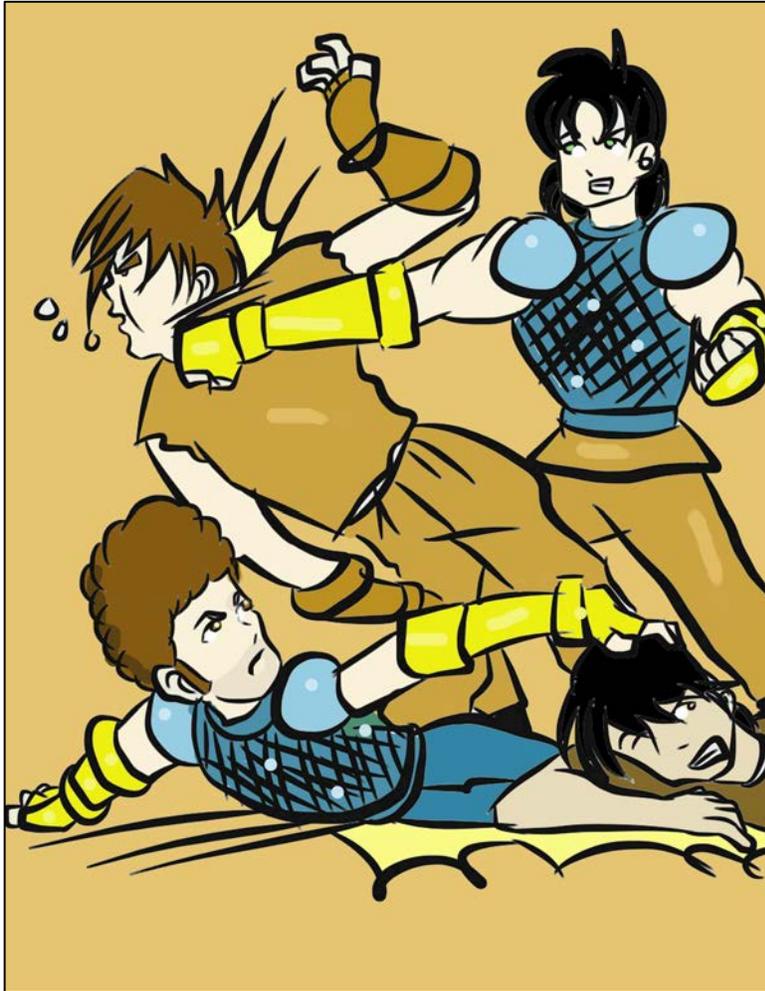


## Chapter 9 “A Country Song”



Sarantos slammed into one of the men knocking both of them off balance. He found himself doing a strange dance while trying to avoid the fall - he began to topple over the man he'd bumped into and who was already on the floor. In a last feeble attempt to prevent his body from confronting the wooden floor, he reached out his hand and tried to stabilize his footing by grabbing another one of the unruly men; instead he simply pulled him down with him.

The three of them were grappling around attempting to gain some sort of sense of dignity and foothold. Meanwhile, Blayke had already knocked out the

other two men and had placed them back in their chairs. He picked up the man that Sarantos had pulled over on his way down and plainly punched him, knocked him out and then sat him in his chair.

Blayke stood there staring at Sarantos.

*What was he doing? End this already!* His mind raced as he continued to do battle with the intoxicated man on the floor with him. He was a singer not a fighter!

“Blayke, finish him off,” he heard his voice scream out in frustration.

Blayke laughed and slugged the guy who had flirted with the woman that Wallis

took upstairs. He then also placed him in a chair. The men now looked like they'd fallen asleep awaiting their meal.

“What’s wrong Sarantos, you can’t handle one drunken scallywag?”

“Well, no - apparently not,” he said exasperated.

