

## ***Chapter 2*** ***“Nothing to Hide”***

Sarantos always had trouble sleeping and tonight was no different. Something felt like it nudged him and had awakened him from a deep sleep. He stared into the darkness. It was 3am.

It had been three months since he had felt that incredible enlightenment from the dream he had on his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. That was the moment his world had changed. He'd changed.

However, something still felt out of place and the more he thought on it the further away it danced. Sometimes in the quiet of the night he would try to figure it out, until it lingered on the edge of his mind teetering back and forth. He, eventually, had to let it go or he would drive himself mad. Sarantos felt sure this lingering thought had once again disturbed his peaceful dreams.

His inner spirit had finally awakened during that dream and pushed him into embracing that strong, artistic personality that had laid dormant within his heart for far too long. Two months ago he had approached his childhood friend, Brad and explained what he'd intended to accomplish over the next year. His vision had become a creative sanctuary and Brad was totally on board. His friend was open minded and an accomplished musician, playing a mean bass guitar and loving every minute of it. He could go to the zone where complete expression became one with man and instrument. They were like brothers and had shared many other interests over the years. It was great to be moving in the direction of where he wanted to be and sharing it with his best friend was an added bonus. Now, he felt more alive than ever before!

These past several months had been awesome. Sarantos and Brad had managed to set up a website, put lyrics to music, and hire a manager. Today, they were going to interview different talents to put together a band. Brad would be over around seven that morning. It was a big day and Sarantos couldn't wait.

He smiled and allowed his thoughts to roam and before he knew it he was sitting up writing down a new song.

A hint of light was peeking through the curtains by the time his pencil stopped moving. He looked at the clock. It was already 6:30. Their first interview was at 8am. He'd better get moving.

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For Sarantos, standing under a shower resembled a magnificent work of art that renewed his spirit. The water tapping his skin like a soft gentle rain was simultaneously refreshing and invigorating. He felt that using his senses opened a meaningful interpretation to capture the painting of each new day. This was his way to bring life into his morning. Sarantos closed his eyes and allowed the water to rinse all the soap from his hair and body.

Today something was different. His personal space came with uninvited sounds and feelings. A strange warmth overtook the coolness of the water and was followed by a tinkling noise, like the sound of a chime. He opened his eyes.

He almost went into shock. His body flailed about as he desperately tried to keep his footing, while he backed himself against the tiled wall. His voice was weak, "Wha...at are you?" The moment he asked that question, he knew there was no way he'd get an answer, but he had blurted the words out of his mouth anyway. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, but it didn't go away.

A black cat was standing half in his tub while the back half was still moving forward out of a purple mist. The size of the cat and long hair resembled an Old English Sheepdog, but its head was clearly a cat. If Sarantos hadn't been so frightened, he might have laughed at the expression on the cat's face. It appeared annoyed.

The cat looked directly into his eyes and spoke with a soft feminine voice, "Please, remove that strange look from your face. It's bad enough that I ended up seeing you without any clothes on. Humans are quite gross and disgusting to look at. You could do with some fur, which would definitely help. I don't know why I always end up in a shower facing a naked human? That's magic for you!" The cat shook

water from one paw and said with a hint of sarcasm, “I really dislike getting my fur wet. Do you think you could show some consideration and turn off the water?”

Sarantos stared at the strange cat. It was hard enough to imagine this creature in his shower, much less to get his head around the fact that it spoke. He felt rather queasy, but thought it best if he now turned off the water. This beast could attack him and he wasn’t taking any chances.

The cat effortlessly leapt out of the tub and shook the water from its fur.

“This isn’t real,” Sarantos said as a statement, as if the words would somehow confirm his own sanity. He grabbed a towel off the rack and followed the cat out of the tub without going near the purple mist.

This couldn’t be happening, “Brad, are you there? I don’t know how you’re doing this, but it’s amazing. Please show yourself! The joke’s over.” He was starting to laugh giddily. Great, this is how I’m going to die, mauled by a figment of my own imagination.

The cat was calmly licking its fur and appeared to be slightly agitated, “Why do humans have such a limited capacity of acceptance. Most feline species communicate quite clearly, if you’d learn to listen. We’re quite civil.”

