sleazy man grabbed the woman and started pawing at her, which caused Wallis to jump up and hit the man over his head with his staff. Then he lifted the woman and threw her over his shoulders and took her right up the stairs to the jeering and cheering of everyone in the joint. She kicked and screamed all the way up calling him a few nasty names.

The man was lying on the floor unconscious and the other members of his group stood up growling and tried pulling out their weapons in a drunken stupor, as Harry hurried back to the front of his pub.

Blayke stood up and drew his weapon and hauled Sarantos to his feet, and then he slung his friend into the fray. It was on!