

## *Chapter 3*

### *“The Silence Doesn’t Bother Me”*

The cold penetrated his warm clothing until it reached his sensitive flesh. Nothing would ever warm him again; well, except for the thought of beautiful Leigh and their recent Valentine’s night together. That was all that moved him forward tonight as the snow blew harshly into his face stinging his cheeks and rendering them numb in an instant. His nostrils stuck together, oh how he hated that feeling!



It was still and quiet as the countryside goadingly turned to white. The silence didn’t bother him. In fact, he’d learned to enjoy the peace it brought with it. The silence reminded him of his last concert as he embraced the crowd howling outside his mind. It was a distant thought similar to this blustery northern wind.

It was so cold even the dwarf was too frozen to complain! Sarantos was glad though. He enjoyed travelling into his head and preferred not to be disturbed. Moments like this he was actually alone with his thoughts, despite the friends that were next to him. He continued to move forward with robotic-like motion, propelled by a fervor for survival. He’d definitely die on this journey he thought or surely at least grow stronger than before if he actually endured the elements. He couldn’t know if he would make it though. Furthermore, he didn’t want to know what the future had in store for him and his friends. To possess that type of knowledge might just make things worse. Better to be naïve and not know what the future holds. Did people really ever wish to know about their future? Or did they just want to know about the good things?

The sun began to finally set as the bitterness of winter increased within the shadows of dusk. They’d covered ground all day even eating on the move to make haste. To stop was certain death.



Snow piled up mercilessly on the wizard's long beard and heavy woolen coat. As Sarantos finally lifted his head to view the colors the setting sun cast upon the adjacent hills, he immediately thought of Leigh's warm touch. For an instant, he was warm all over. He quickly regained his senses as the path was no longer a stark white color, blinding him until all he could see in front of him were spots.

There were abstract lights in the near distance. Gabby tapped the wizard and pointed toward the inviting warmth. The wizard began to move faster.

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The small group never stopped until they were inside of the comfortable inn. The fire was blazing and enticing as they removed their cloaks and shook them off at the door. The wizard's eyelashes were iced over.

"Really, Wallis, don't you think you could have at least brought a potion or had a spell of warmth so we didn't feel like we were the walking dead today?"

The wizard shot the dwarf a look with eyebrows furrowed so deeply you could barely see his eyes. "Dwarf, believe me when I say, I did. But, now I'm going to tell you something that'll make you thaw out so fast you'll leave a puddle where you stand. I'm saving the best spells for the really cold days ahead of us. This was just the appetizer. Since you're always fantasizing about food, I thought it'd make more sense if I describe it that way to you."

The dwarf stood there with his mouth open but couldn't speak, while the wizard walked over to the fireplace, then turned to everyone and said, "Come join me for a hot dinner." His eyes twinkled and he grinned evilly at the dwarf.



None of them waited for an answer from the dwarf. Immediately, they began pulling up chairs around the hot spell of the blistering fire. Sarantos rubbed his hands together and was sure he had frostbite but didn't have long to dwell on it before a large beautiful woman who had the most delicate skin, deep purple eyes and luscious lips placed hot tea in front of them, alongside a pitcher of warm ale with a hint of cinnamon and cloves that oozed out of the steam.

“What can I bring you?” The woman asked looking only at the wizard with a pure voice like sweet honey.

“Bring us your best warm soup and loads of warm bread. We'll have a meal of potatoes and muffin to follow. You also have an hors d'oeuvre called “lasuka.” Please bring us that as well my fair lady. We would be most obliged.”

After she brought them their food, they all ate in bumbling silence until Sarantos began to feel his toes again. “Why don't you just blink us where we need to go Wallis? I don't understand why you like to torture us like this.” He couldn't stop the words from popping out of his mouth. He stiffly lifted his head to observe the wizard's reaction. It could get ugly in here he thought as he came off kinda rudely.

Wallis slowly looked up from his meal but instead of looking at him, the wizard's closely set eyes centered in on the dwarf and in a voice colder than the snowstorm was, he growled, “Did you say something stupid again dwarf, or was it my imagination?”

The dwarf laughed, never flinching from the wizard's evil glaze and smacked Sarantos on the back. “Wasn't me, but I certainly have trained this lad to be as grumpy and observant as a well-mannered dwarf!”

“It would seem so,” the wizard mumbled while shoving a slice of honey covered bread in his mouth. “Let me, once again explain something to all of you. The mage exhausts oneself from casting that spell and if we arrive somewhere and the need is dire, our magic will not be strong or as efficient. Do I see a mage in this group that would rescue us all from such a disaster? You, Sarantos?” The sarcasm clearly oozed from his lips deliberately moving throughout the room and attacking Sarantos from his toes and into his very core.

All he could do was shake his head and wonder if he was indeed turning into a dwarf. Nothing would surprise him anymore in this world.

The wizard wasn't done speaking and continued in a more school-like tone. “The walk has strengthened our bodies. It has fed our souls with endurance. It has touched our spirit with the freedom it needed so our thoughts can connect to the natural wonders of this world. That helps us know ourselves and our surroundings better - it is good. Trust me. I urge you all to embrace it and we'll please have no more discussion about it.”



