

## Chapter 2

### *“Valentine’s Day”*



It was late afternoon before Sarantos had finished working on his last protection song for the upcoming journey. The thought of unknown magic creatures, curious plants and unknown spells had him on edge. He hoped that what he had provided would help him and his friends through the unusual circumstances they'd most likely encounter. He'd only had a week to prepare but he thought he had done a good job on such short notice. Tomorrow Gabby would return and the journey would likely begin at once. He shivered, even as the fire blazed warmly. The fire raged and danced excitedly deep inside the

massive stone fireplace in the comfortable home of Wallis. From the first day he and Brad had arrived, the old wizard had welcomed them with open arms and made his home theirs without hesitation. They'd never questioned the fact that they belonged here, not once. They now felt that it was their home too.

Sarantos inhaled deeply and slowly allowed his breath to exhale slowly through clenched teeth. His stomach ached. Mika looked up at him sheepishly from her favorite spot on the soft homemade rug that Wallis so loved.

He grinned back at her. “Well that about does it for me. The moon will begin to wane tomorrow and I believe Gabby will return and we’ll probably be leaving here.” He paused and stared off into the fire searching for some unknown answer to a question that he couldn’t quite think of. He must be mad. “Maybe forever. What if we never return, Mika?” His voice drifted as his mind reeled with the thought of dying, or possibly something worse.

“Do you feel prepared?” The words gently entered his head, ever so softly like a whisper.

“As prepared as I can be, considering I had only one week to create magic!”

“That’s not what’s bothering your heart, Sarantos.” The cat wasn’t now asking him a question. It was clearly a statement of fact.

He nodded.

“I feel your pain.” Her tail moved slowly reflecting her sensitivity towards his raw emotions. Sarantos had learned to somehow understand the big cats’ expressive features over the years.

He smiled weakly. “In my world today, it’s February the 14<sup>th</sup> - it’s considered a special day for love. It’s called Valentine’s Day.”

The cat yawned and stretched. “That’s very sad your world only has one day set aside for love.”

His eyes twinkled with amusement at Mika’s honesty and literal explanation and understanding of what he just said. “No, my friend, it’s just a special day based on a Saint named Valentine. Actually, there are many interpretations of how the tradition was established. My favorite one is when Saint Valentine was imprisoned for not changing his religious beliefs and he even healed his jailer’s blind daughter. Before his execution he wrote her a letter and signed it your Valentine. So we write

letters and love notes to our Valentines. I know it must be hard to understand for you.”

“What’s hard to understand is human expressions of love. Shouldn’t you send love every day? Why did it take this Saint Valentine to get humans to realize or accept the need for letters and love?”

Sarantos couldn’t help but laugh out loud at his friend’s genuine yet naïve innocence. “My dear friend, you’re so much more human than most of us, for a cat that is!”

“I think that was a complement of sorts. Although I’ve spent many years around humans, I’m still not sure I fully understand their ways.” With that comment Mika moved toward the door and disappeared, leaving him to wonder about the ways of her feline nature, as well.

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Sarantos noticed the house was empty most of the day. The wizard and Adele seemed to be off on their own adventure. He stepped out of the warm shower and walked into his room quickly towel drying his wet hair. It was warm in the house. Fire was wandering inside all of the warm fireplaces in each bedroom, which Tom attended during the day. Tom was a local that had recently been acquired for services rendered by Wallis. The man was kind and recently lost his farm to an eager fire. The old wizard had taken him and his wife in. Certainly his

house was large enough and they both kept quite busy tending the place. They were in their early seventies, so it worked out well for everyone. Wallis and his friends offered to build them a new home in the spring when the flowers started to bloom.