Sarantos could barely speak. He watched as the cat flicked her tail around exposing many protruding silver blades that seemed to move in and out like claws. He managed to stutter a few more words, “Wh...at, and who are you?” He paused and continued, “What are you doing in my house?” He slowly backed out of the bathroom and into his bedroom.

The big cat followed, “I’m what people in my world call a Merlinian cat, made by magic. We’re nonexistent in your world and rare in mine. My name is Mika and you summoned me.”

“I didn’t summon you,” he stated flatly. Then, for some reason that he couldn’t figure out, Sarantos started chanting over and over again, “This is just a dream, this is just a dream...”

The big cat broke up his chanting, “Oh, yes you did summon me. Several months ago, by your standards of time, you sent me a message when you were in a dream

state. It doesn't really matter, a day dream or night dream, you called me and here I am.”

“I've never requested a visit from a giant black cat, and if I did what took you so long?”

“Oh, brother. You did call me, and I quote, ‘*Whoever's listening, please let it be my dream, because that is where I wanna be.*’ I was listening and I'm here to make your dream come true. Okay, I might be a little late, but it took me a while to shuffle through all those other dreams you humans dream and find the right one. You can't possibly appreciate what I went through to find you and how many naked humans I had to encounter. My eyes hurt from the exposure.” Mika shook her head as if dispelling the memories of a nightmare.

“Well, it doesn't matter what took you so long, because I figured it out and I'm making my own dreams come true,” Sarantos said with pride.

“Don't think so,” the cat purred. “You're missing something and that's what helped me find you - your thought is hanging on the ledge. The one that you can't seem to find. So, we don't have much time. Grab what you want or need and throw it in the portal and we'll be off.”

The kitchen door opened and a man's voice said, “Buddy, what're you doing? Ready to create our band?”

It was Brad.

“Brad, quick in my room,” Sarantos yelled succinctly.



Brad walked into the room with his guitar case hanging off his shoulder. He was tall with shaggy blonde hair and deep blue eyes, his smile was full of big white teeth, as he grinned at Sarantos standing there in just a towel. “Hey, get dressed or is this our new gig dude? Something Egyptian?” Brad started laughing, but came to a complete stop when he turned and faced the

cat. His mouth fell open and his eyes bulged while his hand raised into the air with a jerky motion. He stared like a zombie and pointed at Mika.

“You see it,” asked Sarantos?

“Of course, I see it. What is it?”

The cat yawned, “If you must know, I’m a Merlinian, from the world of Yarrowtopia.”

Brad’s face went white and he looked ill. Sarantos helped his friend to a chair, “Are you all right?”

“It talks,” were the only words that Brad could muster out of his mouth, as his head shook in disbelief.

“I know,” said Sarantos nervously.

“Yes, of course I talk. You’d be used to us by now if we were able to travel here once in a while. We might have enjoyed visiting your world, but you humans are close-minded and we risk harming you. After all, you chased away all the unicorns. When you made their horns marketable, they returned to their own world. Now, you choose to believe they belong to fable. I suppose that helps your conscience. The list is too huge to go into right now. We don’t have that kind of time.”

“Sorry,” said Sarantos. What else could he say about mankind’s ego and lack of tolerance?

“Well, gather your belongings and we’ll be on our way. We’re working within a small window of time.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve already explained. You summoned me and once I’m called, I am bound. I have to complete the request. I can’t live in your world. I’d be hunted and killed for my fur and tail. We’re tethered. You have no choice in the matter either. I’m here to help you find what it is you’re missing. If you don’t come with me, I’ll cease to exist. Do you want that on your conscience?”

Great, just what he needed - a guilt trip. "How long will I be gone?"

"That depends on too many variables. Grab what you want and throw it in the portal. Wallis awaits us. We'll be living in his home."

"Who is Wallis? What if I don't want to live there?"

"Wallis is a great wizard and he created me. He's quite old and very knowledgeable. I think he might come in handy. He's ready to take you on as an apprentice. Please hurry. I'm getting quite hungry."

He could still be dreaming, but Brad was in it, as well. He tested the portal and threw his alarm clock into the purple mist. Gone. He grabbed the box of leftover pizza and tossed it in. Gone.

"Cool. I suppose it might be interesting meeting Wallis?" he said, as he started packing a suitcase full of clothes and personal belongings.

