

## Chapter 6

### “A Sunny Day”

He had no control over his body as it flailed about through a vortex that seemed to be closing in on him. It became smaller and smaller until he saw a tiny hole in the direction he was being pulled. He wasn't sure he could fit through the opening.

“No,” he screamed and closed his eyes!

His shouting didn't stop him from being sucked through the hole and popping like a cork into a cool breeze that smelled like singed flesh, fireworks, blood and sweaty armpits. He collapsed on top of something extremely sticky, and when he opened his eyes Derek was beneath him covered in a grand white cocoon.

He couldn't free his hands to stand up. His thoughts turned into words of confusion and anguish, “A web? Crap, I'm stuck in a freaking web!”

His concern for his friend turned urgent and his voice crackled, “Derek, are you okay?” There was no response.



Strong hands grabbed the back of his shirt and lifted him while the web was already starting to disintegrate off of Derek. A multitude of loud voices were mumbling incantations and the sound was both deafening and eerie at the same time. The whisperings of his friend Wallis were mixed in with the others. Blayke had been the force that stood him up but before they could speak, Blayke rapidly turned drawing both blades from their sheaths. Daggers were being hurled in their direction, but the hands of Blayke moved like lightning as he shifted effortlessly to strike down each threat to their life. Sarantos tried to count how many blades

Blayke dispersed but he lost count after ten. Blayke was simply too fast.

“Duck, Sarantos!” Blayke shouted.

That's when he wished he was still on the ground as he skirted around flying darts, using his guitar to bat them away when needed. He caught a glimpse of Mika cleaning herself over by a sign that read, 'Irongate 15 kilometers.' He was jealous. She must have landed on her feet, as cats always do. The teleporting of bodies by Wallis needed some work Sarantos thought. After all, if they can land on their feet in Star Trek - then what's the problem?

Sarantos suddenly realized they were actually caught in a crossfire between two warring factions of wizards. He decided he should make a run toward the cat. He didn't get far, though, because Blayke reached out with his bear like grip and hauled him back into the group before he had moved barely four feet. Wallis was casting a spell and Derek was now standing again, with a little help from Blayke. A shield of wavering colors magically appeared around the group.

"Stay close to me," the wizard said. As he moved toward the sign, their protective covering moved magically with them.

Now the wizard was cursing, as they moved like one across the different shades of blue grasses. Sarantos and Derek were being pulled along by Blayke. Sarantos couldn't help but notice his surroundings as he was stumbling through the tall grasses that had many shades of unique blues that colored this awe-inspiring landscape. The forest to the left of them and the mountains in the background were cascading with tiny waterfalls that were created by the sapphire sun as the streams of its light passionately hit the earth. This must be what was considered a sunny day in this unusual world although, the rays felt rather cool upon his skin. Grey buildings in the distance outlined a town that backed up to what appeared to be the end of the woodlands. An impressive structure of a foreboding castle stood in the rolling hills of the mountains. Immediately, he wanted to go inside. The intense bluish colors and beauty of Ethel slowly took his breath away.

The wizards were still fighting when the small party reached Mika.

"Great placement, Wallis," Sarantos voiced in sarcasm.

Wallis cursed louder and visually threw daggers at Sarantos with enough speed to penetrate his eyes and bore into his brain giving him a quick headache. Sometimes magic was just wrong!



There were about thirty wizards to either side of the battle zone and their hands were moving quickly with voices raised very loudly in a language he didn't understand. One group carried staffs with a bizarre looking animal head carved on the top, and all of those wizards were dressed in deep scarlet robes. There was a strange design on the front of their robes, about chest level, one he'd never seen before today. It resembled an eye, but what resembled a peony was in the center. The flowers began to open and close in a sporadic manner. He couldn't be sure, but from where he stood some type of powder flew out from the center of the flower as they opened and the thick substance moved directly at the wizards

opposing them. Amazingly, the spell casters appeared to be guiding the direction of the powder.

The other group of wizards were adorned in silent black robes and carried staffs that had creepy skulls with ominous red glowing eyes carved at the top. They wore headbands with strange writings across them and their robes were covered with many lifelike grey bats with open mouths that exposed horrendously sharp fangs dripping fresh blood. He didn't have to guess a lot who the bad guys were.

Sarantos and his group watched as the powder started to filter around the dark wizards. Some sneezed and others stopped their incantations while those in the back quietly disappeared before the yellow dust could affect them. Two wizards screamed and fell to the ground, suddenly unable to move. There were five left standing in a confused and helpless state, until several vampires materialized behind them and promptly grabbed them by their robes and took them to a place of safety.

