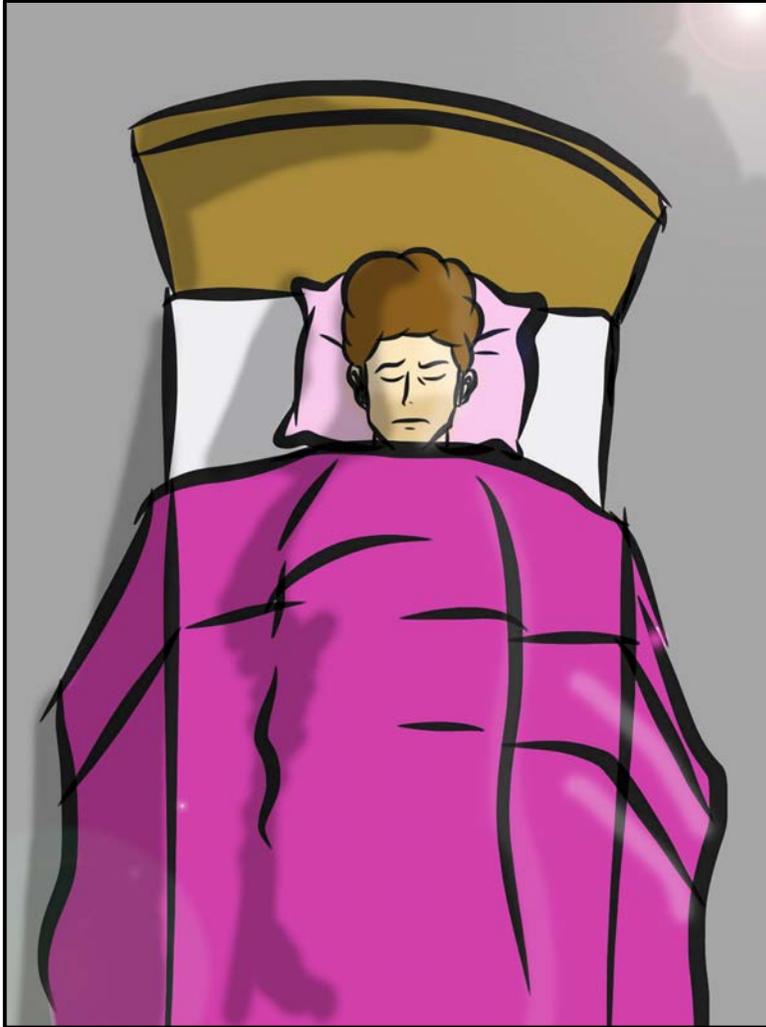


Chapter 4 “Dreamer”



The first thing Sarantos felt as he came to was a deep throbbing to either side of his temples. The soft familiar whispers of several friends reverberated gently about the room. He couldn't quite hear what was being said, but suddenly realized there were several voices that were unfamiliar to him. He was sure this racket had somehow awoken him from his peaceful dreams about Leigh.

Between the pounding in his head and a slight case of confusion he all at once remembered — someone had tried to kill him!

He tried to listen to the pandemonium for a while to make sure there were no current hostile intentions towards him or his friends. He couldn't tell exactly what it was, but the smell of warm food permeated the air around him. He wanted to open his eyes, but the pain was too great or maybe it was the fear of what he might see that prevented him from lifting his eyelids to properly assess his present situation. He decided to go where he felt safe and where he didn't have to think - inside Leigh's heart.

Leigh, if you can hear my mind, my thoughts, just know that we'll always be okay, even when we're apart. You always said I was a dreamer. Maybe I am but I'll never break your heart. I miss you my love.

He took a deep breath and finally found the courage to slowly open his eyes.