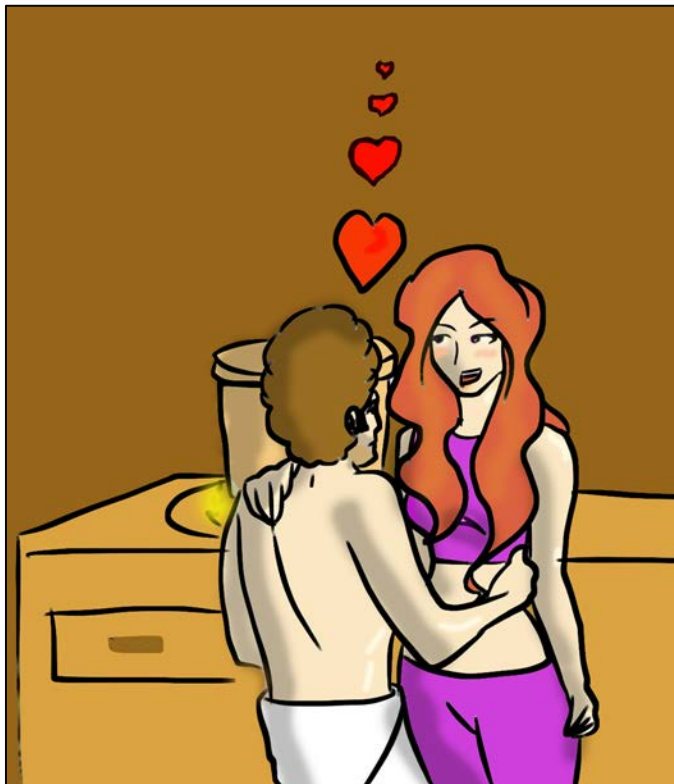
He stopped in front of the heat and became mesmerized by the red flames. He missed Leigh. The wild red fire reminded him of Leigh's wild red hair. His thoughts travelled to the word love and what Mika had said. What is love, anyway? Why is it love? Sometimes it's illusive, maybe by our own desire to not feel it for fear of getting hurt, or maybe because we have difficulty in finding the right person, or maybe, it's just not for everyone. Who knows? He knew it was right for him though. The love he felt for Leigh was real. Of that he was sure! He had never felt this before. Her love was gentle and kind. God, he missed her so much. They never really had the chance to share a Valentine's Day together. He'd confessed to her once about how that made him feel rather sad. Their lives were always too busy on adventures of some sort to ever enjoy that one day of the year set aside for love. This day was special. It was meant to express love for the one who captured your heart. Although Mika was right that it should be a daily holiday and occurrence, he still longed to have shared at least one with Leigh. One day maybe if he was fortuitous, he thought to himself, it would happen.

Suddenly, he smelled something cooking. Wallis must be home he reasoned. It was almost dinnertime and he now felt a little hungry after getting a whiff of that aroma. His feelings about tomorrow could wait. He'd enjoy dinner with his friends. He turned towards his bed to grab the clothes he'd laid out...wait, what's that? There appeared to be rose petals all over the bed. What in the world...chocolate on his pillow wrapped in red silky paper? His heart leapt out of his chest. Could he be so blessed? Leigh?!?

He faithfully bolted out of the room and into the kitchen. Standing in the middle of the room smiling was the most beautiful vision he'd ever seen. Leigh was cooking a wonderful meal, the table was set, the candles were lit and the glow from the flames skipped across her almost naked skin. The fire in her eyes immediately ignited his entire body. She was barely clad in a red satin gown and her hair hung down her back. She wore a heart-shaped apron and had cute red and white bracelets around her ankles and wrists. She threw her head to one side joyfully. He watched in complete infatuation as red ribbons glistened in small braids that

moved like miniature waterfalls around her glowing face.

Sarantos simply couldn't move. He stood in blessed awe of this unbelievable woman. There was so much he didn't know about her...so many mysteries, but in that instant he understood what Brad had said to him just last week, 'I know all I need to.'



She moved toward him - slowly, sensually and precisely pushing her body against his, in a flash causing his knees to weaken. Damn he still couldn't move! What was wrong with him? Her face touched his as she leaned in closer. Her breath was warm and wet. Her soulful bosom brushed against his bulging bicep with a portentous purpose.

Shivers ran down his stunned body and she voiced seductively with a delicate whisper, "Happy Valentine's Day, my love."

That's when he moved. He grabbed her feverishly, kissing her red full lips, biting them gently and then running his tongue along their edges. His mouth enjoyed every taste of her, as a heated sensation jumped to his heart. He kissed her neck, breathing heavily. He almost lost his footing in his own excitement, but managed to lead her to the fireplace and slide her to the warm inviting rug...

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Leigh moaned next to him and kissed him on the cheek before momentarily removing herself from his embrace. He allowed her to go, even though he still

ached for her touch. He wanted more!