Sarantos felt his cheeks heat up. “Wizard, I’m sorry. It was my frozen toes. I was chilled and as I thawed I realized how foolish I sounded. I spoke out of turn. Clearly, I left my toes and frozen body detached from my spiritual center of learning.” He grinned and continued eating. He wondered, did that even make sense? Maybe his brain was still iced.

He heard Wallis grumble, as the atmosphere returned to normal. The wizard was very seldom wrong about anything. Sometimes Sarantos

disliked feeling lesser than him, although he didn’t understand why it bothered him so much. The wizard had lived a long life and his experience couldn’t be matched. He had much to learn from this wise old man. This ancient, kind man lived only to help heal his world and assist those he loved. To be angry at such an admirable person was both absurd and arrogant. Wallis always showed him how to be a better individual and led by example. He was grateful to him. He felt ashamed.

The dwarf looked at him like he read his mind. “Don’t worry lad, he annoys me too. Part of the fun of being around the wizard is looking for any loophole that will prove him wrong. Darn if I haven’t found one yet! Maybe, together we can achieve my ambition. It has been a lifelong dream of mine to prove him wrong. Will you join me in my quest?”

Blayke laughed. “Good luck with that, my friends.”

When dinner was over, they rested and enjoyed the obstinate fire before eventually heading to bed.

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The wizard was right. It was colder as they trudged through two more days of ice storms that seemed to take a toll on everyone’s personalities. Sarantos tried to manifest a spiritual enlightenment from the experience, but as darkness closed in around them on their second evening the only thing he knew he’d learned was to never follow a wizard frantically into a blizzard. No matter who that wizard was he vowed! He chuckled to himself as they began to climb up a steep hill, but then Gabby came to a stop and pointed towards the top. He thought it was Gabby, although honestly he only saw a shadowy figure. He couldn’t see what she was

pointing at. The storm made sure of that as hail and snow pelted him forcefully in the face. He watched her as she removed something from her backpack and passed it to a figure next to her. He hoped it was the wizard but he wasn’t sure who it was. He could barely see anything!

They’d quit moving when the dwarf started tying something around himself and then handed Sarantos a large rope. Blayke, who had always followed behind him to protect him, moved forward to make sure the rope was secure around him too. He tied it to himself and then Sergio. It sure wouldn’t do the elf much good to utilize his ability to change into a bat in this type of weather.



The climb up the hill was slow, but steady. His muscles were aching as the group made their way to the top. When they finally arrived on top, they were happy to see that it leveled off in front of them. A sheet of thick ice covered the land. On they travelled regardless. What really bothered him as they hiked on was not his burning muscles but what was in their way. Their way was blocked by something.

He was surprised that his frosted vocal cords still worked as the shock of what he saw roused them out of their own suspended animation and into action. “You’ve got to be kidding me?”

“No, Sarantos. This is far from a joke.”

The large mountainside hadn’t been seen until they stood right in front of it. He suddenly developed a migraine headache.

One by one, the shadowy figures of his small party disappeared. Sarantos was pulled forward closer and closer toward the raw face of the mountain. He tried desperately to remove the rope attached to his waist, wondering if someone else now would inadvertently lead their group into a hasty death trap. Who would know? You could barely see who was trudging next to you, but you faithfully assumed it was still those friends you started out with.

The mountain loomed like a mighty beast in front of him. He was about to live out the rest of his life as a permanent fixture embedded into a cold rock. He all of a sudden inhaled abruptly when a dingy shadow rose in front of him and he breathed a sigh of relief when he finally entered an extremely small cave opening.

This wasn't what he had in mind for his overnight accommodations but it would have to do. At least it was somewhat warmer in the cave than outside.

The dwarf turned toward him and was helping him remove the tightly bound rope when suddenly a fire blazed forth in the middle of the large cavern.

It was the first time today he was able to clearly see all the members of his party - his friends. They looked a little worn and run down. The arctic frost on the men's beards were dripping profusely onto the cavern floor.

Gabby pulled a small animal from a sack hanging on her belt and skinned it on a slab of rock. Wallis reached into his bag of holding and provided a large pot over the fire, immediately followed by vials of water, enough to fill the pot. This priceless bag was dipped into again and again as using magic he filled the pot with cut potatoes, onions, beans and a variety of herbs mixed with intoxicating spices. Soon rare meat was added as the pot briskly began to boil. It didn't take long before the cavern smelled like home.



Wallis threw another pan at Muriel who filled it with an elfin liquid. Once it was warm she handed a cup out to everyone.

Sarantos indulged in the tasty drink and immediately a warmth quenched his insides causing a tingling sensation to spring forth throughout his body that healed both his cold skin and his shriveled spirit.

The color on everyone's face quickly returned to a golden, healthy glow.

He marveled at the beauty of the women as their eyes danced back to life matching the movement of the flickering

flames. This elixir of life restored light to the somber area and to his own heart.



He heard sighs from around the cavern, as comfort filled each breakable soul.