Brad watched him from his chair and when he spoke his voice was loud and determined, "I'm coming with you. You're not doing this alone." He grabbed the keyboard and amps and threw them in before Sarantos could stop him. "I came over today to start the band and that's what we're going to do."

"You sure, Brad? I'm not sure when I'll be back."

"Are you kidding? This is an adventure of a lifetime. Besides I've never met a wizard before!"

Sarantos patted his friend on the back and they began throwing everything they could think of into the portal. Books, notebooks, music sheets, microphones, boots, sandals, clothes, a case of harmonics, a bag of seeds, toothpaste, and then Brad went into the kitchen and came back with bags of food - all went into the portal.

"We might need nourishment," he grinned, as he heaved a box full of cookies, chips and canned goods into the other world.

The friends wore the same size shoes and clothes, so nothing was left behind. When they were ready, both friends picked up their guitars with the amps and stood at the edge of the mysterious portal. Families had been hastily contacted to

care for things, and were told they would be traveling the world for a few months. Sarantos hoped he'd be back before then.

"Is that it," asked Mika?

Sarantos looked at his shower, "Do they have showers?"

"No," said Mika.

"Then, I'm not done." He handed Brad his guitar and amp and went to the garage.

He came back a few minutes later with a new showerhead he had purchased, but never installed, along with some plumbing pipes with connectors. Brad looked at him in a quizzical manner while wondering why in the world a shower was so important when they were going off to some magical place.



"I love my showers," Sarantos shrugged sheepishly.

Both friends laughed and jumped into the purple glowing mist. Mika looked around the room. Her green eyes had a human appeal, until the color changed and moved like the heavy ocean tides. She turned and followed close behind.

The room now seemed bare and void of life, as the mist grew in size and exploded into a tiny star, before vanishing.

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Sarantos still possessed a nagging sleeping disorder. Two years on Yarrowtopia hadn't corrected it. His eyes were shut, but he was wide awake. Mika knew it.

"She's still not back. You should have let me follow her."

The house was quiet, but he knew Wallis was also awake. It seemed he never needed sleep. Sarantos learned a lot from the old wizard, in fact, Wallis had been so interested in their instruments that he worked with Sarantos until they were able to instill a magic substance that allowed the amps to work properly and better than

ever before. The wizard even played lead guitar in their band and was quite good at it. Brad had been happy to teach him, although he thought the old magician used some magic here and there. He smiled. They finally had their band.

Mika snuggled next to him, as Sarantos opened his eyes he ran his fingers through her soft fur. He looked warmly into her eyes. When she was thinking about something, her eyes grew into large green orbs with orange circles around the outside edge and he loved looking at them. He still stayed away from her tail, but her blades were, for the most part, kept retracted. Her tail was dangerous, but sometimes it would come in handy. This world had many strange and evil entities. Mika was a great ally. Her tail could slit a throat or sever all fingers from a hand in one vicious swipe.

He loved this cat, “Mika, I’m not that obsessed with where you go off to that I would risk your life. No telling what you’re into really.”

The big cat purred, “I can take care of myself.”

He had met Leigh about a month after they arrived in this bizarre world. She’d stopped by to visit Wallis one day. They were all sitting outside, but Sarantos never got a good look at her, because Wallis quickly walked her down a small path to his private quarters. They were in there for quite a while. The wizard came out with his arm around her and it was then he brought her over to where he and Brad were sitting. Her long dark blond brown hair and bronze skin tone was utterly breathtaking, but when she was introduced to Sarantos, her smile tugged at his heart strings and her dark raven eyes captivated him. He was in love.

They quickly became intimate and she moved in with him and Brad. They had a great time together and because of her and Mika, he didn’t work too hard at returning to his world. But, this past year she’d changed and was out all night most of the time. When she attended their concerts, she’d often leave early. Once in a while she would join the party afterwards, but she was always preoccupied. He didn’t know where she went and recently they were no longer intimate. That hurt him. He wanted to believe in her, but he couldn’t control the situation. He loved her so much. His soul felt lost inside her eyes, somewhere, and he had trouble retrieving it. She had a power over him and he wondered if the wizard had anything to do with it. Sarantos knew more about magic than when he first got here, but still had a lot to learn.