The smell of lamb with hints of mint wafted through his nostrils, as he watched her firm, yet elastic body, slip effortlessly into her gown. She winked at him and teasingly left the room. He listened contently as the sink filled with water. He managed to pull himself up off of the floor and realized how cold he now felt without her body's heat to comfort him. Grabbing his damp towel, he sheepishly followed her into the bathroom. She was just finishing washing up when he moved in behind her and kissed the nape of her warm neck.

"I love you, my special Valentine," he murmured in her ear.

She shivered slightly and hurried from the room to attend to dinner, but not before slapping his ass, as he stood there naked. He laughed and thought how much he loved this woman. Then he abruptly wondered if he was now ready to commit to marriage? He must have a problem because she was so special and any man would

be privileged to have her for a wife. If he could dream about it constantly, why did he find himself questioning it during waking hours? What was wrong with him??



He washed up and pulled on his jeans and a warm hand-knitted sweater, before heading into the kitchen to join the love of his life.

Watching her get dinner on the table was so simple, yet she did it with such love—he could feel it. She was intoxicating! He knew love was real and kind, and so gentle was her love that it flowed easily through the room surrounding the food she cooked, insulating him, and

brightening everything else she touched. She made him feel that love was all around him, so much so that the purity of her love took his breath away over and over again.

She looked at him and smiled. “See master, I remembered your Valentine’s Day and wanted to be here for you, because I know it meant so much to you. We’ve never been able to have one together since you’ve been here, and now, here we are together and actually even a little bit in love. It’s perfect for you, isn’t it my love?” She said it in such a playfully passionate voice that the room almost came alive. There was a noticeable shimmer that followed her around as she moved about the kitchen humming one of his songs.

Indeed, there were many mysteries to this woman he loved, maybe that’s what he felt so insecure about. But, did it really matter? He knew she’d never harm him and even the other friends he’d met in this world frequently sacrificed themselves to the duty of others. Could it be that was part of the problem? Was it his selfish nature to want her all to himself while he knew that she belonged to no one in particular, but to everyone all at once? Was he scared that anyone and everyone could take her away from him at any given moment. This had happened so many times he’d lost count. He’d come such a long way in repressing his own needs and was now finally able to put others ahead of himself, but now he needed to move one more step closer to love, to real love — pure love, like the kind Leigh and her friends had in their hearts for each other.

He sighed and sat down with his steaming dinner in front of him and his love sitting politely across from him. She gathered his hands in hers and blessed them, their love and the food they were about to eat. Her hands were delicate and toasty like her heart. He felt adored. He felt blessed.

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Dinner was amazing. They toasted with some champagne that had been homemade by Brad when he had nothing to do last winter. Leigh had baked a flirtatious chocolate bread and filled it with velvety chocolate hearts. How she managed that, he didn’t ask, but it tasted decadent and moist, truly a dessert of love.



The candles danced in celebration with all of them as Sarantos pushed himself back in his chair and smiled. “Well, my love, you’ve outdone yourself for sure. This meal was definitely made with love and was out of this world fabulous.” He paused and took both of her hands in his own and said, “No, Leigh, I stand corrected, you are the one who is out of this world and fabulous! I’m so eloquent with words, right?”



She puckered her luscious lips and blew him a thankful kiss. He felt it touch his mouth. He literally felt the moist fondling of her mouth. Was there magic in the air? He lifted his fingers to his lips and smiled sinfully. She was apparently now more freely expressing some of her hidden talents, talents she’d never shared until this very moment. This woman was incredible and so mystifying. He grinned at her; she tilted her head and threw him a wicked grin. Before he could respond and remove her quickly from the kitchen and

into their bedroom, she laughed and stood up and then proceeded to run away from him.

She collected up the dishes and said, “Why thank you sir. I didn’t set out to impress you, but simply to honor our love, yet it would seem I’ve succeeded in both regards. Shall I ask your eyes...and stomach?”



He joined her in laughing and helped collect the dishes. They washed everything while the fire crackled in the background. He put on another log saving Tom from the worry that was sure to come. The tinder leaped into action. Sarantos watched it burn and soon after spoke absentmindedly, “So that’s where everyone went today. You got them to leave us alone, even Mika made her quiet escape.”

