

The Masque of Bellasora

The Adventures of Elspeth and Aya

“Is this the place?” Aya asked.

Elspeth frowned a little, thinking back to Roald's words.

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*“Morgaine Darkwalker?” the monster-hunter mused.*

*After an evening of well-rewarding Roald for his aid, and any aid he might render in the next century or so, they had fallen to speaking of why Elspeth and Aya had come to Bellasora.*

*“I might be able to help,” Roald said after a moment. “I'm familiar with Darkwalker by reputation, though I've never crossed paths with her. I heard a rumor she is going to be at the Masque of Bellasora, a grand party taking place this weekend, as a matter of fact.”*

*Elspeth's eyes lit up with excitement.*

*“Where is this Masque? How can we get in?”*

*Roald held up a hand in a placating gesture.*

*“It's the grandest, and most debauched, party in Bellasora. You can't just walk in. You'll need to make arrangements. Thankfully, I know someone who might be able to help...”*

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And so Elspeth and Aya found themselves at yet another seedy tavern. The *Grasping Crow* was not significantly worse than most dives Elspeth had seen, but it was a far cry from being a good one. She sighed and entered, Aya a step behind.

The common room was a seething cauldron of raucous carousing, brawling, and sin. Rough-looking men of varying professions mingled with women whose attire varied between skimpy and non-existent. Elspeth paused to look around the room, hoping to find the person they sought. She was suddenly aware of grasping hands pawing at her. Ale-soaked breath assailed her sense of smell.

“You're a pretty one!” a one-eyed sailor, skin weathered to resemble cured leather, leered at her. “Let's you an' me have a roll.”

Elspeth's fist crumpled the sailor's nose, knocking him senseless to the floor. She was aware of several others, clearly friends of his, standing with scowls.

“Oh good,” Aya purred. “I was afraid this would be boring.”

And then the Eastern woman was among them.

Elspeth could only stare as she watched Aya move. The dark-haired woman flowed through the toughs like water and hit like stone. Her fists and feet never failed to strike and where she did, it was to great effect.

And she looked great doing it.

The tavern went silent as the last of the sailors dropped senseless to the floor. Aya brushed some non-existent dust from her shoulder and strode over to Elspeth's side, smirking in a manner that reminded Elspeth of a cat.

There was the sound of clapping. Elspeth and Aya turned to its source.

She was tall and curvy, with curly chestnut-brown hair that tumbled in a cascade across one eye and down to the middle of her back. She wore a low-cut dress with a tight corset that pushed up round breasts held behind straining linen. She had a harp slung across one shoulder.

"Very, very, well-done!" the bard said with a smile. "Don't get to see Ienotochi unarmed fighting displayed often in the slums of Bellasora's port towns. I'd love to hear your story."

She holds out a hand. "I'm Belinda Skysong."

Elspeth and Aya exchanged glances, then smiled in return. Aya bowed to the bard while Elspeth took her hand.

"Elspeth Witchbow and Aya of the Kitsunekuroi Clan," Elspeth offered by way of introduction. "Very pleased to meet you, Belinda. As a matter of fact, we came to this charming locale to find you. A mutual friend actually suggested you might be able to help us out..."