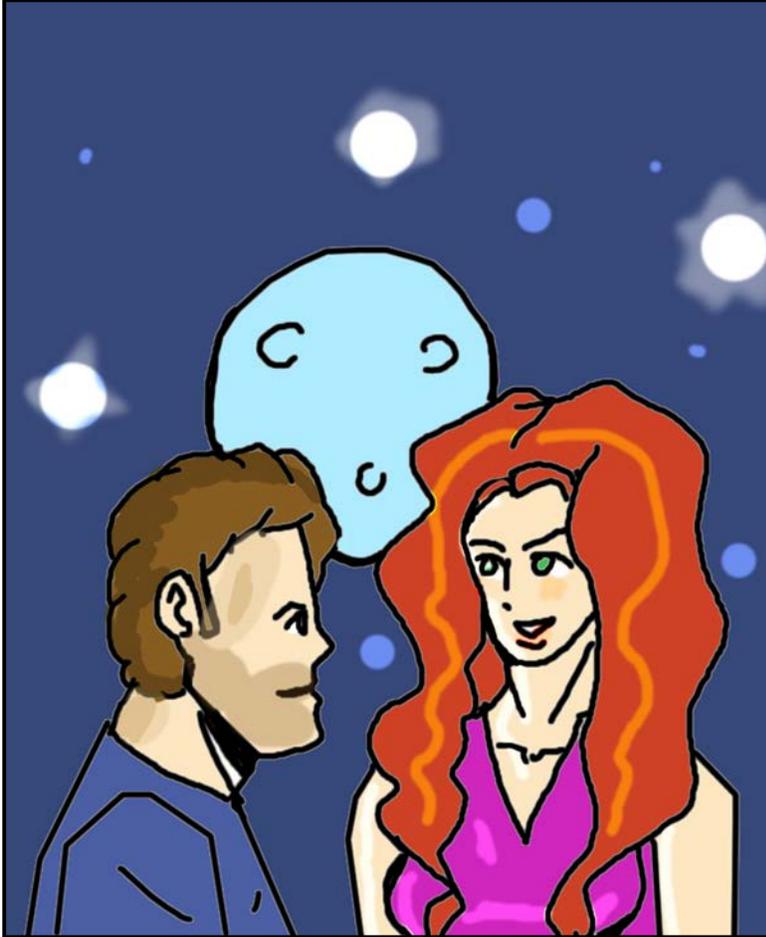


Chapter 8 “D’ja Cheat”



It was dark out, but her smile was like a contrast between the moon and stars, lighting the way to everything he had ever desired. Her warm breath reached with raw power into his spirit as her lips found his. Was this heaven? Most definitely! He hoped he wasn't dreaming again. Then a nasty voice penetrated his mind and he knew for sure he wasn't dreaming, at long last.

“Well, you finally decided to quit playing games and join our adventure then, huh?” The wizard's voice was sympathetic yet crushed the gentle air around Leigh.

“Good grief, wizard, do you have to be so deafening? The whole world is shuddering.”

A loud laugh cackled behind the wizard. “I agree with Sarantos, wizard. I've always said you're too gruff. You need to come home with me and be introduced to dwarf women. They'll lighten your spirit in a most proper manner.”

“I have a woman, thank you very much. Now, enough jibber jabber. Let’s get some much needed rest before we move into these woods.”

Sergio moved aggressively to the wizard’s side. “The woods are watching us. They know what we’ve come for and they don’t want to give it up. Their will is strong. We’ll surely need help.”

The wizard nodded his head slowly while playing with his beard. His blue eyes twinkled and locked with Sergio’s. “Go then.”

Sergio didn’t wait around to be told twice. He disappeared as Murielle casually slid her arm into the wizard’s and rested her head on his shoulder. “We should have brought him with us from the very beginning, my dear.”

The wizard nodded and then closed his eyes.

Blayne was silently moving around their small camp, always watchful of anything out there. Sarantos believed that nothing would be out there, nothing with any brains anyway.

