

Chapter 1

“Close Your Eyes”



Sarantos stretched his legs out on the grass and leaned back into a soft pile of featherwhite and inhaled deeply until he felt the fresh air fill his lungs. He exhaled slowly and smiled. The fuzzy plant that became his pillow was a well-loved flower that when laid upon, released a gentle nirvana-like smell that always made the plant one of his all time favorites.

“Good morning, Sarantos,” Mika said, as she quietly entered the clearing where he was enjoying the warm sun of late spring.

“Good morning, Mika. Why not come and join me for a while. I was just reminiscing about the past year and can hardly believe it’s been a year already

since we rescued Leigh from the evil clutches of that she-vampire. I hope that devil is enjoying her time as a beautiful moss. At least she’s finally given her life a worthwhile significance.”

Mika chuckled, “That is a lesson well learned! Yes, I’m proud of Leigh. She has come such a long way on her physical healing, but the emotional and spiritual damage was so brutal and to the very core of her essence I’m afraid. My friend, it’ll still take her a while longer before her eyes light up like they used too. I’m sorry, Sarantos. Hang in there!”

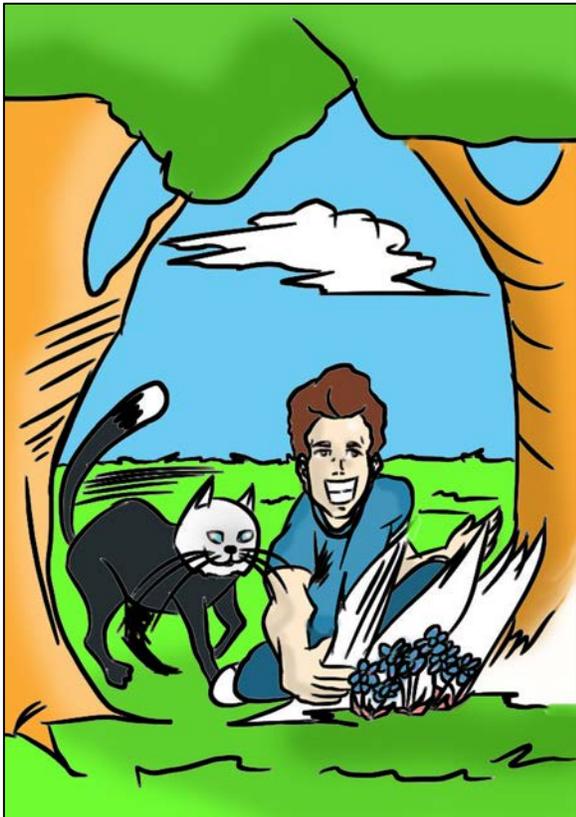
“I know. Her scars are so deep that it breaks my heart when I look into those beautiful eyes. But, I have to say, Mika, for the most part it feels amazing when we’re together. After the drawn-out struggles to get her back, I feel truly blessed. I just feel alive when I’m with her. I’m amazed at her strength. Watching her return from that ‘dark place’ has touched my soul in a deep and profound way. It’s hard to explain. It’s difficult to put into words.”

“I can sense it, so you don’t have to explain your emotions . . . they are a part of me too,” Mika purred.

“Thanks, my dear friend. I never thought I could love her deeper than I did, but sharing the experience of her spirit rising slowly back to the light left me in awe of her.”

“I have to say in all honesty she has also touched everyone around her in the same way. We’re all affected by her perserverence. She is loved by many.”

The big cat stretched out her four paws causing her long legs to brush against the featherwhite instantly sending tufts of the fluffy flower billowing around both of them. Mika raised her head and her nose twitched as she sniffed the air. She yawned so huge her front fangs could be seen clearly. If she wasn’t his friend he would be worried, those fangs were the size of his index finger.



She looked over at him and said, “I smell dreeber mixed in with the featherwhite. There must be some buried under the pillows.”

“I smell them too!”

He loved dreeber with its tiny purple flowers and peppery leaves.

Mika sat up and her body bounced in excitement, “They’re rare, my friend, and here we lie in a pool of them. Oh what luck.”

The two of them began to carefully lift the tufts. The expression on Mika was priceless. He was sure his face was rather silly looking too as they kept uncovering the many beds of the rare flower.

His grin was goofy, but he couldn’t help it. He said, “Brad will be so happy with these. He uses them for potions of healing, movement, sleep, babble and a number

of other things, not to mention he loves cooking with them. They change each recipe into something exotic and different, each time they're used, even if it's the same recipe!"