They were still actually in the same room and he was in the same bed he'd fallen asleep upon. A fire was blazing under a dark black cauldron and a woman with dark red robes and long blonde braids carefully stirred the pot. She turned to face Switch who stood next to another dwarf. They both extended their bowls toward her as she ladled the steaming liquid into their aged brown ceramic vessels. He noticed right away that the soft, youthful face of that woman quite possibly dated her. She might be a girl or teen, maybe no older than eighteen.

She continued to politely fill bowls and place them on the table, while the dwarfs sat down and started to enjoy their food. Wallis sat next to a man in navy blue robes with a white crescent moon across the front. His beard matched Wallis's in length and color, but the way he held himself tilting to the side was rather curious. Mika was sleeping, as usual, but the thing that bothered him the most was that no one seemed to notice he was awake.



He tried to sit up and that's when he saw a strange looking man standing to the right side of his bed. His attention was still on the young woman's movements. The stranger next to him was around seven feet tall with ashen stone-like skin, a bald head and a muscular physical appearance. He wore simple leather pants and a plain shirt.

His friends were busy chatting, never looking his way. Maybe he was dead and was having one of those out of body experiences. After all, no one really knew what could happen in the afterlife Sarantos reasoned. He might be doomed to travel around for all of eternity like

this haunting his friends, and being regularly tortured by their sarcasm.

"Hello? Does anyone care that my head is reeling or that someone tried to kill me???"

"Welcome, back to the land of the living, Sarantos. You've been asleep for twenty-four hours. That was quite a rest my friend."

"What are you talking about, Wallis? It's not a rest when you're being suffocated in your sleep!"

The wizard laughed and then continued talking with the man next to him.

"That would be my fault. I'm truly sorry, Sarantos" The giant by his bed faced him with deep golden eyes and a gentle smile. "I came through the wall, like I do most of the time and there you were in my friend's bed. You see, he'd just died in battle against a horrendous hoard of snow shifters. His bravery allowed us to escape. We went out searching for more food and ran into those scum who would rather see death in the world instead of life and beauty. They have wicked hearts, or maybe none at all. I was angry and hurt. I'm so sorry. My name is Rocky."

"Nice to meet you. I'm glad you came to your senses before my demise. That would've been awkward for the both of us!"

The large man chuckled. "Yes, indeed. Luckily, the wizard recognized Bear when he jumped on Mika's back. Bear belongs to Flame, a wizard who was an apprentice under Wallis for many years. Here, let me help you up."

"Thanks. I still feel a little dizzy."

Rocky lifted him off his feet and placed him in a chair in front of some warm food.

"Eat up, Sarantos, you'll need your strength. That lovely young lady is Velvet, the dwarf is Barf and this intelligent man is a great friend, Flame. He nearly got Switch with a lightning bolt, had I not deflected it with my insanely quick reflexes. I saved your skin too by placing a freeze spell on Rocky, which gave Blayke time to put his swords to the big man's throat. Of course, Mika hissed when she recognized Bear and we all came to our senses."

Mika looked up. "Yes, he is certainly a nuisance and mischief maker but can also have a great sense of humor. Bear can be very handy in combat and has many skills. You'll like him, Sarantos. He's a bit like me, at times."

Great, just what the doctor ordered.

"I heard that Sarantos."

"Of course, you did!" He hated it when they read his thoughts and was about to take a swig of ale when Flame's robe came open and out jumped a bear the size of a small cat. The cat landed directly in front of Sarantos bowl of soup, dipping his head in while he started to eat.



Sarantos jumped up out of his chair.
"What's this?"

"What do you think it is, human.
Haven't you ever seen a bear
before?"

"A bear?"

"You're brilliant, you must have
dwarf in you."

"Good grief," moaned Sarantos.

Wallis grinned and said, "Meet
Bear, Sarantos. This is Flame's familiar, friend, protector and his eyes."

"Familiar what?" Sarantos asked with mockery oozing from his pores. As he sat back down and scooted the bear away from his food, he groaned.

"Oh, he is a dwarf. Intelligent and nasty humored for sure."