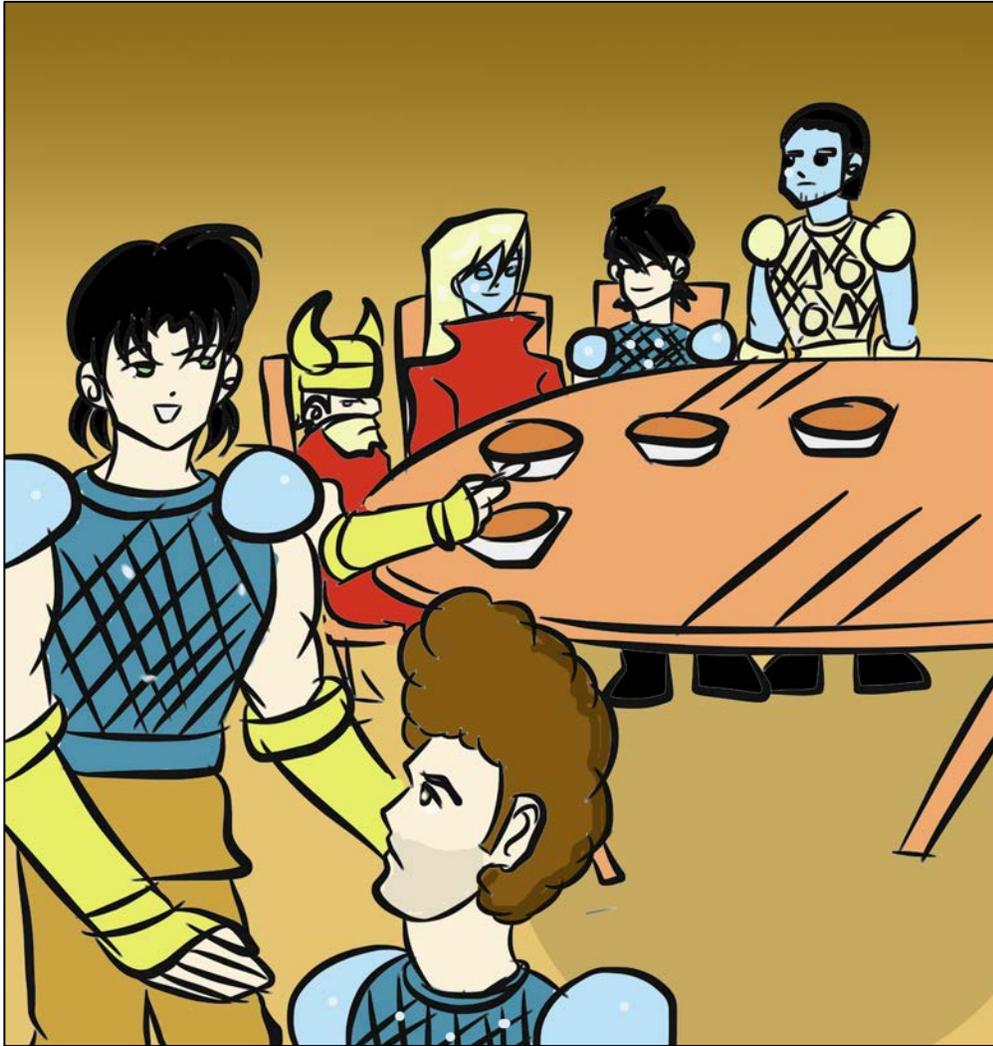
Switch stood up and looked over the situation. “You’re interrupting my meal. I really dislike it when that happens. Finish off the bloke, Sarantos.”

Blayke must have decided they were drawing too much attention, because he lifted the man onto his feet and knocked him out, placing him on the table as a centerpiece for the rest of his companions.

Sarantos managed a smile and looked at Blayke, “I kept those two occupied for you. No need to thank me.”

Blayke grinned as he helped him to his feet, “It was quick thinking on your part to jump into the fray. I couldn’t have handled it without you, Sarantos. I think we need a new nickname for you. What do you think, Switch?” The small man grumbled and Blayke smacked him on the back, “I think a name like Terminator. How does that sound?”

Good grief, Sarantos thought, but secretly he loved it. He enjoyed the movies. Of course, terminator was a classic. However, he really didn’t see himself as a terminator but he knew Blayke was just teasing him and he was okay with it. Blayke didn’t know anything about those movies anyway, as far as Sarantos knew.



Adela and Halo had already left the room. Switch sat back down and continued eating. Sandwort was alert - watching the area. Derek and Deanna were talking quietly and very engrossed in each other.

“Let’s go Terminator,” Blayne prodded Sarantos and they headed up the stairs

leaving the rest of the party at the table.

Sarantos knew Blayne had probably been assigned to him by Wallis as his bodyguard for the duration of this trip.

They headed up dark stairs and continued down a long and heavily shadowed hallway with doors to either side. After a few minutes they arrived at a window where the hallway ended but the heavy grayness of the world simply didn’t bring in much light. There were two doors, one to the left and one to the right of the window. Blayne picked the noisy one and tapped three times.

When the door opened Adela greeted them with a smile.