“I know you can take care of yourself, Mika, but I can’t lose both of you. Surely, you must know something about where she goes and what’s happened to her. She accuses me of something. I see it in her eyes, but I’m who I am and have nothing to hide. What’s she afraid of?”

“It is not for me to say. I would follow her if you asked, that is all I can do.”

His little alarm clock was still going strong. It was 4am. He got out of bed and went to take a shower. The water wasn’t totally clean and was piped in from a lake behind the house, but it worked well enough. The wizard wondered why he didn’t just jump in the lake. Sarantos had tried to explain it to him in a way he would understand. *It was a magical ritual for him to start the day, an action to create the magic of each day.*

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He allowed the water to take him away. He thought of Wallis. Sarantos grinned whenever he thought about their first meeting.

They’d arrived on top of all their belongings and stood inside a large room with a massive stone fireplace that had an unearthly caldron hanging from it. A strange table was in the middle of the room and many unusual chairs were scattered about. The home was a simple log cabin and the floor was made of large and rough wood planks. There were several large cabinets against one wall with skins, potions, bottles of herbs, and along with them a lot of unfamiliar tools were placed on the shelves. The items appeared to be in some sort of order and most were labeled. Sitting on a large chair next to the fire was Wallis. He had intelligent and mysterious eyes that danced with humor. His clothes were robes of many different layers with drab shades of purple. He had a silver beard that was as long as his hair and both hung down to a golden belt that resembled a cord that tied around his waist. Pouches were attached to the belt. He wore an amulet that had an amethyst in the middle with small garnets that circled it. But the greatest thing was the mischievous look on his face, as he sat there eating their cold pizza.

His voice was deep and strong. “*Great stuff. I only get it once in a while, if I sneak into other worlds,*” he innocently smiled.

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When Sarantos had finished showering he went back into his room. It was still dark, but he could make out the outline of Leigh sitting on the bed taking off her boots. Her head was down and her hair was a mess. It was no longer in the long braid she wore earlier.

He didn't know why he bothered, but he asked, "Are you okay?"

"I suppose."

That's all he ever got from her nowadays: later, maybe, another time, but never a yes or no. What kind of life was he living now? He truly needed to re-evaluate his situation.

She stood up, removed all her clothing and walked across the floor heading to the shower. She loved his shower. That was the only thing that didn't change. He thought he could make out mud and possibly blood all over her body.

Mika was nowhere in sight. Sarantos walked over and picked up Leigh's boots, they were muddy. Her jacket had nothing in the pockets, and he found that rather odd. How could he have been so wrong about her? Their relationship left him in a constant state of confusion. He had always been disillusioned by her beauty but now he wasn't sure if he found her at all attractive. Why was he even bothering with her boots? What did he care? The problem was, though, that he did.

The shadows on the walls held many secrets. He knew because that's what he himself talked to when he spoke of her. She was stagnant stale air, dead to him.

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He heard the shower turn off when he was in the next room getting something to eat. They had a type of coffee here, and it wasn't bad. Brad's stock of Starbucks ran out a long time ago. Wallis always had coffee in the fireplace, patiently sitting over the burning embers to keep it warm. He grabbed a cup and went to get some eggs from the chickens. When he returned, Brad was sitting there drinking a cup of coffee and smiling. He was always in a good mood.

"Good morning. Tonight's our first gig at The Secret Door. I heard a lot of weirdos hang around there. Muriele was nervous about performing there, but she'll do it anyway. She said to bring lots of protection. I'm not really sure what she meant by that."

Muriele was another friend of Wallis. She'd known him for more than a hundred years. She was of elf kind. A very beautiful elf with bright turquoise eyes and white hair that sparkled like the stars when she was in the dark. Mika's fur was the same way. Their twinkling motions were mesmerizing. Muriele was an illusionist and very talented at it. She could make herself appear in many different forms, and Brad found that enchanting. Muriele was all too happy to learn the keyboard and was a proud member of their band. Brad had a crush on her and decided he'd have to stay here forever, because he '*wanted to marry that beautiful, clever elf.*' She teased him quite frequently.