Leigh left for a moment and returned with some food. He felt famished.

He smiled up at her and said, “Thanks, my love.”



She sat next to him and sang softly. Her song was unusual and he marveled at her voice's dreamy quality. The words she sang were intense yet held a mysterious calm to them. The forest seemed to hum along to her melody. Everything around their camp was soothed with her words. Suddenly something moved somewhere in the woods. It felt otherworldly. It was listening to her sing, of that Sarantos was certain. He wasn't sure however if the others noticed it too.

"Yes, Sarantos. We all hear the commotion in the woods," answered the big cat.

Thanks Mika.

Leigh had so many secrets to her, he thought. He was sure she would always keep him interested though.

She continued for an hour or so without tiring in a voice so enchanting the universe seemed somehow closer, so close in fact that he could hear it breathe. Time stood still and was beckoned to become a part of this peaceful embrace.

He closed his eyes.

“No, wizard! I will not be pushed aside this time. I’m here to stay. Sarantos needs me and that is the most important thing in my world. I’m not going anywhere else.”

Leigh’s anguish had awakened him from a deep sleep. He jumped up and grabbed his guitar, but before he started singing one of his dynamic defensive songs he realized it was only her and the wizard. They were not being attacked by anyone! The two of them were standing by a hot fire bickering, while Murielle cooked next to them without a care in the world.

“I won’t have it. It’s just too risky. You’re getting me frustrated, Leigh, and I hate feeling that way.”

“Oh, wizard, go ahead and pout if you choose to. It makes no difference to me and I won’t change my mind. It is too risky for me not to go. You’ve already lost Gabby and this is a most dangerous mission. I should have been here from the start.”

The wizard’s head drooped to his chest. He looked confounded, as though she’d slapped him across the face.

“I’m so sorry, Wallis.” Her voiced softened and she said, “I lost my head. It wasn’t your fault. You can’t blame yourself. We all know the risk we take and it’s love that makes all of us take it. If we don’t do it for each other then we do it for mankind. There’s a reason for us and we know full well the risk. So please don’t pout at my ill-mannered words. Let’s just enjoy the time we share together, whether in peace at

home or on the road chasing an adventure. Please accept my apology my friend.” She held his head between her hands and smiled kindly.

God, she was so beautiful thought Sarantos. And he loved how she could calm the wizard like a simple daughter whose love was endless. Her sincerity and compassion were without question.

“Okay. You always did have a way with me my dear.” He linked his arm within hers and spoke again, “But, I worry. I’ve always loved you Leigh and if something happened to you...”

“I know, but know that I love you as well, and if my being here will help all of us survive this journey for our friend, Sergio, then it’s something we all must do. It’s my choice. Whatever happens, it’s on me not you!”

What a thing to wake up to. The incredible woman in front of him was definitely his soul mate. Her heart was very different than anyone else he’d ever known. She’d never harm him and she’d never cheat on him, unlike other girls he’d known in the past. Well, the dream guy didn’t really count, did he? His world was way out there in an unexpected realm. It was impossible to say someone cheated in certain situations like that, right? Look what just happened to him, in the gem. Really, was that cheating? He was inside a prison for pity’s sake. Different when you’re not in control but some might still consider it cheating, but it wasn’t. Or was it? If it really wasn’t, why did he feel so guilty all of a sudden? His mind started to race.



He remembered a short blonde he'd dated in college. She stayed at his dorm quite often. He thought she was the one. Then one day she stopped having sex with him. He wasn't sure what was wrong. He'd tried talking to her, but she clammed up. It was funny in retrospect how he'd flipped out. He later acted like a rabid dog when

he saw her walking across campus with several male friends. He'd started chanting, okay, more like screaming, d'ja cheat on me, d'ja cheat me? He couldn't stop repeating those words. His offbeat anxiousness and nagging feeling had made him suffer and also had made him totally lose it. The look on her face, well, it bordered on fear! It's a good thing he calmed down and just let her go. Eventually he realized that it made him stronger. He stopped caring whether or not she cheated on him despite the fact that he was faithful to her and there for her.