Their smell was unique indeed and would never be lost even if one tried to forget.

"Well, Leigh must be up and we need to get this prize back to the house quickly, for Brad. Did you eat yet, my friend?"

"Yes."

Leigh was already downstairs when they arrived back home. She was laughing in conversation with Wallis and Adela while enjoying a steaming cup of coffee with fresh eggs. Brad was scurrying about the kitchen getting breakfast for everyone.

"Something smells good." He said as the two of them entered the kitchen area.

Brad turned and handed him a basket of fresh-cut homemade biscuits and motioned for him to place it on the table without noticing the flowers in his hand or those that were hanging out of his pockets.

"Bout' time you two wanderers decided to come home for breakfast," Brad said while pouring out a couple more cups of coffee.

He smiled at his friend and put the basket on the table in front of where he was about to sit down. He leaned over and kissed Leigh, "Good morning, my beautiful lady."

She smiled up at him and his heart skipped a beat . . . damn he loved her so much.

"Good morning, Sarantos. I haven't forgotten you dearest Mika; come and let me pet you to also wish you a good morning. It appears you and Mika have been busy my love," Leigh said while using one hand to take the dreeber from him while the other one kept intimate contact with the long, soft fur of Mika.



Wallis frowned in curiosity. His head tilted to the left as he pulled some of the flowers from Sarantos's pocket. He held it up to his nose and grinned, "Well, bless me. What do we have here? This is a surprise indeed. The exotic dreeber this close to our home? This is good news. Is there more, Sarantos?"

Adela leaned toward the wizard and smelled the bright blue flowers in his hand. "Yes, very rare they are indeed. Dreeber is such a fragrant flower with tasty leaves. Their rich powerful benefits have yet to be fully discovered, that's for sure. Wherever did you find them?"

Brad was so busy preparing breakfast that the conversation was lost on him. As he turned and set down a plate of food for him and Sarantos, he pulled over a chair to join them at the table. Then just as he lifted his fork to his mouth he saw the flowers and dropped the eggs clumsily back onto his plate.

"Thanks for the eggs, my friend," Sarantos grinned while handing him some of the flowers from his pocket. Brad stared for a few minutes and looked at the wizard.

"Are these what I think they are?" The look of shock and awe on his face was priceless.

The wizard just returned the quizzical look back to Brad, so Sarantos finally answered, "Yes, they are Brad, and to answer Adela, we found them in the 'wolf clearing.' When Mika stretched out her body, she caused the featherwhite to move into the air. Their fluffy tufts stirred up the odor and exposed the vibrant plant." He faced Brad again and said, "We'll go collect some more after breakfast and I'll help you bring some back to get your own plot started." He patted Brad on the back, "There's many patches, my friend, many many patches as far as the eye can see."

Adela was still smelling the flower and said, “You’ll want to go at dusk, that’s the best time for harvesting this precious flower. They spread out when in the right environment.”

“Wow . . . that’s really a bit of luck.” Brad sipped his coffee while nodding his head in approval.

“Yes, a bit of luck,” Wallis said while pulling on his beard.



It was a beautiful sunset as he stood next to Brad, Leigh and Mika staring into the ‘wolves’ clearing’.

Brad spoke up, “Mika, you beautiful cat, I don’t think I’ve thanked you enough for this treasure. So, thank you a billion times over.” He threw his arms around her neck and kissed the top of her head.

Leigh started laughing, “Well, dearest Mika, it would appear you need to go about stretching and sniffing once again, as it looks like the lovely featherwhite has filled in their fluffy pillow heads around the whole glen and covered up the dreeber.”

The giant cat slowly walked into the clearing and sniffed about before stretching and pawing at a rather large six by six foot area. There underneath the glorious white fluffy heads that were moving along the wind were the incredible rich blue blooms, as the featherwhite petals worked diligently to restore the dreeber to their previously hidden state. The combinations of smells were intoxicating and the beauty that held their senses was mesmerizing.

Brad looked at Sarantos and let out a yelp before he fled into the midst of the flowers.

They continued gathering and playing about until they had enough to start two gardens. Brad wanted some for the underground city, as well.

Leigh walked about and collected seeds from the featherwhite plants and placed them in several pouches she'd brought along with her that evening. They knew the best time for harvesting these two types of flowers was right at dusk.