Mika meowed and purred. Sarantos couldn't remember the last time he'd heard her voice ring with such joy and pleasure.

"Thanks loads, Mika."

He looked around and became curious about the others. "Where are the elves, Willow, Gabby and Blayke?" It was then that he noticed what the wizard had meant about Bear being Flame's eyes. The wizard was blind.

Wallis peered at Sarantos. "They went out into the cold to seek out the snow creatures and then to clear our way, so of course we can be on our way."

"Oh."

As Sarantos ate, he was pleasantly surprised by the healing vibe that filled the air of all present in this chamber. The laughter of Velvet resounded while she watched the dwarfs eat and listened childishly to their belly-aching. He had to smile himself. The dwarves were entertaining! He watched Wallis enjoy the deep conversation of a long-lost friend who understood the wizardry behind the wizard. All in all, it was a delightful time. Rocky had moved to guard the room at the door and stood like a stone statue. If Sarantos didn't know any better, he might've been fooled that he wasn't real. That could come in handy someday, he thought to himself.

He listened to stories about their journeys and marveled how simple this group lived in order to survive. They never wanted for much, but instead the gold they'd found was used to benefit the town folk where they'd grown up. They only kept what they

needed and lived every day to better their world. All of them were intelligent, well-intentioned and pleasant company on this fine day.

Bear had taken up residence on the mane of Mika. Both seemed content. The miniature bear enjoyed riding on the back of the extremely large cat and Mika would get up just to give him a ride every now and then. They seemed like good friends.

Time passed slowly and all was peaceful. They were safely hidden away deep inside the cavern.



The fire was dying down when Barf jumped up and removed a large stone, pulling a log out of the wall and placing it on the fire.

The dwarf moved back to the table and lifted his glass before singing a very sad ballad. His voice was rich with deep tones and somber inflections. Velvet looked down and he noticed several tears dripping down her cheek. Even Switch shed a tear while the two wizards nodded their heads and puffed on their pipes.

Sarantos could stay here for a while and be quite happy. He was relaxed. He was calm.

Velvet stood up and was about to speak when the door burst open and the elves, Willow and Blayke came forcefully into the room.

Their clothing was snow covered and Murielle had what appeared to be blood on her pale white cloak. Sergio's eyes were calm, but blood dripped from his fangs, obviously the battle was so great they hadn't yet had time to retract. Blayke carried Willow in his arms and quickly moved to one of the beds gently laying her down. He slipped off her wet clothing and handed them to Murielle. She walked to the fire and placed them on a chair before the blaze.



Wallis leapt to his feet. His robes whooshed as he moved purposefully past Sarantos. He knelt to her side and looked up at Blayke.

"We didn't want to tell you she was injured. We thought it best to hurry back, instead."

The old wizard frowned and quickly went through their sacks searching through jars.

Her eyes were open and her cheeks were flushed. Blood was saturating her clothing by her left side. Her appearance

was fluctuating between Aurora and Willow. Sarantos felt like he was going to throw up.

"Where's Gabby?"

His voice seemed to disturb the very foundation of the room. Everyone turned to look at him. He was an unnecessary distraction. Suddenly he felt very small.

Blayke looked like he was going to break down. His eyes flashed. "Gabby stayed behind so we might escape. Even now, I don't know if she lives or dies."

The wizard never looked up but obviously found what he was looking for — he held up a pink vial and smiled. Blayke held her head up as the wizard gently put the liquid into her opened mouth. Blayke sat her up to help her swallow it faster while Wallis pulled out a jar of ointment and quickly pulled up her shirt and rubbed the greasy substance on her side covering a gash the size of a table knife. Willow smiled and her appearance began to stabilize.

She reached out her hand to Wallis and whispered, "I can't feel Gabby. Help me wizard, I need to feel her. Help me reach out to her Wallis!"

He grabbed her hand and squeezed it tight. They both closed their eyes and appeared to be praying but Sarantos knew they were searching for her thoughts.