“Clever man,” she teased. “It didn’t take you long to solve that mystery, did it?”

“Duh...I know it took me a while to figure it out since I am a silly boy but I thank you for your kind gesture and polite tone, my little smart ass.” He moved to grab her arm, but she pulled away and ran towards the bedroom, laughing. “Running away won’t help you! Not one bit,” he joked and followed her into the room like a stray puppy in love.

She threw herself on the bed and said, “Play me a song, Sarantos and I’ll dance for you.”

How could he refuse such a request? For him, the most perfect moment just came true. He closed his eyes for a second as if to process this memory and permanently etch it into his mind forever. He then picked up his guitar and sang of love on Valentine’s Day. The magic that held two lovers captured inside a world where they shared one soul, yet allowed their own spirit to live free. He watched her face as the words flowed so easily because of his love for her. She stood up and danced perfectly to the music and melody, matching love to love and heart to heart. The song came alive as the beat echoed their combined heartbeats. He suddenly felt drugged and intoxicated. The room filled with floating roses. He watched as they climbed the bedposts and moved up the wall. A garden of romance in their bedroom was blossoming to life, far better than any fantasy ever imagined. Energy rose to life in their simple bed chamber on this Valentine’s Day.

His life seemed to belong to someone else, like a king out of an old classic fairy tale. He had a hard time figuring out if this magic was his song, Leigh’s mystical essence, or a combination of both. No matter, it was the most passionate

experience of his entire life! He didn't feel like he ever deserved to be this happy. What had he ever done to deserve such a moment of magnificence?

She was moving with such grace—making love as he played and sang. He continued over and over again in a very magical way, never stopping the words or the rhythm. This definitely had to be one of those perks of being in love with Leigh...the room was a garden and his body was like jello, yet he sang on somehow. He wasn't sure how long they were in this bed of love. It was like being inside a real, living and breathing Valentine's Day card. Time lost meaning. Sarantos didn't really care if they were locked in this flirtatious rapture for a month, a year or a century, he didn't want it to end. The reflex was bliss and pure love. For all he knew the night moved to day and the moon rose and set again. It didn't matter.



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His eyes were closed, but he knew he was now lying in bed and he felt the big cat moving at the foot of the bed. Well, there wasn't much space for a cat of Mika's size to move, but nevertheless, she jumped up on the bed and made her presence known.

He opened his eyes wondering if he'd just had the most incredible dream, but Leigh was curled up in his arms; the room still smelt of garden flowers and damp earth. It wasn't a dream after all. That soothed his soul. Their party had to have gone on way into the late morning hours, but he felt alive,

refreshed and very well rested. He wanted her again. How could he dare leave her to go on another adventure right now?

“You have to, it is your duty.”

“Mika, go away, do you have to be such a spoil sport?”

“Yes.”

Mika purred and rubbed against Leigh’s long legs. Leigh still had her eyes closed as her lips broke into a beautiful smile but she reached her hand around her body to pet the head of the persistent cat.

This day would prove to be one of the hardest of his life. Sarantos didn’t want to go, not now, not ever.

“Leigh, I know you know I’m leaving today. Come with us. Please, I don’t think I can leave you again.”

Her gentle voice riveted throughout his whole body. “Sarantos, I must go help our friends plan and get ready for their wedding, and if I’m thinking correctly there will soon be another one I’ll want to assist with, as well.”

He jerked his head towards her and looked into her open eyes searching for what she knew. Was it a comment about them? Had she read him? Of that he’d had no doubt, but would she be so bold? “What? Are you referring to Star and Brad? How does everyone know about that? I just found out last week.”

“Relax, Sarantos. Who else do you think I was referring too?” She nudged him teasingly. “Oh, my love, everyone has sight and love will show its magical face to those who know what to look for, it isn’t that hard...love isn’t hard. People make it

hard but it isn't difficult in its nature.”

“I suppose,” his voice held a grumbly attitude.

“Dearest, Sarantos, all will be fine. I trust you'll return and I predict you'll experience more lively Valentine's Day adventures in your future,” she said with a chuckle while sliding her fingers through his hair.

“God, I hope so. There's always an adventure with you, that's for sure.” He thought his love with Leigh was pure love that could not ever be denied.