“What are you doing? I thought we were collecting dreeber!” Sarantos glanced at her quizzically.

“Well, it seems to me that the dreeber grows quite nicely underneath the featherwhite’s fluff. Some plants might be shy and need teamwork to prosper. Maybe that’s what makes them so rare; not enough featherwhite about the land.”

Brad turned and grabbed Leigh by the hands and said, “Will you marry me? That’s a brilliant thought. It makes perfect sense.”

They all busted out laughing and Sarantos replied, “In your dreams Brad. She’s all mine.”

Leigh giggled, “Well, it seems we’re done here, Sarantos.” She dropped one of



Brad’s hands while still holding onto the other one and then encouraged them to all hold hands, as they giddily sang and danced around the clearing like they were little children.

The featherwhites were so stirred up that their magic became more enthralling as the soft fluffy white substance appeared to join in the dance and twirled around them like a gentle snowfall. It reminded him of the cottonwoods back home. He sang louder. It felt good to let go and just allow the moment to embrace them. He was thankful the people he loved the most were there to share this moment with him.

Mika joined in and jumped about like a bucking bronco sending the tufts into a flight of beauty as the night slowly crept in.

They were insanely caught up in this moment of joy, until Mika suddenly stopped. Her ears went straight backwards and her back hunched up as she crouched as low to the ground as the giant cat could get and then she disappeared.

“Horses, be wary.” She whispered in Sarantos mind.

He pulled Brad and Leigh over to a large tree outcrop while holding his finger to his mouth gesturing for them to be silent. They squatted down and eagerly listened. From where they were hiding they could only see a glimpse of the road. He was worried, Mika very seldom hid in this world.

Within minutes several horses and their riders approached the clearing. Luckily, the featherwhite had already reestablished itself on the ground covering up their passage.

The riders stopped and looked about before speaking.

“Well, I told you the Shadow wouldn’t like what you’d done. Now you opened a portal to the world they call Earth.” The man’s voice carried through the woods. It was deep and held a slight accent. Sarantos couldn’t quite make out where the man might have originated from.

The sound of the name earth, gave him a twinge of longing. *What about a portal to earth? What does that mean?*

“Well, how was I suppose’ to know that his ‘Deathdreamers’ and ‘Flacens’ would escape into the portal? I don’t have that ESP, you know.” The second man’s voice was softer, less educated and clearly more irritated.

“No one said you needed it, Clancy, but basic common sense would be nice for you to have sometimes. You do know what that means, don’t you? Now, here we are searching for the wizard to assist the Shadow when I should be home with me wife and kids. If we weren’t friends I would have tossed you in the portal with them and sealed it up. Wizards scare me and I’m not sure where we’re at and it’s getting dark.”

“Quit pickin’ on me Stanley, you know I always mean well. I was tryin’ to create a potion for Elmira to drink. She wanted to fly around the cave for a while, and I meant no ‘arm.’”

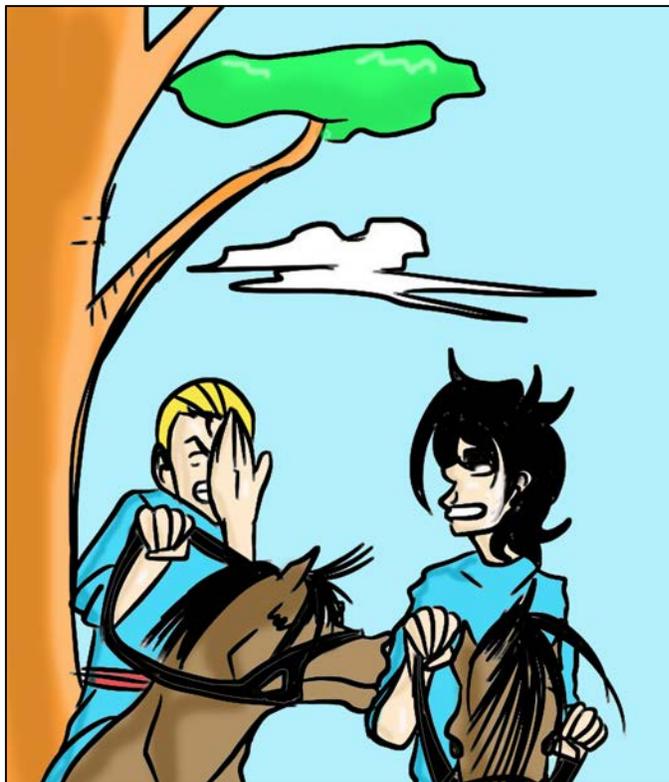
“Now, that’s calling the kettle wrong! A potion and a portal, very different entities. Just because they both begin with a ‘p’ doesn’t mean they should ever come in contact with the other.”

