

Chapter 9 “Whiskey”



He was exposed. His compassion, his selfishness - all of who he was ripped out of his soul instantly, leaving him with absolutely nothing.

He could taste his life on the edge of his lips, evaporating quickly. He longed to take a sip, just a little taste. His mouth was dry and his knees were unsteady.

His thirst was building...

“Sarantos, are you alright?”

It was her voice. The woman who made his life intoxicating. He needed her like a drunk needed a cheap shot of whiskey, but she was more refined. She was much

more. She was like a finely aged expensive shot of bourbon! He wanted her and couldn't live without her, the need was too great.

What a perfect sight to see when he opened his eyes. God, he loved that pretty face. There she was.

“I’m fine, but I think the forest took something away from me, something that was me, you know, an actual part of who I am.”

“I know, Sarantos.” She ran her fingers through his hair and kissed his cheek ever so gently. “That’s what feeds these woods.”

“Oh.” That’s the only word that fell out of his mouth. What he wanted to do was ask for it back, but he wasn’t sure what was actually missing. His insides were a little emptier, sort of washed out. What was he now missing?

Everyone was a little dazed-looking except for Aurora, Wallis, Leigh, Sergio and Bear.

“Take a few minutes and gather your senses. You’re going to need them in here,” Wallis said matter of factly.

Great, what if that’s what was missing from him, his senses. He didn’t have enough to share with Wormwoods. He smiled though. Keeping up a good sense of humor in this place was a necessity as far as he was concerned.

“I agree, Sarantos.”

“Thanks, Mika. However, the wizard’s face doesn’t seem to be sharing in our point of view.”

“No, the wizard isn’t sharing in your point of view. Not that it matters to the two of you!”

Leigh smiled.

“What’s he babbling about, Sarantos?”

Only those that were listening in on his thoughts would have known why the wizard was so angry. But, Wallis always enjoyed seeing everyone’s reaction when he would suddenly blurt out a sentence that was part of a telepathic conversation, leaving others totally confused.

“Let’s go.”

Bear took the lead after the wizard motioned without saying a word. They all knew where they were going; heading towards the otherworldly smoke.

Until now, the woods had allowed them all to enter. That was a good thing because he knew it would take all of them to accomplish what they were there to do.

There were no paths through the dark, animated forest so they slowly made their own. Bear led them, being ever so careful not to destroy any plants. He attentively and gently moved them aside allowing the rest of the group to cautiously follow close behind. Little bear was on the druid’s shoulder and appeared to be communicating with something in the woods. At least, that’s what Sarantos thought as he watched the small creature tilt its head and then whisper in the druid’s ear. Peaceful intentions and good communication that was backed by honesty and openness would be the key to their success on this day.



Sarantos was already exposed. The woods had gathered all the information out of him that they wanted or needed.

He tried to get back some of what they took from his soul. They now knew all about the secrets buried in the depths of his inner sanctuary. He was sure they'd learned more about him than even he knew of himself. For some reason it was never easy for humans to accept or tap into the complete makeup of what makes them who they are; what sparks them, drives them, their fears, their hates, their darkness and what makes them love.

His need to get some of that back from the dark beauty of the forest prompted him to reach out into the surrounding shadows and do a sort of mind meld with the powerful life that they now walked inside of, which held a different perspective. Sarantos realized he now walked inside this fully organic life form that was alive and named Woodworm Woods. This place, it had a name, like him. They were allowed to pass and because of that they had a responsibility to protect it from harm. It was alive and shared its essence with them willingly. He felt somehow like a guardian of the earth and for the first time in his entire life he understood what that meant.

“Thank you.”

The words consumed his whole being but not just his head. They filled him up, like love did. Softly, yet with a forceful perfection and magnificence! His heart pounded with a love beyond the flesh, but with a deeper and purer entity. He wanted to hug a tree, but he followed the group as they walked gingerly upon the lifeline, the blood flow, the veins of the woods. He couldn't stop himself from smiling and laughing giddily like a child, after all, this was a new experience in his life. This was a moment of wonder!

“Thank you,” he said again. This magical being had given him a gift beyond anything he could've ever imagined.



They'd walked for hours when Bear stopped without warning and sniffed a plant in front of him. It was bright green and phosphorous. The wizard moved swiftly to his side and after a quiet discussion, they chose a slightly different direction to continue their trek.

When Sarantos passed the plant, he realized why. It feeds the trees. The phosphorous leaks slowly into the earth and supplies the forest with its strong and regular heartbeat. Clever.

Woodworm Woods was allowing him to tap into its personal library of knowledge. A microcomputer that fed him constant information with each curious question that popped into his head. The last few hours were incredible. There was a smell of wonderment in the air. The woods weren't scary at all but people with bad intentions were the real evil that threatened the life of this magnificent creation. Could his earthly world have destroyed their ability to touch the source of a woodland's life, because of our greed and carelessness. Did we cause them to quit speaking? His heart ached for the ignorance of his world. He thought of the rainforest. Some scientists reasoned it was the life force of his old planet. He now knew they were probably right.