A high-pitched screech became the only auditory sensation in the immediate vicinity, as bats came flying out of the robes of the wizard/vampires that were left on the ground. They immediately flew at Sarantos and his group.

Their screams were unbearable as their wicked wings beat fiercely against the sharp wind. They were within ten feet of the group when Wallis nimbly raised his staff and pointed it at them, disintegrating all ten of them right out of the air while their beady little eyes glowed in anticipation.

The end of the battle scene was indeed a messy one. Some wizards were hanging from trees, others had limbs sticking up from the ground like they were pounded into the earth by a great force. Upon further investigation, several were even frozen in place and one was turned to stone. All were dead by cautious human inspection.

\*\*\*

The scarlet wizards started to dissipate one by one, until only three cloaked magi remained. They conversed for a moment with two elite-looking long bowmen and three armored dwarves carrying short swords and battleaxes.



A tall woman broke from the group and headed their way. Her flowing hair hung to her waist and its silver color picked up the blues in the landscape adding a brilliant presence to her already elegant stature. A red pseudodragon sat upon her shoulder and blended in with the color of the robe. Sarantos was impressed, he'd only read about them in fantasy books and now, here he was looking at a real, tangible, living, breathing dragon. The rest of her party headed over to the two wizards who had collapsed on the ground when the magic powder had overtaken them.

The woman stopped in front of Wallis, her eyes were sparkling as she nodded, "Welcome Friends."

She had a smile that brought Sarantos an instant feeling of warmth and friendship. He hoped it wasn't a spell.

Wallis spoke first, "What prompts you to bestow upon us the word friend, before we are introduced, wizard?"

Her eyes twinkled, "The vampire's minions only attack their enemies, and enemies of The Nullifidian's are friends of The Asterism wizards."

Sarantos already liked this woman. She held herself high, but showed no apparent arrogance. Her ability to manifest a friendly disposition after a grueling battle expressed an endearing and joyful spirit.

Mika felt the exact same way, because she began purring and rubbing against the woman's legs. She bent down and gently stroked the long hair of the beautiful cat.

Her fingers interlaced with strands of fur and never removed her eyes from the cat, as she addressed Wallis, "Your familiar is sleek, wizard. Her kind is rare throughout the circle of existence, and to summon such a magnificent beast is not only difficult, but she had to submit herself to you. Someday, I would love to hear your story of how you enthralled one so divine, as Mika. Her name suits her, clever and alert she is."

Wallis raised his brow, but never said a word.

"My name is Adela and this is Milan. Welcome to Irongate and the land of Ethel."

Sarantos stepped forward and bowed, "It's a pleasure to meet you, my name is Sarantos and I look forward to building a long-lasting friendship with you while working together."

"Your accent is similar to those born on earth. I'm extremely fascinated by that strange instrument you carry strapped across your shoulder. Are you a bard?"

"Yes, I suppose in a way I'm a bard, although I carry what we call a guitar instead of an instrument that would be more appropriate for bards," Sarantos grinned sheepishly.

Wallis intervened before she could speak again, "Well, it seems we're already friends and I won't need to tell you my name is Wallis and I'm from Yarrowtopia.

More important, Adela, I believe we are kindred spirits. Mika wouldn't have shared her name with you unless you were the same race as I, or unless I gave her permission."

"Oh, how right you are," she laughed joyfully, as she threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly.

Wallis kissed both her cheeks. "It's been so long since I've been around kin." His loud laugh held a secret wistfulness.

"Nor, I. How delightful. Please join us at Alazuline, the castle that you can see adding to the beauty of these Cerulean Hills. We took it back from the renegades only a fortnight ago. We'll celebrate victory and kinship."

When the rest of Adela's friends joined them the dwarfs were carrying the two renegades. Their robes had holes where the bats had extracted themselves and now the material was hanging on their sleeping frames.

"Hello," said a very young male wizard with shoulder length blonde hair. His eyes were the color of orchards and his skin had an iridescent blue shine.

Sarantos smiled toward Derek as he stepped forward and nervously decided to speak, "Hello, my name's Derek, son of Sojan from the world Yarrowtopia."

A young female wizard about the same age as Derek moved into view. "Hello, Derek, son of Sojan. The Guardians of Ethel welcome you and your friends," she almost sang her words with a voice as pure and gentle as a fresh spring breeze.

The robe she wore hung on her thin frame, but her eyes defied any weakness as they flashed like the colors of a turbulent sea that held both the deep mysteries and the vibrancy of life.