“Well, duh . . . I think I know that much, Stanley! I was jus’ practicing and being a friend.”

The horse snorted and turned toward the clearing. *Mika*.

Stanley stared into the opening and waited for a moment as though he allowed his eyes to adjust to the fading light, before he spoke again. “Practicing what? Sometimes you’re a ‘duffass’.”

“You know I’m practicing magic, Stanley.”



“What? I just want to shake your head sometimes until it rattles. How many times do I have to tell you? You’re not a wizard! I distrust wizards and they’re quite scary. Now, you know why they frighten me, because you wanna be one! Too many wanna be wizards and not enough real talent in this world.”

“Oh, shucks . . . I think I would not be one of those wanna be wizards if I could learn from a real one.”

Stanley slapped his hand to his face and covered his eyes. “Read my lips, Clancy. You . . . are . . . not . . . a . . . wizard!”

“Now, who’s being a ‘duffass’? I didn’t have to read your lips, Stanley, because I heard every word you said.”

“Great, Clancy. I’m glad you have ears that work now. You’re impossible. Did you hear that?”

Mika said inside his head, *“Speak to them, Sarantos. They look for Wallis and it seems the need is urgent. It’s your world they speak of.”*

He took a step out into the clearing and pulled Brad and Leigh with him. Brad looked confused, but Leigh had heard Mika, it was part of Leigh’s gift.

They slowly walked toward the two men on horses.

He didn’t want to panic them so he said very softly, “Hello, Stanley and Clancy, my name is Sarantos and this is Leigh and Brad. I believe I can help you, because we live with a wizard. If you would be so kind as to tell me his name.”



The horses weren’t startled, because they’d already sensed them and Mika, but the expression on the two men’s face was amusing. Sarantos tried not to laugh.

“Now, where did you come from,” asked Stanley?

They were exact opposites in appearance, but what made it bizarre was Stanley had a dumb looking face, if that was even possible, but spoke with intelligence. He was unshaven and disheveled with wild dark hair that stuck out

all over the place. Clancy, on the other hand was handsome and very well put together. He looked at them with slight interest and raised eyebrows, like a man in deep contemplation.

When they both opened their mouths to speak, it was similar to watching an old Japanese movie where the voices didn't go with the right mouth, but in this case the faces didn't go with their voices. He found it hilarious and heard Brad giggling next to him, while Leigh kept squeezing his hand so tight, he wanted to burst out laughing.

Because they both chose to speak at the same time, neither man could be understood, until Stanley held up his hand.

“Sorry, about that, Sarantos. Your name is very unusual. I've never heard it around here before. We're looking for a wizard by the name of Wallis, he is one of 'The Sixties'. He might be our only hope. We would appreciate any help you could give us in this matter.”

He allowed himself to grin and said, “Well, gentlemen. Where Wallis lives is our home, as well. We are about to return now. If you'd like to follow us down the road you were already traveling on, then come along.”

The three of them stepped in front of the horses and started down the lane toward their home.

“Thanks so much,” the two men replied in unison.

“I told you we were heading in the right direction,” said Clancy.

“I think, At this point it doesn't really matter what you said. Does it?”

“What's that suppose' to mean, anyway? Course it matters, cause I said it.”

The two men bickered with each other for at least ten more minutes.

Leigh decided to deal with them in a very creative way. “Boys, you better not talk anymore. These woods are filled with crawlers. Did you ever hear of them?”

“No,” they both said in unison, as they looked worriedly at each other.



“Well, crawlers are nasty creatures that prey upon open mouths and the louder you talk the more you’ll draw their attention until they leave their woodland homes. They’ll find their way into your open mauls and slide into your stomach causing nausea and diarrhea.”

Both men gulped so loud Leigh turned around and gave them a look that would undoubtedly silence them for the rest of the trip. However, she didn’t stop there.

She whispered, “They lay nasty eggs in your stomach and that’s how they procreate. The newborns crawl back up your insides and out of your mouth and in rare cases, or so I’ve heard, they come out of your . . . well, you know, right? Private parts.”