Today, the brisk memory made him laugh. Who cared about that past love anyway! He had now found the ultimate woman. So he suffered a little in the past to win a lot in the future. He learned to let go of his little boy temper tantrums and fits of jealous uncontrolled rage. That's why he could be apart from Leigh so often and not worry about her being unfaithful. He just knew. They fit together like two peas in a pod.

“Sarantos, I'm coming with you on this quest.” He could smell her as she moved to his side, so fresh. So simple. She rarely wore makeup and was as natural a beauty as he'd ever seen. It didn't even matter what she wore. She made anything look good. He used to always prefer skirts, dresses, pantyhose and heels... but with her, anything worked – even pants! He didn't even care anymore. She would wear anything so well.

“I know,” he said as he gathered his composure. His voice couldn't hide the joy he felt. If it was possible for someone to feel their own eyes twinkling, he felt them sparkle at that moment.

The day went by slowly and dusk took over the landscape while they waited for Sergio and whoever he was bringing with him to return.

The woods were quiet, but at times he thought something or someone called out his name. Periodically, Leigh would start singing and all would be comforted again, except the wizard.

“Where is that elf?” The wizard was irritated and seemed to be talking to himself.

At that moment, Mika spoke so everyone could hear. “Sergio just contacted me, because he could feel the wizard’s annoyance with him so he skillfully chose to avoid it.”

“What? I’m not annoyed!”

The big cat’s eyes rolled from side to side. “Okay then, moving forward. He said you know how hard Bear is to find. He’s had no luck so he had to locate a reliable finder to assist in locating the Druid. The finder will begin the spell in the morning and it may take the better part of the morning before they actually locate him. By the time he arrives there, speaks with Bear and receives an answer, he may not return until tomorrow evening.”

“Why am I not surprised? We just keep running into problem after problem. We’ll need to use this time available to re-evaluate what we’re going to do once inside the woods. Let’s go over what we’ve brought with us and how we’ll possibly be using those items in as many scenarios as we can think of.”

“That’s a great idea, wizard but all I need is me axe. It’ll take care of any scenario we run into.”

The wizard looked at the dwarf long and hard and then said, “Didn’t I give you a ring of flying, in case we are in need of a quick exit and our spells won’t work?”



“That’s right, but I gave it to Sarantos. He’s not a fighter and may need to use it to get out of a bad situation. Leigh says he’s also not much of a lover so I’m not sure what purpose he has for our team.”

Sarantos ears perked up. “What’s that you’re saying Switch? You told me you gave it to me because it’d be a cold day in hell before you resort to flying away to escape like a terrified bird. To me, I think that meant, you’re scared to fly.”

“Now, Sarantos, don’t go making things up. I never said I was afraid of flying; dwarves aren’t afraid of anything. We can dig into the deepest bowels of the earth and uncover some of the darkest creatures known to exist, but we always prevail in a confrontation. Scared? Bah!”

The wizard grinned and slapped the dwarf on the back. “Well, my friend, all you had to do was tell me of your fear and I would have given you a different kind of ring, you know, one that offers its bearer a little bit of courage too!”

“Okay, wizard, now you’ve gone too far. You better watch your precious staff during battle lest my axe accidentally slices it into several short rods!”

Wallis’s eyes narrowed. A dark cloud suddenly formed around him. His fingers twitched nervously. He clung to his staff. A low grumble of thunder rumbled around the area and the earth seemed to rock from side to side.

“Dwarf, make no jokes about Windstorm. This staff has an ego and without my control, it would love to send you to a remote cloud to live out the rest of your inconsequential life. Be careful what you say about things you know nothing about. Magic is strong and has a wide range of influence in many realms. Some objects were created in ancient times with many so strange influences that even one as gifted as myself does not know of them all, much less understand them. What I’m saying my friend is, it may respond to your negativity against it in a way I have no control over. These artifacts protect themselves, even against its bearer.”