Wallis knew Muriele for a long time because he belonged to another long-lived race of magicians called The Sixties. They were bold, adventurous, and temperamental, and not quite human. They looked human enough, but didn't have the same genetic makeup. They pretty much fought along the side of any cause that seemed just in their view. There was a birthmark on his arm that all of his race were born with. He had said it was symbolic of peace. When Sarantos had heard this and noticed the symbol was very common where he lived, he secretly wondered if they had visited his world in the sixties and started a lot of the peace movements. He never asked though.

"When will Blayke be here," asked Sarantos.

Brad looked up from playing with his coffee cup and said, "He's meeting us tonight, at the pub."

Sarantos nodded. That was typical of Blayke. He was a human warrior in this world and could wield two swords at a time, so long as they were close to the same weight. So it's no wonder when they put together a drum set he picked up on it right away. They had met him through Muriele and found him very talented and quite trustworthy. He designed his drum set with gems inlaid onto the foot pedal. His sticks were a shiny silver and unique. Rubies and diamonds were set along the edge of the sticks. His clothes were studded with gems of all sorts, although his pants and shirt were a simple soft brown leather. He had dark wavy hair and bright green eyes that drew women to him like a magnet. Blayke always checked out the place before they arrived to perform their gigs.

Sarantos stood up and was heading back into his room. "Catch you later," he said.

"Sure, is Leigh back?"

“Yes,” Sarantos said without emotion. Brad knew the situation.

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She was lying there awake.

“We’ve got a gig tonight at The Secret Door. Are you coming to watch the show? You don’t seem to enjoy my music anymore. I thought you understood how important it is to me.”

He watched her back rise up before she turned over to look at him, “You can’t go there tonight.”

“What? Why would you say that?”

She never answered and turned away from him, but not before he saw how pale she’d become. He felt angry at her for not sharing her thoughts with him, and for not loving him enough to trust him. She was secretive and elusive. She dressed to fit into the background where no one would notice her hiding in the corners. That wasn’t how she used to be. He wanted to shake her, but instead he decided to take it like a man and show no emotions and run and hide away his sensitive side, before it crushed his entire spirit.

So he just said, “Well, I’m going and there’s nothing you can do to stop me. I’m tired of you looking at me like you’re accusing me of something. I told you before I have nothing to hide, I’m just me. I think this relationship is now a mistake.”

Her back flinched and when she turned over her eyes flashed. She had a tattoo on her stomach, a strange symbol that he’d never seen before he’d met her, it seemed to glow to match her eyes. In this world he wasn’t sure if she was even human.



Her face changed like a chameleon and she smiled that smile he loved, “Okay, I’ll go tonight, but I need some sleep.”

He suddenly felt more afraid of her smile than her flashing eyes. Her skin looked drained of blood and

her dark mysterious blond-brown hair made it look even paler. He just nodded his head and left her to sleep.

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The pub was easy to find. The wooden structure sat alone on top of a dark wooded hill. Vines were growing up the sides of the building and yet, you could sense an intelligence about them. Stone statues of Gargoyles guarded the entrance, with evil expressions. They'd actually seen some real ones in the area over the past two years.

Sarantos had become accustomed to riding on horses, and they had designed a cart to pull their equipment behind them, except their horses were spooked and wanted nothing to do with this place. He had to gently coax them toward the door so they could unload their heavy equipment.

Brad looked at him and shivered, "This place gives me the creeps."

"I hear you brother."

The building was old and the windows were heavy with lead holding glass in a very intricate pattern. The bouncers looked like Ogres from old pictures he remembered. He suddenly thought about the unicorns.

The bouncers stood between a double wooden door with brass knobs. Each door had two leather straps running across the width and were attached by small brass nails. This was unusual. Most places they played at were meek looking, like a typical pub located in England. Maybe, Leigh was right. He didn't know what he was doing here. Something seemed off.

One of the bouncers came over and helped them unload and carry their equipment safely inside.

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The inside was worse. It was cold, dark and damp. Candlelight was dim and the stage was set against a far wall that had a very depressing feel to it. Pictures of lewd men and women with fangs were biting the necks of their victims while blood dripped down their mouths and fell onto the chest of the poor souls. Brad ran into

Sarantos and almost knocked him over, while he was looking at one large painting that had three vampires enjoying a feast of flesh.

His voice was shaky, “Sarantos, their eyes are following me. Seriously, they’re moving.”