“Come in. This is where the women will be staying. The men’s room is across the

hallway.”

Inside the rather large room they found Wallis and Halo in a lively conversation with the woman that Wallis had carted up the stairs.

The wizard held up his hand, “Come and join us.”

Mika was in front of the fire and now quite noticeable.

There were two large beds to either side of the massive fireplace and a round table with six chairs scattered about it in front of the fire and to the right of the big cat. The executive suite, Sarantos mused.



“Meet Malena, the better half of Harry.” Wallis smiled at her and took her hand, “She grew up with Harry and me, and if she hadn’t fallen for that mad friend of mine...I really might have settled down.”

“Oh, right you would have,” she laughed. “Wally boy’ no woman had that type of power to make an honorable man out of you. You’re just not that type of man and I remember a lad too full of adventure and his studies to ever settle down.”

He laughed and looked at Adela, “Maybe, but I think someone might now be able to finally change that and make this old wizard quite content.”

Adela smiled at the wizard and winked. There it was now out in the open. They were such a great match and Sarantos really liked her. He wondered where they would live if they got together.

He silently moved over to Mika and sat on the floor next to the great big cat. She purred, as he rubbed her head. I miss you, my cute little friend. She purred louder and said inside his mind, "I think she would then live with us, which would be a wonderful change for all of us." Sarantos agreed wholeheartedly.

Malena stood up and headed to the door just as three taps were heard. She opened the door and the rest of their party entered.

"See you all later. Enjoy your stay, and if you need please anything let us know." She started to pull the door shut, but peeked her head back in the room, "Harry can't function without me for long, otherwise I would stay and chat." Her laugh was so joyful and harmless that everyone grinned, even Switch and Sandwort.

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The day had gone by quickly and uneventfully. They'd hung out in their rooms just enjoying each other's company and Sarantos had also found time to work on his lyrics for spells and even a special song for Leigh. Harry had brought up lunch and dinner at the request of Wallis, because he was concerned about having any further confrontations. Blayke and Halo had gone out for most of the afternoon but returned in time for dinner.

Blayke had been secretive and went to the men's guest room to chat with Wallis while everyone else had a warm dinner and ale in front of the fire in the ladies bedroom. Mika stretched and then wandered across the hall to join the two men.

Sarantos couldn't stop his thoughts from keeping him awake. The nights in Bedlam moved in quickly and the darkness seeped into the depths of his soul, as he looked around the pitch-black room allowing his eyes to slowly adjust to the shadows.

Wallis and Mika had left shortly after the blackness penetrated the town of Lancaster. The wizard never explained where he was off to, and no one asked. Wallis had magically sealed the door when he left to keep out intruders, but it didn't help Sarantos sleep any better. Every now and then he could hear some sort of skirmish going on downstairs and wondered how Harry took care of all those situations, although between the married couple they had a lot of incredible skills.

He wondered how Brad was doing and missed his good friend. His humorous way of dealing with ugly situations was appealing and in this world, needed very badly.

He also missed Brad's pizza.

In these quiet moments his thoughts of Leigh sometimes would overwhelm him, so much so, that he tried to not think of her at all. He felt guilty and lonely without her touch. He'd written 'A Country Song,' for her and him to maybe sing together. They'd enjoyed doing that in the past on occasion. That past now seemed more like years than months.



He could hear her laughter moving about the dark room. Her voice rang in his ears, "*Sarantos, I think of you. I feel you holding me.*"

What? "Leigh, I promise for a lifetime you can depend on me," he whispered back. Then he broke down and cried, holding his head in his hands. His voice was hushed and filled in secrecy, "What got me through the day was remembering our first kiss...I'm not myself when you're away...I'm not myself."

He faced the wall as tears streamed down his face; tears that had been held in for too long were now free to escape upon the pillow of his dreams, as he fell gradually into a deep slumber.

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Sarantos was awakened by a loud thumping sound. The room was chilly. It was dark and he felt groggy. Barely reacting to the sound, he turned slowly in his bed.

Wallis was standing in the middle of the room and a low illumination glowed from his staff reflecting his face. He lifted the staff and thumped it into the floor several times. His face had a faraway look and probably held back some intense thoughts behind his furrowed brow.

"What's going on Wallis?"

“What?” He glanced at Sarantos and then at his staff. “Oh, I’m sorry Sarantos. I was just contemplating and when a wizard contemplates you never know what to expect from his behavior. Our world becomes our own and the deepness of thought expands into many worlds leaving this one behind.”