After about ten minutes Wallis stared wildly into the eyes of Willow. "I can't find her! By god, I can't hear her think. She is closed off from me."

He stood up and turned searching around the room in desperation, wanting answers. Sarantos had never seen the wizard so distraught.

Wallis grabbed his arm, hurting him slightly. "Sarantos, grab your instrument, dwarf, your axe. The two of you are with me. Quickly, make haste!"

Sarantos didn't have time to think. He threw on his winter clothes, grabbed his guitar and was standing in front of Wallis before the dwarf had even moved.

"Hurry, dwarf!"

It only took Switch a second before the three of them were ready. The wizard was about to cast a spell when Blayke stopped him by grabbing the wizard's shoulder and spinning him around.

"Wallis, you've gone mad. You can't go out there searching for her in that. You know the skills of Willow and the elves, yet we returned badly damaged and lacking Gabby. You will kill them, surely." He pointed at Sarantos and the dwarf.

It was then that Sarantos realized what he was doing. He'd responded to the wizard out of fear for Gabby and hadn't thought about the ramifications. He could die out there. He never thought about the consequences of his words. Then a random thought popped in his head. Were these creatures yellow?

A whisper filled his head. "No, they're not yellow, Sarantos."

"Thanks, Mika."

Meanwhile, the wizard became angry and pushed Blayke away from him and continued his incantation. Murielle and Sergio moved towards him and each taking one hand searched his face. He looked into their eyes.

Sergio spoke, "Wizard, you'll kill them both."



"I will not, now move out of my way elf."

Murielle became anxious and her eyes saddened. She took the wizard's head in both her hands.

"Wallis, we are old friends and I know how you feel about Gabby. Leave it be. You don't know what is out there. The snow shifters came with an army of 200, but right when we thought we had them beaten down to only around 50 out of the snow rose ten Blizzard men. They carried white blades that cut deep into the side of Willow. I've never seen that type of blade before and I'm not sure if it could've also done some other kind of damage to our friend we have yet to learn about."

She paused long enough to let that sink into his mind, but his eyes flashed.

"Murielle, we leave no one behind." Then he raised up like a dark wizard and shouted so loud Sarantos didn't know how the small elf could endure his voice without a bat of an eye but she did. "We leave no one behind!"

He gathered up his robes and moved away from her and grabbed Sarantos again by the arm.

"Wizard, think! These are your friends, as well. Do you want us all dead? They come out of the snow buried deep in the cold. We can't see them until they stand before us ready to drag our bodies down into their snow covered caves. We must wait them out. We must wait for the snow to stop falling. Wallis, we should turn back."

He shot her a look of anger. "We can't. I owe you and Sergio. Nevertheless, it's our time to make up to the giants what was done to them. It's our time. Now! Our time is now."

Sarantos had never seen the wizard like this. He was usually calm and meticulously thought out new situations, but this new Wallis shocked him. He looked around the room at his friends and they all appeared very concerned and even frightened. He knew better than to say another word. He chose to keep out of it. The wizard's look could take him down anyway. Besides none of this would help those fighting against him right now.



The wizard bellowed, "We must go now! Time is of the utmost importance. Tell me elf, did you destroy any of the Blizzard men?"

Sergio spoke up. "They are snow rats, Wallis. We cannot defeat them. We aren't prepared for their type of war."

"We destroyed none." Murielle muttered.

"Why?"

"I told you, wizard, they carried weapons the likes of which I'd never

seen before. Not ever in our long lives have I seen these types of weapons. I know not where they found such things. They are white as the snow and bite into your flesh like the harsh cold. One touch and Willow was down, shaking and cold like death itself. You know what she is made of wizard, and her kind could never be brought down by any mere weapon...until now. We need time to think. We need time to find out more about these weapons. They must be destroyed no doubt. No human could ever hope to stand against these creatures who carry such swords. Even magic and elves run from this type of force. There was ancient writing on them. I need a

day to think on it with Sergio, Willow and yourself, before we dare confront them again."