The dwarf's face darkened and he stepped back away from the wizard. "Well, why didn't you say so, wizard? I was never properly introduced and now it seems I've made a faux-pas against Windstorm. I'm deeply sorry for my lack of wisdom in dealing with magical entities. Windstorm, please accept my sincere apology." The dwarf bowed towards the staff. Sarantos could see him shaking a bit.

Sarantos backed up, as well, and looked with concern at the staff to see how it would respond to the apology. He thought he saw the staff tilt slightly in the dwarf's direction and a weird smile under dark eyes appeared briefly along the grain of the highly polished wooden magical entity.

The sight gave him the creeps. He'd no idea the staff had a name, much less an ego. He squeezed the small hand of Leigh as her fingers intertwined warmly within his own.

He loved her here next to him. Although he worried about her well-being, he needed her love close to his heart. In moments like these where magic was a bit daffy, she made him feel more secure. She kept him grounded.

“Would you ever cheat on me, Leigh?”

“What? Where did that come from Sarantos?”

He realized how stupid it sounded after he blurted it out. This woman was pure and would never harm anything if she could help it, much less him, but there was so much he didn't know about her; like that dream guy. He couldn't seem to let that incident go. He still wasn't sure if that was real or not but in this charmed world, he wouldn't doubt it being real somehow.

“I'm sorry, my love. I guess I've just felt out of touch lately. Being away from you for so long fills my head with bad thoughts sometimes.”

“I understand, but now that you have this great ring of flying, shall we test it out?” She leaned in close and winked. He loved it when she was playful.

She threw him for a loop when she switched the topic so quickly, but he gathered his poise and said, “What? We can do that?” He searched for the wizard and spotted him still arguing with the dwarf. The two of them really liked each other, almost in a weird way. Both of their personalities were stimulated by the constant banter but they thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. “What would Wallis say to us if we did fly away? You know how grumpy he can get.”

“Oh, he's an old pussycat.”

“That he is, well, at times, and maybe only for you!”

They both laughed and his heart swelled. Her laugh was sunshine across his soul, and her beauty was blinding. The thought of allure made him all of a sudden wonder where Aurora had gone?

“Where’s Aurora?”

“She left for a while. Something with her family, but she’ll return tomorrow before we enter the woods.”

“Oh. That’s good. I think we’ll need her but I wonder how she’ll present herself to the woods that know her truth.”

“She’ll do fine,” Leigh reassured him. She barely took a breath before she commanded, “So, you have the ring on. Now stand up, put your arms around my waist and chant three times, I believe I can fly while twisting the top of the gem to the left.”

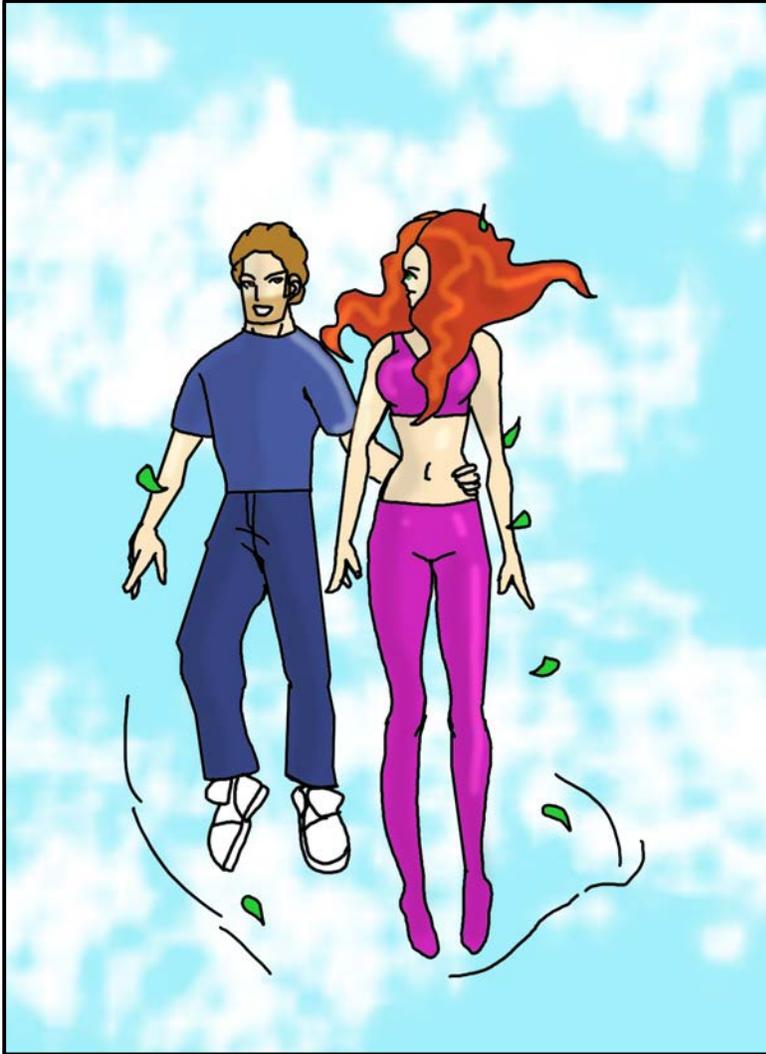
He couldn’t stop himself from giggling. Her eyes glimmered at their light-hearted friskiness.