“Don’t you ever sleep?”

“Oh, sleep? No, not much, I suppose. Hmm...I guess I have never thought about it before.”



Sarantos noticed Blayke was sitting quietly at the small table by a warm blazing fire with Mika in front of it, but the room still held a stale chill. Switch was leaning back in a chair intently cleaning his armor and weapons. Derek was still sleeping on his small bed with his back to them facing the wall on the far side of the room. Sandwort was nowhere to be seen. It didn’t appear his bed had been slept in, yet Sarantos saw him lie down when the wizard left.

The wizard hit his staff one more time and turned to Sarantos with a huge smile, “Sarantos, I miss Brad’s pizza. We shall have him make it when we return. I’ve told Adela all about it and she’s quite fascinated with the opportunity to partake in the pleasure of tasting it.”

“I miss it as well, Wallis.”

Blayke chuckled, “Count me in. I have to say his food was rather interesting and very tasty.”

Switch looked over at them and said, “I’ve never heard of this pizza before, but if

Wallis enjoys it, then count me in. I shall return with you and try it. All dwarfs love food, of any sort.”

Wallis stood staring at the fire and started talking to no one in particular, “I went with Mika to visit an ancient wizard last night by the name of Zoner. He lives with a young human apprentice called Lucas and two caregivers. One is a very distinguished lizard man with a name given him by Zoner, ‘Credence,’ the name shows him that Zoner gives him credibility and authority, the other one is a woman named Bezel, from a race I’ve never heard of before last night. She is very tall and muscular and her race has no body hair, but they’re highly intelligent and are considered seers. His home is in the darkest part of Bedlam. Mika and I teleported there to find ourselves staring at a large mountainside made entirely from obsidian and after what seemed like hours a portion of the rock disappeared leaving us an opening to enter. We did, and found ourselves inside a warm and homey surrounding with very attentive hosts. They brought food and drink and we chatted for hours, quite possibly days, because Bezel can hold time.” He paused and moved to a chair across from Blayke.

Derek had awakened and was on the edge of his bed listening attentively to the wizard.

Wallis tapped his staff on the floor again and continued, “The information I gathered from him was invaluable. Who he is and what he’s doing here was shared with me in secret. His business is his own. He knew nothing about Villmah, but he gave me valuable information on some rare herbs that only grow in the area he lives in and only in this world, as far as he knows. One was of the utmost importance and will hopefully aid our quest to help Leigh. This herb is known as ‘Bluesooth’ - a glorious star flower, the color of a rainy day, blooms out of the center of the plant. When these flowers are gathered and crushed into a powder, then placed in food or drink it has the power to disintegrate a vampire, like in the days when the sun could affect them, and now I have brought it here to honor Villmah; to free our world and all worlds from her venomous nature, to restore some sort of balance.”

Sarantos jumped in when Wallis paused, “Who informed you about the wizard? Can he be trusted? Can this herb be trusted?”

“Harry knew of him, but he never ventured there, not many would; Zoner would make sure of that, my friend. But, to answer your question, he is without any doubt trustworthy and quite knowledgeable beyond even me.”

“Good, we can leave then and rescue Leigh,” he almost sang the words and the joy in his voice was undeniable.

He jumped out of bed at the same time as Derek; both men started pulling on their clothes before Wallis could say another word.

“That’s great news, then. Let’s clear out of here,” chimed in Blayke.

Wallis grimaced, “No, we’ll wait a few more da...”

“No? What are you saying, Wizard? You didn’t let me save her before and now we have the means to destroy her captor and you say wait. Well, you can wait if you want. I’m going home. Every day counts – her life counts! Her life matters to me!” There was anger in his voice and most men would not have challenged Wallis with such a fierce emotional display, if they valued their life. But, Wallis was not most men.

“Relax, Sarantos. You may go back on your own if you chose, but the herb will not be going with you until I return. Mika checked on her last night while I gathered the deadly flowers. It seems the vampires knew we left and have been busy causing havoc throughout our homeland. Their attention is now elsewhere, in the pursuit of gathering more minions and destroying the land and although, this is a concern of ours, we must wait. To move too quickly could cost us. You have to trust my judgment.”



Hearing the news about Leigh made Sarantos go weak in the knees and he collapsed on the edge of the bed. He sat there staring at Wallis while tears welled up in his eyes in frustration, relief, concern and most of all love.