Blayke guarded the cave opening until Wallis put a magical seal of protection around it. Anyone attempting to enter would be sent backwards over the icy terrain at least 300 feet. If they were able to get back up and return to the entrance, the noise from the alarm would have already alerted the entire party.

He looked around the muggy cavern. The damp walls were lined with a florescent blue hue that appeared to be a very thick moss. The eeriness of the color demanded his attention. It was brilliant. He moved toward it and stared intently while his eyes followed the gentle flow of the living wall.

It wasn't long before faces seemed to appear deep inside the moss. Faces of people he knew! What was this illusion? Was this a trap? He couldn't turn away no matter how hard he tried.

Their mouths started to move. Then he heard them as they all began talking at the same time. To understand them was almost impossible. He saw his mother. She'd died when he was eighteen. He still missed her to this day. They'd shared the same sense of humor and the same fierce energetic brown eyes.

He tried to focus on her mouth. He wanted to understand what she was trying to say to him. Her voice became clear in time. God, he'd missed that sweet motherly voice; soft, loving and patient.

“Sarantos, be careful. I love you. Beware of the color yellow. It carries your death upon its wing. Beware of..th...e...color...” Her voice faded along with her beautiful face.

The image was gone.

Before he could think about her warning, another image appeared. It was clearer than the others and a voice he knew better than anyone else's spoke.

"I love you my darling Valentine. Be safe. Be warm." Her sweet lips sent him a kiss.

He tried to hang onto her smiling face as it began to leisurely fade away.

"No, stay," he shouted.

Her smile changed and her eyes grew concerned. His heart fell to his stomach. "Beware, my love..beware my..."

She was gone.

"No come back, Leigh. I need you. Don't leave me! Please don't leave me again..."

He wasn't sure how long he studied the faces and voices until Muriel touched his arm and he found himself once again standing in front of the unassuming fire.

She handed him a bowl of soup and a chunk of crusty bread. He reached for it and mechanically placed it in his mouth.

The wizard was staring at him with squinty eyes and Sergio was sitting on a large rock eating, but his eyes were like steel fastened to those of Sarantos.

"Great soup," the dwarf shouted, while he slurped the remaining liquid in his bowl before bringing it to his mouth to lap up any soup that might still be left over.

Sarantos shivered from what he'd heard and the looks he'd received from the wizard and Sergio.

What did it mean? He wanted to turn back - to go home once more to the safety of his bed, but he knew he couldn't. He couldn't leave his friends. He couldn't bow out of this journey.

He undid his bed roll and placed it in front of the blazing fire. Exhaustion filled his mind and body. Although his aches had disappeared after the elfin drink he still knew he needed rest. He laid down and watched his friends move about the cavern.

Wallis and the dwarf circled the entire cavern looking for other openings that would be immediately sealed off by the wizard. The dwarf searched for secret doors or walls that might go undetected by the rest of the group, except for the elves. There was some commotion toward the back of the cave caused by something the dwarf had found.

The wizard shouted, “The dwarf has found a small hallway that leads to a lit room. Come with us Blayke while we check it out. The rest of you wait here.”



Sarantos watched them as the fire’s light lost their presence, but a small torch Wallis carried showed their constant movement. Soon it too disappeared.

He listened to those around him whispering and focused on staying awake, in case they needed him.

It seemed like hours when the light finally appeared again far in the distance. He watched them move closer and closer, finally to where the group rested in front of the fire.

“Well, we found a nice room with beds and the comforts of home. It appears to have been lived in just recently, although we found no signs of another entrance or individuals lurking about. Shall we rest there?”

Muriel grinned and suggested it might be slightly more comfortable than the cave floor. They all agreed and soon a large hallway was in front of them, lit with wall



scones. The sound of their footsteps echoed off of the enclosed area creating the illusion of a small army.

The room was comfortable and warm with a table for writing and a massive fireplace that had recently birthed a relaxing fire that was glowing with burning embers. There was a cabinet with plates and chairs around a large wooden dining table.

“Where did they go?” Sarantos asked. This place made him nervous. Who would have left this? It appeared that someone would soon return.

“One can never tell in this type of world, Sarantos,” the wizard answered.

“Don’t worry my lad, we’ll be safe here. If someone does return I’ll take my axe to their sorry heads.”

“But, there are five beds. That means at least five of something will return and we must be ready.”

Sergio looked around the room and led Muriel to one of the beds and sat there with her. He leaned her back and said, “Rest now, my wife. I will guard you.”

She smiled and closed her eyes.

The beds were set with soft white sheets and big comfortable quilts.

Sarantos decided to make himself cozy and laid down as well. Soon he was sleeping soundly. The silence didn’t bother him.

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“Help me! Help me!”

A loud piercing scream of a woman caused Sarantos to awaken with a startle. He sat up in bed and was immediately shoved back down on the bed. He couldn't breathe. Something was holding him down. His face was covered with a pillow. He was going to die. It wasn't caused by something yellow but he was still going to die!

He heard fighting nearby and his world began to spin out of control. Incantations were being worked and he heard Mika hiss and someone curse, just before he lost consciousness. Everything went silent.