He watched her get up. He realized they'd just shared more than love. He might even go so far as to say it was an out of body experience. He'd only heard of people who might have felt this, but until last night he wasn't sure if he at any point believed it or thought he would ever have one himself. Surely it couldn't have been anything except that because that type of pleasure couldn't exist in the real world, unless he never understood what love actually meant until now. He knew he wanted to do that if he could every night. That garden theme was so cool. It was just wow...no way to explain it, but magical and wow! Words always filled his head but right now, he couldn't think of any other way to describe last night. Just wow.

“Let's go Mika,” Leigh said and headed out the door to get some morning coffee leaving Sarantos lusting for her more than ever.



He let out a deep sigh. She'd just thrown on a pair of leather pants and a tunic that was a curious purple, ran a brush through her hair, and looked like a million dollars when she left the room. He was going to take a shower but then realized he already seemed kinda clean. His hair had a slight scent of earthy musk to it. Abruptly, he remembered they'd stood under a waterfall washing each other down. Flashes of images and snappy scenes ran thru his mind, but that had to have been a dream he thought.

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“Good morning, Sarantos, or should I say Valentine?”

“Well, wizard you disappeared rather conveniently yesterday, but here you are back again and in your normal state of un-reputable sarcasm.”

The wizard patted him on the back and laughed heartily. “Well, my friend it's about time you appreciated and understand that no one comes close to making this old wizard uncomfortable, yet certainly foolish people have many a time tried and failed. You'll be happy to know Gabby will be here later this evening so we will not leave until tomorrow morning bright and early. So you can extend your day of love to a second day with Leigh if she has not grown tired of your antics. Or is that even allowed, considering Valentine's Day is only one day and that one day has now passed?”

“Very funny, wizard, very funny.”

Breakfast was already laid out nicely on the table and Tom’s wife Gretta had outdone herself today. He walked over and kissed Leigh on the cheek and pulled up a chair next to her. He was famished from last night and amassed on his plate bread, eggs, fruit, sausage and a hot bowl of oatmeal. Wallis looked over at him in earnest while he shoved the food into his mouth in rapid succession. He didn’t feel the least bit shy scarfing down almost a whole loaf of bread.

The wizard grinned and shook his head. “Leigh, it appears that you’ve got the touch that drains the energy right out of your victim leaving him vanquished and in dire need of nourishment.”

Everyone laughed, including Blayke and Switch who had just entered the room. The cold air from the frosty winter morning blew in causing the hair on Mika’s back to stand straight up. The big cat shivered slightly before they closed the door behind them.

At the sight of his friends, Sarantos jumped up and gave them both a hug. It was really good to see them. These people were like family to him and Brad.

“So laddie it sounds like you had a great night. But, I still say a female dwarf is the most desired woman in the world. When she grabs you by the beard and whips you around throwing you on top of the bed...” Slowly and pleasantly the dwarf’s face lit up and his eyes drifted. Sarantos didn’t want to know what he was seeing in his mind. Then his grin extended covering his whole face as he smacked Sarantos on the back almost knocking him into the table. “Well, my friend, let’s just say, ecstasy, pure ecstasy!”

Blayke shifted slightly before taking off his coat. “Ah, the world is now a better place, dwarf, since you’ve shared that little horrifying image with your friends. We thank you for not offering any further details involving your naked bottom or the stamina of your female dwarfs.”





“Oh, I couldn’t do that, even if I wanted to, friend, otherwise our poor women would be hounded by you vulgar humans. You’d be trying to steal away all our women! Some secrets are best kept to oneself.”

“Indeed dwarf, indeed,” said the wizard with a twinkle in his eye.

Sarantos shook his head in disgust trying to get the image of the wizard with a dwarf female being friendly out of his mind. Could he ever have desire a female

dwarf? It was impossible to ponder. Besides, he would never want anyone other than Leigh.

Leigh interrupted his thoughts. “Come and eat something,” she said as she got up and filled up several plates with food while Gretta poured out fresh coffee.

“You don’t have to ask me twice, in fact you don’t have to ask me at all,” laughed the dwarf as he hung up his coat and sat down guzzling down his first cup of coffee without taking a breath.

Laughing, Sarantos asked, “How can you taste the wonderful flavor of the coffee by drinking it so fast, dwarf?”