“If our contact doesn’t arrive within these next two days; we’ll leave. I still feel we’re missing something important about Villmah. The more information we have on her the better our chances of success. I’d rather go to battle prepared than to be too hasty and lose

Leigh, altogether. If we don’t bring her back this time, the she-demon will destroy the woman you love forever and that will be the end of it.”

His shoulders drooped and he quietly said, “I understand. Of course, you are right, Wallis. I’m sorry. I let my emotions get the better of me sometimes.”

The wizard walked over to him and placed his hands on his slumped shoulders. “No worries, my dear friend. Leigh is tough and resilient. Her love for you is strong. If you feel the need to return, certainly you may leave here today.”

“I’ll stay, thanks. Wallis I appreciate your patience with me, but sometimes I feel it’s getting too much. A heaviness comes and goes inside my heart. I contain it for the most part, but then, especially at night, the darkness creeps into my soul and drains what little hope I have, until I finally fall into a fitful, uneasy sleep.”

“I know Sarantos...I know. I’m sorry, but hope is all we had to count on until now.”

The wizard turned and walked to the door and opened it to Harry.

The two of them passed messages at will, so they really had no need to speak and Harry had no reason to knock. Sometimes Sarantos thought they spoke for the benefit of others, or out of habit.

“So, tell me Wallis, did you meet the great ancient one in the obsidian mountain?”

“Yes, and his mysticism engulfed this old wizard like I was a small weed in a world of flowering ‘Moongazer Teardrops’ on the hillsides of Maluna.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open and his eyes glazed over. “Ah, my friend he must have been grand indeed.”

“What type of flower is that,” asked Derek?

Wallis smiled and his eyes took on a faraway look before he spoke, “Back in our home world there was a hillside called Maluna and across the whole of it bloomed the most magnificent flowers all year long. No matter the weather or conditions, they bloomed profusely. Their beauty was beyond speech and they held a mystical power of their own as the flowers bloomed in iridescent blues with hints of purples moving through them like the blood of life. When their buds hung from the bluish leaves they appeared to be large white teardrops with sparkles that glittered along the hillside, the blue flowers appeared when they bloomed. Magnificent, indeed.”

Harry spoke, “Well, on another matter; I received a message this morning that my contact will arrive in the small town of Vantage, about a six hour walk from here. If you want to meet him there, he’ll be there by morning, unless you wait here and then he will come to see you at my establishment.”



“Can’t we teleport over,” asked Sarantos?

“Teleporting takes a lot of energy and magic, Sarantos. We don’t like to use it except in emergencies, or for necessary travel. Mika has the ability to go at will, because she’s a magical creature, however I’d never risk her in this land. The harm to her kind could be too great.”

“Sure, I get it. So what do you want us to do?”

“Let me go speak with Halo and Adela. Together we’ll decide the best course of action.”

He left the room. Sarantos was getting stir crazy, but the news about Leigh was awesome. *“Thanks, Mika.”*

*“You’re welcome. She looked better than I’d imagined. She was sleeping, so I didn’t disturb her rest.”*

It appeared that Blayke had read Sarantos’s mind. He stood up, “Well, I’m going crazy waiting. I need some fresh air.”

“Aye, me as well,” said Switch. He pulled on his beard and headed to the door. “That old wizard can’t keep this dwarf closed in for long. I need some ale.”

Derek laughed, “I think it might be a little too early for ale, Switch.”

“It’s never too early lad...never too early for me at least.”

“Come on Sarantos and Derek, it’ll do us all some good,” said Blayke.

The two of them finished getting dressed and followed the dwarf and Blayke down

the stairs and out into the streets of Bedlam.

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It was cool outside, but the wind felt good as it brushed Sarantos across his face. The soothing touch was invigorating, yet, there was something a little sinister about it – a warning perhaps?

The town was busy with ornery looking characters as they proceeded down a small winding road that led out of the chaotic atmosphere and into a heavily wooded area. About twenty feet down the path, tiny black flowers with white outlines on each petal bloomed to either side of the path and added a very interesting display against the back drop of bluish grey ferns. Bedlam did offer an amazing variety of interesting people and plants.



After a short time the woods emptied into an area Sarantos could only refer to as ‘Country living.’ There were farms and gardens as far as the eye could see. Strange crops grew along hillsides while many familiar vegetables were seen in various beds along the hills and roadside. This was definitely the country. You could smell the cows and pigs. A

donkey brayed somewhere off in the distance to no one in particular. Sarantos always thought that sound was haunting and had a painful feel to it. He wondered if Bedlam had strange animals around, as well.