“You’re talking,” said Clancy

She turned, “I’m allowed, because I’m a woman. These are women crawlers getting even. If you know what I mean.”

Stanley and Clancy both nodded their heads, as Stanley leaned over his horse and tried to smack Clancy on his head, but he was a little quicker and avoided the mischievous attack.

Brad glanced at Sarantos and had a huge grin. Both men chuckled under their breath.

Dinner was cooking on the big fireplace as they entered the cozy home of Wallis. The years they’d spent there had been filled with joy and they repaid the wizard’s kindness by helping tend the land, cook and fix up the house and anything else he

needed. Adela was a recently bright addition to the home and she made Wallis very happy.

No one was in the cabin when they arrived. The two men stood at the door unsure about entering a wizard's home.

"Come on in, fellows," Sarantos grinned.

"We're not going to get turned into anything grotesque are we," Stanley asked?

"Maybe, if you're lucky," said Leigh.

She was something else.

"No, you won't. Leigh likes to tease. Come on in and have a seat. I'm sure Wallis is around somewhere."

The two of them walked in very slowly and moved toward the fire, when suddenly Stanley appeared to jump into an open space and fell to the floor, face first, causing Clancy to bolt for the door. When he opened it, the wizard stood at the entryway. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and then he fell backwards like a tree.



When he came to, the sun was sinking behind the planet and Stanley was hanging over his head checking to see if he was breathing.

"Are you all right? Seems the wizard scared the life out of you." Stanley chuckled while pointing at a giant cat sitting in front of the fire. "It was that cat that caused me to trip. She forgot she was still invisible," he laughed joyfully. "We got this wizard wrong, my buddy. These people are really

hospitable.”

Clancy whispered, “Before they turn you into mushroom stew, of course they are. That’s how they get ya!”

Brad walked up to the chair Clancy was sitting in and said, “You’re in Wallis’s chair. Why don’t we move over to the table and I’ll serve up some dinner?”

He bolted upright and passed the wizard to get to the table, never taking his eyes from Wallis for a single minute. “You eat first Stanley,” said Clancy with a solemn voice.

“Fine. I will,” Stanley retorted.

Wallis went over and sat in his chair, but not before grabbing some warm bread. “Okay, now tell me what has happened.”

“We live in the Caves of Color with the Shadow.” Stanley started speaking while slurping on some stew.

“Ah, it has been a long time. How’s my old friend, anyway?”

“Shadow sends regards to you and wishes you good health, but my friend here was pretending to be a magician and has caused Shadow to crawl under a stalagmite and from there he told us to fetch you.”

Clancy piped in, “Shadow’s always been fearful, but never of his own shadow and now he’s in hiding?”

“What caused this?” The wizard said looking toward Clancy. “What did you do?” The tone of his voice sent shivers down Sarantos spine and when he looked over at Clancy, he was shaking like a draft of winter air was moving up and down his body.

Stanley spoke for him and told the wizard the whole story about the portal and some of the creatures that were going inside.

“I’m afraid to ask, but what’s coming out of the portal into our world?” The wizard was tugging at his beard.

“Nothing that we’re aware of, but it’s taken us five days to find you.”

A knock at the door abruptly disrupted them. “Come in,” said the wizard.

Blayke strolled into the room and stopped short when he saw the grim looks on everyone’s face. “Maybe, this was a bad day to surprise you?”

“On the contrary, Blayke, your timing is perfect. We have work to do.”

“Like I said, this was a bad day to surprise you.”



He looked over at the woman he loved, as the stars glittered about the room. “Leigh, are you awake?”

“Yes,” she whispered and cuddled into him causing him to wrap his arms around her. She moaned innocently.

“You don’t have to come with us. I want you to feel safe. Stay here. You are loved and cherished. You have nothing to fear. You don’t need to prove your love to me by joining our adventure.”

“I know, Sarantos, but I want to see your world, even if it’s on this type of mission. Those creatures called the Deathdreamers are evil and

could destroy so many of your kind. Your people will be very vulnerable to them and you know it. Although I don’t have any vampire powers anymore, I’m still quite capable and full of surprises. The Flacens are gentle and curious and could be taken advantage of by humans.”

He pulled her closer. “I know you are full of surprises, but close your eyes and remember who you are to me. What you mean to me. If something happened to

you, my heart would break. Leigh, close your eyes. Now, is your time to be healed . . . my beautiful soul, close your eyes. Remember who you are...”