She pushed several of her waist length blonde strands away from her blue tinted skin and said, "My name is Deanna and that blonde mischief maker is my brother Drew. We're Lazuline's and the rightful guardians of the land of Ethel."

Sarantos watched as Blayke's eyes moved while observing all that was being said. He stood in silence like a statue waiting to come to life.

Adela faced the old wizard, "May I?"

He nodded, “Be my guest.”

With that, her mystical words began to dance about the area stirring up the wind and caused it to swirl about them giving them a pleasant and relaxed sense of comfort as an evergreen fragrance filled their eager nostrils.

No, thought Sarantos, not again, but before he could say, ‘No thanks, I’d rather walk,’ he was moving through a dark tunnel and standing on his own two legs. It felt like he was on one of those floor elevators at an airport on earth. He swiftly rode by viewing scenery made for a sunny day. There were simple things, like people walking by nodding their heads in acknowledgment. Blue jays flew along

with him singing a happy tune. He could’ve sworn Adela made it just for him.



He came to an abrupt stop in front of a wooden door with a bright yellow sun and the coloring was beautiful in every way. It opened and he walked into a massive dining hall.

“Welcome to Alazuline,” Adela smiled sheepishly while sitting at a massive wooden table as a feast was being served. She fit in nicely around the glistening white china.

\*\*\*

Dinner was incredible with rich delicacies that Sarantos had never tasted before in his entire life. The salad greens were blue and offered the fresh crispness of romaine lettuce, but had a rich tone of several different decadent chocolate flavors. Once in a while a burst of mint or lavender would explode in his mouth causing everlasting moments of pleasurable bliss.

He smiled watching Blayke and Derek as their expressions became a series of humorous gestures. Tilting their heads and weirdly closing their eyes trying to find a word to describe what it was they were eating and feeling.

Dinner came with three different soups of unique origins containing foods grown as products of a blue sun. Five different soft breads were passed around the festive table. One was made with an ale that reminded Sarantos of beer bread back home on Earth.



They had been joined by Deanna, Drew, Adela, the dwarfs and archers along with thirty other beings. Some were tinted blue and were the true ‘birth right’ guardians of the land. One handsome blue guardian sat at the head of the table and appeared to have some sort of prestige. Everyone stood up when he came in beside a man with copper hair and respectfully waited until they were seated before they sat back down. The two men wore the robes of the Asterism wizards and sat at either

ends of the table. Two small human men with shifty eyes sat to either side of the man with copper hair. They appeared to observe everything that went on and noticed everyone that moved.

It was a festive dinner and Sarantos thoroughly enjoyed himself. There had been no talk of war or evil things. Their time at this table seemed to bring joy and peace, and nothing more.

Wallis leaned back in his chair and patted his stomach, “Ah, Adela, you are a pleasure and you pleased me with Misolean soup, one of my favorites from our old country. What a feast! I confess it was happily accepted and completely enjoyed.”



She playfully winked at the old wizard.

\*\*\*

What a pleasant night he'd had. When they finally retired for the night he felt as though he'd just left a party fit for a king. Adela had shown them all around the breathtaking rooms of the castle. Sarantos had loved it!

He and Derek were then led into the extremely large room they were going to share during their visit. A massive fireplace about the size of his bathroom back home stood at the far wall blazing away. Wood was skillfully piled to the side in a large box built into the stone wall. It warmed the room well. Castles were typically damp and drafty, but still awe inspiring. Big overstuffed chairs sat in front of the hearth facing a large wooden table placed in between them. There were two oversized sleigh beds in the room. They sat directly behind the chairs facing towards the dancing fire. Heavy drapes hung at the diamond beveled glass windows, which were open. He could see the moon through the window and was pleasantly surprised to find it just like the moon of earth and not blue in color.

“What do you think of this world Derek,” he asked, leaning back in one of the overstuffed chairs?

Derek plopped down on one of the beds, crossed his legs at the ankles and stretched his long arms over his head. “I'd have to say my first impression wasn't a great one, but when we met Deanna my heart skipped a few beats. Is this what love at first site feels like? The food was great but I could hardly eat. She makes me tongue tied.”

“Well, my friend, it seems you've been bitten by what we on earth call, the love bug.”

“What kind of bug is that and how do you know?”

He laughed, “That means love has bitten your heart, and once that happens there is absolutely no escape. Well, except death.”



“You tease me, Sarantos,” he chuckled. “ I love the shades of blue that this world offers in its landscape. The blue works in a harmonious way and the food was quite delicious. I’ve never tasted anything like that salad. I’m at a loss for words to even describe it.” His eyes trailed off in a dreamy manner.