Derek was walking next to him with Switch chatting openly to Blayke behind them.

Switch suddenly stopped talking mid sentence. Derek turned around and looked at him. Sarantos watched the smile slowly disappear from Derek's face.

"Hush...what's that sound?" The dwarf's voice was barely a whisper.

Sarantos listened and didn't hear anything except for an occasional moo from the local cows.

They all came to a halt and tilted their heads in different directions to listen more intently for anything unusual. There were clucks off to the left from a group of chickens. After the three of them listened and heard nothing out of the ordinary, they looked at the dwarf.

Switch held up his hand in a gesture of silence while his head continued to tilt and move. He got down on the ground and listened to the earth. His expression quickly grew into one of dismay. Before he could speak, a group of birds flew up out of the woods behind them squawking and screaming in apparent fear. They obviously heard what their friend did. Sarantos eagerly looked in that direction but still couldn't hear any unusual sounds. Blayke didn't wait for the dwarf to tell him something was there; he drew his swords and took a defensive stance, but Sarantos and Derek didn't have the time or reflexes to respond.



The dwarf jumped up and turned his head searching for something. "There - over there." He pointed toward a hilltop, his voice was urgent as he yelled, "The barn over there. RUN!"

Sarantos still didn't see or hear anything, but he didn't have to be told twice. Derek was already moving and he took off running behind him. Derek was faster than him and was quickly approaching the barn. He looked over his shoulder and saw the dwarf and Blayke lagging behind, never overtaking their companions.

He didn't see anything chasing them.

Then he heard it. A screeching sound rose up and seemed to ride along the wind threatening to pierce his eardrums. He wanted to cover his ears with his hands. It was an unnerving and horrendous blast like 60 people all running their fingernails down a chalkboard at the same time. He kept running.

Derek had already reached the barn and was trying to open the large barn door. He appeared to be struggling with it for a few seconds and then he managed to slide it open, pulled out his daggers and went inside. All Sarantos could see was the black inside, as Derek disappeared into it. The light in this land didn't penetrate deep enough to expose the interior.

He arrived at the barn and was about to turn around to see what was following them, but Derek started backing out of the doorway. There was a young man with scraggly brown curls that hung to his shoulders. He had a kind face that contradicted the crossbow aimed at Derek's chest, as he continued to back him out of the barn. The curly-headed lad glanced at Sarantos, as if to say, 'move and he's dead.'

Blayke was suddenly there and moved in front of Sarantos. The dwarf moved to Derek's side.

"It'd be best if you let us go inside there lad. We out number you and if you kill our comrade you will then die quickly by our hand. You're too young for that. Now move aside."

The boy looked over at the dwarf and said, "You bring the bane of the Orgredog with you, they'll kill my cattle."

Blayke stepped forward and raised his weapons, "Then stand aside and let us in so together we can discuss a way to eliminate these Ogres."

The boy looked out over the land in the direction of the sound. Sarantos could hear the thunder of their hoofs and didn't want to turn around to see what they looked like, until they were all safe inside the building.

"My name is Seymour, quickly come inside."

They all went in and Blayke helped the boy shut the barn door and slid a bolt over

it to keep out the horde.



The fearsome sounding creatures hit the doors just as soon as the bolt was in place. They stood there in the dark, until the boy went around and lit torches. Sarantos could barely see into the corners of dark places – places, where you never knew what was hidden. He heard a giggle and turned. Out of the hay came a very young girl, about seven. She had blonde curls and a kind face like her brother's.

“Marty Ellen, I told you to stay hidden.”

“The man with that thing is funny,” she said and pointed at Sarantos and his guitar.

He smiled at the little girl.

Blayke said, “Are you two alone, with no adults?”

“We are all the adults we need. My parents were killed and we’ve managed this land for nearly two years on our own. My sister is a great shot and can cast small spells, as well. You aren’t from around here, are you?”

“No, but your sister should climb up into the rafters and do her battle from up there. I don’t know how long the doors will hold against our foes on the other side.” Blayke pointed to the ladder, “Now get up there little one.”

She giggled and grabbed a short bow and hurried up the ladder. Blayke pulled the ladder down and put it against the wall. “Sarantos behind me; Derek your bow. Seymour where would you be comfortable fighting from?”

He never had time to answer, the constant pounding on the wood finally gave in and the horde had an opening big enough for them to come in two at a time.

“What the heck are they?” Sarantos screamed as the first one came in.

A crossbow bolt whistled through the air.