"I care not for your research, Murielle. Every moment we stand here and waste, Gabby's life is being drained from her."

"Stop, wizard before it's too late. I implore you. This is certain death but we can defeat it if we approach it from a smart direction. Death cannot be defeated head on, but snuck up on from the back and slayed before it sees you. This is death's terrain and we will be its victims otherwise. Wallis, I would follow you to my death, you know that, but this is suicide. Gabby gave up her life so we might live, would you waste that life so easily wizard?"



Wallis dropped his head and for the first time since Sarantos met the wizard, he appeared utterly defeated. His shoulders slumped and he slid into a chair. His cold grip was still holding onto Sarantos, like a vice wrapped around his wrist. He wanted to shout out but instead stood there like everyone else in the room except for the elves. They were the only ones with life-long experiences that might matter to the wizard in this situation. Sarantos had nothing to offer. He was just a silly dreamer. He once asked Leigh how she'd figured that out. She told him by the look

in his eyes. Now he wondered what exactly she'd meant by that.

"You're a dreamer, wizard. Nothing but a dreamer," Sarantos blurted out suddenly. He couldn't believe that came out of his mouth, but the look on Wallis's face looked like his own at this moment. They were both agitated. Sarantos was always dreaming of things he couldn't do and things he wanted for himself that usually became struggles against other people. How'd that happen? If your dreams couldn't be reality, what was the point anyway?

"What'd you say, Sarantos?" The wizard didn't sound happy and his grip tightened.

He had to say it, again? He couldn't believe he said it the first time! "I said you're a dreamer wizard, nothing but a dreamer, that's what I said."



The room suddenly became colder than death as the wizard stood up.

Sergio groaned. The dwarf tried to move between the wizard and him. Blayke had said nothing the whole time and looked to be in shock, as he knelt by Willow's side. The giant by the door never moved.

Mika moved toward the wizard, slowly like a cat ready

to pounce, while bear rode her back like a jockey.

Sarantos started to shake nervously and yet, the wizard smiled at him. The wizard's voice trembled and his own body quivered.

"So, Sarantos you think I'm a dreamer. Well, maybe you're right. I am a dreamer. I've always been a dreamer. A dreamer that believes we can make anything happen and I dream of saving those that mean a lot to me and saving the entire world if I have to. Is that what you mean, Sarantos. I'm a dreamer who dreams to save the world?"

"Yes, that's what I mean, Wallis. Maybe your dream is just a little too dreamy right now?"

The dwarf reached Sarantos and grabbed his other wrist and pulled in the opposite direction from Wallis, almost pulling his arms apart like a wishbone.

"Come on wizard, let the boy go. What's gotten into you, anyway? I never thought I'd agree with Sergio on anything, but he has my vote."

The wizard snarled. "Well, that's too bad dwarf, because you and I have a lot in common. You dream of food and filling your precious belly and I dream of saving the world. Would you say that's right Sarantos?"

Cripes, why does he keep talking to me? Why'd I go and open my big mouth Sarantos wondered.

"Mika, I know." Wallis looked at the big cat apologetically.

He was beaten badly and then Sarantos opened his mouth. What was wrong with him anyway? Why did he do these things, like think out loud at the most inappropriate moments?



cloak scattered all around.

Suddenly and without warning, the wizard screamed and threw his free hand over his head. The magic took over. Sarantos was now floating in some kind of mysterious dust along with the dwarf and Wallis. They were being transported. Then they landed in a huge snow pile.

Great, Sarantos wondered as he gathered his senses. They were all probably dead. He might have been a dreamer but he never would've dreamed of this.

As he looked around, he noticed the cold snow. The snow was covered in fresh blood, but there was no sign of Gabby anywhere except for her torn and tattered