He enjoyed watching his friend kick back, finally relaxed and sharing his feelings. Losing half of his family and killing vampires had surely taken a toll on Derek. He had an inner strength that Sarantos admired.

“To me it had the taste of chocolate. It’s a delicacy in my world where the flavor is derived from a coco bean. We put it in cookies, bread, candy, wine, pastries and, well, just about anything else you can think of.”

“I think I would love the food in your world Sarantos.”

Derek grinned at him and closed his eyes. Within minutes it appeared that he’d fallen heavily asleep.

Sarantos covered him up and put more logs on the warm fire. He watched him sleep for a while and appreciated this world’s ability to build such character and resilience in their young.

He closed his eyes and pictured Leigh next to him. He inhaled deeply and imagined her face smiling up at him, as her head rested upon his chest. He so loved when she would lay on his chest. He had hope in his heart and soul that her body and spirit would survive the nightmare she was living thru.

\*\*\*



Sarantos awakened with the blue sun streaming through the thick beveled glass of the large windows. The colorful prismatic effect was mesmerizing. It was also calming.

He glanced over at Derek and found him already awake and sitting in the chair by the fire. His fingers were gently tapping against the arms of the soft brown leather seat. The lad's gaze was fixated on the flames of the fire as they wildly sputtered and flared.

“Good morning, Derek.”

The boy slowly turned his head toward him and lifted a hand in greeting, “Morning, Sarantos.”

Derek appeared cheerful and well rested.

“Well, I suppose we should find out what's on the agenda for today. As usual, I had horrible nightmares about Leigh.” He shivered from the image. “I miss her Derek and need to speed up this process.”

“Yes, I hear you Sarantos. I'm truly sorry. She had always been kind to me. I remember when I first met her. I was about seven years of age. She came to visit with Wallis and stayed for about a week. During that time she taught me how to shoot a bow, ride a horse, how to make animal sounds and even look for herbs in the woods that could heal a number of illnesses. I had such a crush on her!”

Sarantos smiled and said, “She is amazing my friend.”

Suddenly her beautiful face appeared in front of him, her mouth was moving, but no words came out. Then her beauty contorted into pain and fear. Blood oozed down her neck painting her body red. He shook his head and felt despair and horror.

Derek's voice rang with anguish, "Sarantos, are you okay?"

Why couldn't Brad be here now making him laugh when he truly needed it. He missed his friend. He looked at the young boy in front of him, who was not so innocent anymore. In fact, he noticed some whiskers popping up around his mouth and chin.

"Of course, I'm alright, just anxious. But what's this?" He teasingly rubbed his own chin and laughed.

Derek looked confused and then a silly quirky grin emerged making his eyes dance in the morning light. "Very funny. I guess everyone can quit referring to me as a boy now," he chuckled.

As they cleaned themselves up for breakfast Derek began humming a delightfully haunting tune.

"What's that you're humming?"

"It's a tune that Leigh taught my sister and she used to sing it to me every single day. It drove my mother mad. I miss her voice, Sarantos. The song is about a young elfin woman who lost the love of her life to evil. The pain was too great to bear and when all her tears were gone she tied red ribbons of passion around all the trees that surrounded their home, then she left and has never been seen in the vicinity again. She vowed that her return would only arrive on the same day as when the man who was her soul mate would join her in their home. She wanders still, waiting. Waiting for him."

"How sad that is, my friend. I'm sorry the voice of your family has left your ears. Sometimes I've become arrogant in my own selfish thoughts and forget you are dealing with your own pain. I'm so inconsiderate. Please forgive me?"

He wondered if the elf in the song could be Muriele?

"Mother was very strict and got so mad at Leigh for teaching her daughter such songs and her son how to use a bow. She was a kind woman, but too overprotective for her children's own good. Unfortunately, her stubbornness cost her greatly, in the end."

Sarantos put his arm around his new friend's shoulder and they walked out of the room together.

\*\*\*



The dining hall was already booming with activity. Derek glanced at Sarantos while smiling and moving to Deanna's side and immediately started a conversation with her. He was no longer blushing and his face was unshaven.

“Good morning, Deanna. How good to see you looking so fresh and lively,” his voice was cooing, yet held a manly confidence to it.

She turned his direction, “Good morning to you,

Derek. Thank you, kind sir and did you sleep well?”

“Yes,” Derek smiled and kissed her hand.

Wallis came into the room looking well rested and much happier than Sarantos could remember seeing him in months.