He grabbed her around the waist and did what she said. Straight up they went.

It was exhilarating! The feel of being lifted off the ground without a plane.

“What a take-off!”

“You did well my love.”



The wind lifted them gently like motherly arms that held them close and would never let them fall. This was glorious!

They were still going up and up when Sarantos started to panic. “Oh, no, Leigh, what do I do now? How do we move? How do we get back down?”

Her laughter became so loud he could hardly hear the wizard on the ground screaming up at them. “What the hell are you two doing? Get down this instant!”

The wind was blowing strong as they journeyed above the trees. He noticed the forest was so coal black in color and heavy in anger. You couldn’t see into it at all. The foreboding woods continued on as far as the eye could see. Just darkness everywhere, although he spotted something off to the south and nodded to Leigh. She heard his thoughts and was already turning her head.

Her smile faded and her eyes narrowed.



Smoke rose up out of the woods. It was controlled as though filtered through a fireplace chimney. Sparkling blue crystals danced around a diameter of maybe 1000 feet encircling the smoke.

“A spell?” Sarantos frowned.

“Yes.”

They searched the rest of the woods and spotted nothing else out of the ordinary. They were almost as high as a group of lower clouds.

Leigh screamed over the wind, “Twist the gem back the other direction.”

He did what she said and they slowly floated back to earth. He wasn’t sure he wanted to go back down however, as the wizard’s hands were waving wildly and his words raged on and on.

Although, the dwarf had a big stupid-looking grin on his face which eased the tension somewhat.



The wizard was on them as soon as they touched the ground.

“What were you two children thinking? Someone could have spotted you. This is very dangerous territory.”

Murielle was in a deep meditation, maybe connecting to Sergio but not interested in anything the others were doing. She didn't even bother looking up. Blayne was tending to his watch duties but his eyes smiled mischievously as he looked towards Sarantos.

He grinned back.

“Wipe that silly grin off your face, Sarantos!”

Leigh grabbed the wizard's arm and turned him to face her. “Wallis, we have more urgent matters to discuss, and I dare say it was lucky these two children decided to play.”

That got his attention. His expression changed as his eyes focused in on hers and he pulled at his beard thoughtfully.

“We saw what appeared to be smoke coming from a chimney straight south of here, but the interesting thing is 1000 feet around the possible dwelling is a complete circle of a magically laid out spell.”

“What?” The wizard’s mouth fell open and he tugged harder at his beard. “That’s impossible. Who could it be? I’ve never heard of any magical being living in there.

What purpose would that serve? Unless someone is hiding or someone is imprisoned.”

The dwarf’s ears perked up and he moved closer to Wallis holding his axe in a fighting stance.