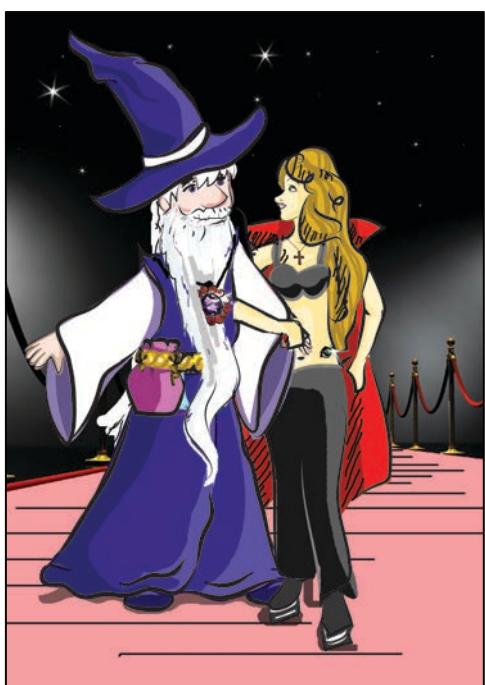
Sarantos looked at the painting and closed his eyes. He opened them and said, “You’re right. Don’t look at them and let’s just set up the equipment.”

Blayke’s drums were already set up on the stage, but he was nowhere to be found.

Sarantos and Brad tried to ignore their surroundings and carried their equipment to the stage. They placed the mics where they needed them. The keyboard was always brought to the gigs. They set it up for Muriele and placed a mic by her, because she was also a backup singer for Sarantos.

Muriele came in walking right to the stage and never looked at the paintings. “I dislike this place.”

Sarantos noticed she wore a cross around her neck.



Wallis came in with Leigh on his arm. She was gorgeous and her color had returned. He didn’t know why, but he was glad she came.

“Who set up this cursed gig?” Sarantos asked.

Wallis smiled, “I did. It was time.”

“Time for what?” asked Brad.

Leigh handed both of them a medallion, “Wear this around your neck. It will protect you.”

“From what,” they both asked at the same time? But they didn’t hesitate to put the medallions over their heads even though she never answered them.

Sarantos saw some squiggly lines on his, but that was all he noticed before he was distracted by Leigh. She had started placing candles around the stage and lighting strange smelling incense in between the candles. They were held in a pyramid shape with moons and stars used as holes where the smoke escaped from to weave its presence into the moist room.

Blayke came out of nowhere and acted just as cool as ever. He nodded at everyone and sat down at his drums looking quite comfortable.

By the time they were ready to play, the place had filled up with many different characters and races. Some of them Sarantos hadn't seen in the two years he'd been in this world, and he wasn't sure what they were. Many were extremely beautiful and others had too many distinctive marks to mention.

Leigh was sitting in a chair at a table just in front of the stage with a strange man who was whispering to her. He had a bald head with a symbol on it and was dressed in robes. There were several crosses hanging from his neck. *What was going on??*

Sarantos looked at his band. They were ready. He decided to start with the song he wrote for Leigh, Nothing to Hide, and motioned to his band about the change to the first song. They all nodded in agreement.

He stared right at her and as he sang the words a tear slowly slid down her cheek. He was moved, but still unsure of what was going on and what exactly she was up to.

What was he doing in a strange world and in love with a woman who was so distant that he might as well be back in his world trying to figure all this out? Or better yet, maybe forget about these past two years.



Sarantos's voice was right on. He danced around the stage and moved over toward Muriele. He noticed Muriele had drawn a pentagram on the floor with tiny crosses around it and she stood in the middle of the circle. She saw him and smiled never missing a beat. She was fading in and out matching all the

races of the guests. Even though it was an illusion it unnerved him.

Something was definitely going on, this wasn't right. It didn't feel right.

A movement in the far corner of the room caught his attention. A man had just grabbed a woman by the neck and kissed her passionately. Sarantos smiled. That's what he wanted in his life, passion. That's what he wanted with his fans, passion. The man raised his head and his eyes glowed blood red. He stared directly at Sarantos, as the woman fell into him with blood dripping down her neck. It pooled on the table. The man smiled wickedly at Sarantos. The stranger then started to feed off of her blood. Sarantos couldn't believe what he was seeing, as his thoughts started arriving in slow motion he began to feel dizzy. He wanted to bite her neck, as well. Why? He couldn't breathe.