“Dwarves have outstanding taste buds that extend beyond your human understanding. We live to eat, unlike the likes of humans who eat to live. I’ll never understand it...never!”

“So I heard we won’t be leaving until tomorrow morning,” said Blayke changing the subject.

“Yes, Gabby won’t be available until this evening, so we decided first sign of light would work best to head off on our adventure.”

“I travelled around to get some essential information on the woods, I might have picked up a little more help. Hopefully, we will see. It doesn’t hurt to check. Also Sergio went to the woods to get a feel for them, you know elves can feel such things. He was cloaked in invisibility but before he got twenty feet, he was spotted. By what he couldn’t be sure but he did feel threatened enough causing him to leave immediately. He proceeded to become a bat, but was sent out again by a strange sound that affected his sonar. This worries me, wizard. Sergio does not scare easily or succumb to many things in this or any world.”

“Yes, Blayke, I heard from him as well but because of his experiment we learned a lot thankfully. The giants were gifted and kind. They wouldn’t allow any falsehoods in their woods. I believe no matter what you do to hide who you are, the woods will know and you may not be accepted. That might be part of the danger for a lot of people who’ve tried to go there dishonestly and died. Be true to who you are, inside and out. I worry for our Goddess, who changes appearances so that others may not become infatuated with her beauty. Maybe on this trip, once we enter the woods, she’ll have to appear as her true self. I only hope you men can handle it.” He stared right at Blayke.

Blayke never said a word. Sarantos knew Blayke could handle it. He was almost godlike himself. He’d never met a more disciplined or self-controlled individual in all his life. Yeah, he was sure Blayke could handle it.

They talked quietly and laughed out loud as the morning went by fast. The hours at the table were wonderful, catching up on the past week and enjoying each other. He still wanted time alone with Leigh though.

After three hours of sharing the past week, Adele joined them at the table. Wallis

had moved to his chair in front of the fire and Mika laid all cozy at his feet. The door burst open and the cold air once again sent shivers through Sarantos when Brad and Brazon entered. They brushed the snow from their cloaks and smiled.



“Welcome, friends,” said Wallis.

Brazon lifted a bag into the air and said, “Friends we are, and we bring you gifts for your journey. We’ve worked all week deciphering what would be the most helpful to you on this most dangerous journey. I think we’ve succeeded.”

Brad shook off the snow before speaking, “Sergio was extremely helpful after his little visit to the woods. We mixed some potions that might free you to be able to disguise yourselves as needed. Sergio wasn’t sure if he could even go into the woods at all because his presence is full of confusion. He is elf, but not,

he is vampire, but not, and the bat is part of the whole thing that makes him undeniably the untruth that may not get past the borders, so he came to us immediately.”

“Good thinking, on Sergio’s part. That’s why he would make an excellent king. I think being a vampire has calmed his youthful enthusiasm for adventure. Although, I can’t say I’ve outgrown mine!” The wizard’s voice was mischievous.

Chuckles were heard around the room.

“When are Sergio and Murille joining us?” Sarantos was wondering how much his

time with Leigh would be cut short.

The wizard blew on his pipe and said, “They should join us sometime tonight. So everyone needs to be prepared for more discussions this evening. I suppose we should do what we need to do before tonight, since it’s already early afternoon. I’ll go over the gifts our friends have brought us and divvy it out.”

Everyone shook their heads in agreement and immediately the room cleared.

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Leigh, looked long and hard into his eyes, as they lay on their bed talking. He would miss her intense gaze and deep spirit that touched both his mind and soul.

“Shh,” he whispered, “I hear something.”

“What?” Her voice was flushed.



“My heartbeat throbbing loudly inside with the love I have for you, my darling. I can hardly breathe. The mere thought of leaving you weighs heavy on my mind tonight.” He couldn’t stop a single tear from running down his cheek.

She wiped it away, slowly. “And I you, my love. But, know this my Valentine, you are my life and if I hear you are in danger or your life is at risk, do not underestimate my desire to find you and protect you if needed. I’ll come to you in

your moment of need for I too, can't be without you. This I promise you.”

She held him closely and they both wept.

The door opened and the voices of elves and Gabby filled the dining area.

Sarantos squeezed her tightly. Would this be the last time they would see each other in this lifetime?

He wept once more.