He couldn't wait for the wizard to speak, so he blurted out, “Wallis I've had nightmares about Leigh.

We need to get the information and leave quickly, before we lose her forever.”

“Yes, but we'll have breakfast first and then decide on a course of action. I miss her, too,” he motioned gently and patted Sarantos on the back.

“Fair enough,” he said. What else could he do? The wizard was in charge of this mission and he had no magic strong enough to go at it alone. He also lacked the knowledge of the people and the different lands. He would never survive without him. So he would eat and wait.

\*\*\*

The room they retired to after breakfast was one of his favorite places in the castle. The tour last night had taken at least two hours, but this space stimulated his creative spirit and he could work on his music in a room like this one without any regard to time.

The ceiling was easily thirty feet high with heavy wooden beams running from left to right. The walls were stone blocks and had many realistic looking paintings hanging around the powerful room. It was comfortable with many chairs crowded around small tables that were carved with the same animal features as the dining table. There were about a dozen smoked glass chandeliers hanging from the ceiling with candles that he was told burned forever.

The room flourished with many unique qualities, from antiques and unusual items that he'd never seen in any world. He would need a week to take it all in and truly enjoy it and fully appreciate the ambiance. It offered a very unusual magical presence that made him actually tingle.

\*\*\*

The meeting was never heated in argument, but more of a joyful and informative expression of each person's ability and how it could best be applied to the current circumstance.

Wallis and Adela took a side chair near the back of the room and listened more than spoke. Derek sat beside Sarantos with Deanna to the left of him. Her brother Drew stood by the windows.



Everyone was whispering and tea was served with some small coffee flavored cakes and vanilla shortbread. It was brought in by another guardian.

After they had eaten most of the food, a tall guardian entered the room and walked with elegance and style with a built in confidence that was born in kings. This was the man who sat at the end of the dining table last night and the same man accompanied him. They had not been introduced and had left the meal quite quickly. He wore the wizard's robe and was

definitely a guardian. He had long greyish hair with silver streaks running down it. The man that walked next to him was a human wizard and they both went to the front of the main table and sat down. Everyone else found a seat and bowed to the wizards before they sat, all except Drew and Deanna. They both went up to him and kissed his cheek first and then bowed and found their chairs.

“Welcome, friends of the land and foes of our enemies.”

He turned to Drew and Deanna and nodded his head, “Welcome, my children. True guardians of the land and rightful heirs to the throne.”

Tea was brought in for the two men followed by more cakes and shortbread for everyone.

“My name is Blaze Brandon and I'm the king to the throne of the land of Ethel. My beloved wife, Priscilla has been deceased for these past two years. Her story is yours, so I will tell it. A woman came to our land about two years ago and won Priscilla's heart and then she stabbed her in it as my lovely wife handed her a cup of tea. Although, my Priscilla had a natural ability to heal, when your head is sliced off from your torso you are pretty much in the realm of the dead. She had

no time to save herself and the castle was quite empty that day. This she-devil we speak of despised the happy state of the guardians and brought renegades with her and empowered those in our world who lusted after power and money. They helped her protect and seal off the castle to the rightful owners upon their return. No magic could break through her defense. My wife's body was hung in the trees at the main road for all to see and bear witness to evil's power." He dropped his head slightly, but quickly recovered and continued, "I'm sorry to say, my sorrow was greater than revenge and it took us a long while to recuperate and return to take back our home. This devil you hunt information of, bores easily and became frightened at our fierce determination to oust her from our land. She fled before we could destroy her, like the coward she is. Her pain would have been great, even though, I'm of a gentle nature."

He picked up his cup to gather his emotions and voice then pointed at the man next to him, "This is Salar, not a birthright guardian, but no truer guardian exists in this realm. He is my closest ally and confidant. I bestowed long life upon him to match his own, he is one of the 'Sixties.' He's been with me a good hundred years or more."

Salar nodded at the king and then at the table of guests.



The king had an ancient soul that peered out from behind sincere dark brown eyes. He smiled at Salar, "He wedded a guardian, my sister, Annabel and they have three children. All girls. Their quarters are in the west wing of my home. Where no one is invited to visit, unless Salar attends you, as his guests. He wears the robes of the wizards of Ethel."

Salar studied each of them carefully. His bronze beard was neatly trimmed and cropped close to his face, but his eyes caught you off guard, because in the depths of their earthen color



were the secrets of the guardians.

For a brief moment Sarantos thought he saw someone else sitting in his place. Someone with a different face.

He shuddered.