When his voice started fading, Brad looked over at his friend and began playing louder as he moved closer to him. Muriele took over lead vocals while Sarantos struggled for air. He saw Leigh on her feet looking at him with concern, when a man with huge fangs leapt on her table and grabbed her by the neck. He couldn't scream and fell to his knees while watching helplessly.

A silver drumstick shot across the stage and turned into a beautiful shiny weapon that separated the vampires head from his body. Leigh, jumped on the table and turned to look at Sarantos. That's when he saw her fangs. As her eyes were glowing a soft red, she smiled at him before turning away. She quickly scanned the room. Wallis moved to the front of the stage. Leigh looked at Wallis and he nodded toward the corner where Sarantos had just witnessed the death of a woman.

Leigh moved so fast he barely saw her. He found her in the corner with the same male vampire who drained a woman of blood, as he'd watched. The vampire was twice Leigh's size, but she attacked. Nothing he'd learned these past two years could have prepared him for this scene.

The drumstick was back in Blayke's hands and he was spinning them all over before sending them off in the direction of yet two more vampires.



The wizard was chanting and sent off a flurry of lightening bolts causing five vampires to promptly evaporate into air.

Brad was trying to play while helping Sarantos to his feet. It was hard for Sarantos to grasp what was happening. His girlfriend was a vampire! What was he doing here? Obviously, this girl had been a big mistake. He felt weird.

Muriele was keeping the music together and controlling the stage scene for reasons Sarantos couldn't understand. Her song wasn't any music they had rehearsed, so he imagined it was magic.

The wizard hollered, "Don't leave the stage, no matter what."

Like that would happen. Sarantos couldn't be dragged off the stage and into that mess.

Then he saw her, moving around in a mist of vapor. Mika.

"No," he yelled.

She was fast and moved around the creatures with such speed that they didn't know what sliced off their heads until it was too late. Mika was turning them to instant vapor. He was sure she knew all along about Leigh and had been protecting them both.

At that moment he didn't know what was real. His head was cloudy. Then Brad smiled at him and said, "You know what, buddy? We do have the coolest friends, even if your girlfriend is a vampire."

They both looked at each other and realized this world was very different from their own and they would need to keep adjusting to fit in.

Sarantos didn't know if his foggy head would allow him to cast a spell, but he decided to try anyway. Wallis had shown him quite a few spells and now he was about to try one out in real time. He uttered an incantation and threw a small fireball that ignited several vampires who were about to drain the blood from a young girl. He yelled at Brad, "Did you see that?"

Brad patted him on the back and said, "Yeah, yeah, I did. That was cool."

The ogres came running in and started to throw out the humans. The vampires seemed to stay clear of the ogres. He imagined they weren't on the vampire's cuisine.

Soon the place was empty except for the band, the ogres, Mika, Leigh, and the man who sat with her at the table. He was obviously a priest and had been cleansing the beast from the vampire's lust.

"Sorry, about not telling you two, but we had this planned. The vampires were becoming too strong and soon would have taken over our small town. There are many more, but we've done a good deed tonight," said Wallis with a wink.

Mika came onto the stage and politely rubbed against Sarantos, "Sorry, my friend."

"I understand," he said and rubbed her back. "I almost came after you, but you were right. You can take care of yourself."

He saw Leigh sitting in a chair. She looked physically drained and her skin was deathly pale. He walked over and hugged her tight against his chest.

"How did this happen to you?"

"It's a long story. I had to become one to locate and separate the leaders from the minions. I had to hunt every night, but got lucky and found this place. It had been kept quite secret, but once I got in, I realized this was the feeding ground of all the major players. Wallis had been using his magic to keep me alive."

Sarantos looked into her eyes, "**I just want to change you back to what you used to be.**"

"I know," she smiled, "but, it isn't that simple."



He couldn't believe what he was about to say and he couldn't stop the words from coming out, "Then make me what you are. I don't want us to be a mistake."

She leaned over him and looked up into his eyes. She charmed him and he felt excited. Her fangs came out and he didn't feel afraid. This was the

first time in the past six months that he wanted her. Her grin was seductive. As she moaned, her tongue licked her lips and she went for his neck.