Blayne turned quickly toward the group. Murielle stood and looked toward the woods, her ears twitching. She smelled the air, as though she’d been listening all along but the wizard’s words just now prompted her to finally respond.

Mika stood willing and ready by the wizard’s side.

Wallis bit on his lip and said, “I must go, there is someone I should see. I’ll return before nightfall. Be safe and stay out of the woods. Mika come with me.”

Then they were gone. One by one the group was decreasing in size.

“Well, that’s just great. What are we supposed to do without our wizard?”

Murielle said, “You worry too much, dwarf. You have us and your axe. Your axe is all you need, isn’t it?”

“Right you are lassie. Me axe!”

Blayke made his circle smaller so he was closer to the group but continued his watch.

The dwarf moved to Sarantos and sighed. “I suppose I’ll stay close to you, my friend.”

It did give him some comfort.

Leigh started to go through their items and encouraged everyone to do the same. “We’ll need to be sure we’re wearing all of our magical protection items - bracers, belts, gems, rings, you name it. Wear all you can. Sarantos you should work on a song to protect yourself from magical spells or even protect the entire group should the need arise.”

Murielle was gone for a while but returned with leaves and flowers. She was soon mixing them up in a pot over the fire. The smell was wonderful.

They worked all afternoon on securing their personal items. The wizard and Mika returned just as the sky turned purple and pink and the sun began to set.

Everyone looked at the old wizard intently.

“My friends, I’ve checked within the magic circle and spoke with a master who knows all the goings on in that world, but no one knows about this and everyone is confused. It has caused anguish and curiosity within the wizard’s guild. There will

be a group of wizard's along within the week to see what this is about, but we can't wait. They've asked us to wait but I declined their request. Are you in agreement with me on this?"

The small group agreed with Wallis. They thought it best to go now.

"Good, because if we wait, it might mean we'll never find the flower that our friend needs. Once the wizards start making a mess of things it could diminish the very magic in these woods. We must go now."

A loud bell sounded and caused them to turn.



There stood Sergio and a tall slender man, dressed in a green leather jerkin and long pants. A dark brown cloak hung about his shoulder. His hair was part green and brown, wavy, and hung below his shoulders. He wore brass bracers on both arms with trees and bears finely etched in the soft metal. His face was soft but looked weathered with age. His hands were huge and strong. He stared at Wallis with deep green eyes, but what was shocking was the small black bear that stood by his side on his hind legs. The bear wore a cloak that had strange writings on it. Its eyes

were the color of the Druid's and its hair was mixed with green.

“Greetings, wizard.”

“Greetings, old friend. You're certainly hard to find.”

They embraced briefly.

“I would do anything to help Sergio. His kind has always been there for the Druids.”

Murielle hugged her husband and they kissed politely.

“Well, then I have news.”

The wizard proceeded to tell them the story of the magical protection in the woods.

Sergio looked confused.

“I’ve never heard of this, wizard. We must find out about this first. It could mean the difference between success and failure.”

“I agree, Bear.”

“We must go tonight!”

The wizard introduced everyone to their new party member as they cleaned up the fire, picking up any mess they’d made.

Soon they were standing at the edge of the woods.

Aurora appeared behind them, passing a small vial to each of them.

“Drink it now,” she whispered.

They did and she changed into the incredible goddess she was but Sarantos only felt happy for her. There was no desire or lust. Well, the concoction she gave them obviously worked. Although Blayke still had a blush to his cheeks.

There they all stood - Sarantos, Wallis, Leigh, Sergio, Switch, Blayke, Mika, Murielle, Aurora and now big Bear and little bear on the edge of Woodworm Woods.



One by one they slowly entered. He heard screams and couldn't be sure if it was his comrades or something else. Leigh entered in front of him and, for a moment, he lost sight of her silky blue robe. Then he felt the woods probing him entering his body, spirit and mind. Knowing everything about him instantly. He couldn't shut it out.

His scream echoed through the dark forest of Woodworm Woods of Molehill...