He opened up to this wonderful unexplored world and this being that was clearly different than him. The gift of life that trees gave to each person was oxygen. How profound after all, that we truly needed each other. To bring ruin to forests were actually to bring ruin to mankind. There's that ironic word again, man-kind. Really? What was wrong with people? Why was man so unkind?

Sarantos decided he would make a change right here and now. He would be more thoughtful, more compassionate and kinder from this point forward! It was his destiny and a fork in the road of his life. It was time to make the change.



Murielle put her arm in his left arm and Leigh placed her arm in his right. They were both smiling and nodded. They were feeling the same euphoria as him. The woods created a deeper emotional attachment to the world around them. They brought a curious perspective to being alive.

He wanted to live there, but knew it would destroy the woods if he did. Mankind didn't know how to fit in very well and some things were better left to their own accord. In life's journey, sometimes you have to learn lessons on your own no matter how

many people tell you about the lessons they learned the hard way. How pathetic is that? Why can't we just trust what we see sometimes? Why don't we use the results of other people's trials to lessen our own burdens?

Leigh squeezed his hand saying softly, "I know."

"We have no need to fear these woods if we are true to ourselves." Murielle grinned as she twirled in front of him. Her eyes twinkled and her spirit danced openly. He'd missed that old Murielle.

"What time of day is it? I need some food."

Sarantos chuckled at the dwarf, but the wizard gave him an evil look.

"Dwarf, we must make it to the cabin before we dine."

"Why?"

"Because, that's the way I want it."

The dwarf lowered his head and kept walking.

The woods chuckled. His heartbeat moved in unison to the surrounding trees. Their breath was his and he became more aware of the natural brilliant world around him. Every plant glowed with an individual aura. The colors were bright and hypnotic. Sarantos tuned into their life energy and somehow understood their true purpose. He asked them about the flower that weeps, the Pleurer.



The wind blew his hair and sent a chill down his back. A shadow crossed in front of him; dark and cheerless. The plants went quiet.

“Leigh, did you see that shadow?”

“No. What shadow?”

“Never mind.” He was afraid he’d cause trouble with the Woodworm Woods. Wallis wouldn’t like that.

They continued walking for a while, but Sarantos felt alone without the camaraderie of the woods for comfort. Sometimes he was just an idiot.

“It’s okay,” Aurora nudged into the quiet space inside his mind. “They like you and are not offended. They’re not allowed to tell you. We’ll arrive at the cabin soon and hopefully get you some answers. Be comforted, Sarantos. All is ok.”

Her voice was pure magic. It gave him great comfort. “Thanks.”

She turned and looked back at him to smile. Her beauty was so overwhelming and blinding that he wanted to run to her side and kneel at her feet begging for forgiveness. He didn’t like what she did to other parts of his body, though. Especially with his girlfriend right there.

Leigh was still holding his arm and squeezed it with a gentle caress of love as if knowing he needed it. It brought him back, but then he wondered about Blayke. He was behind him; did he get urges to bolt ahead and just seduce Aurora without thinking? How could he ever contain himself from her powerful beauty? How could any of them?

Murielle grinned at him and she said, “Oh, Sarantos, Blayke is in love. His love is powered with respect and controlled by discipline. Intertwined together that means he would never harm her, never. The dwarf has a different idea of beauty. Wallis, is not really human and again has deep respect and self-control. Sergio is an elf, we love each other deeply from the spirit - a heartfelt yearning from our youth, one that

is meant to last for all eternity, no matter what obstacles we have to overcome. Bear is a druid. His little bear is his love, his entire purpose. She transforms into a human at will and he can transform into a bear at will. They are what they are and have found each other. Love and passion, Sarantos are very different beyond your human nature. You have always looked and thought of love from a human perspective but it is much more than that. One day you might understand.”

“Wow. Thanks, Murielle, once again you’ve lifted a veil from over my head and enlightened me. I adore you.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

The three of them chuckled.

The dwarf must have been listening because he said, “Sarantos, you have no idea how attractive stocky, fully bearded and foul tempered dwarf women are!”

“I’m sure I don’t, but I think I’ll pass nonetheless.”

“There it is!” Bear’s voice was like a knife, cutting their conversation off immediately.



In front of them was a large cabin with roses growing up the side of a trellis that lined the stone walkway. They led to an immense front door that was off in the distance and the path turned into a bridge somewhere close to the door. Delicate curtains hung from the windows. Smoke rose playfully from the chimney. There was a garden

surrounding the house that had many vegetables, producing the largest ones he'd ever seen. Pumpkins the size of bicycle tires, zucchini as long as his arm, beans the size of two of his fingers hung from rows of vines that reached up into the clouds. His mouth couldn't stay closed so it dropped to his chin.

“Wow!”

“Amazing!”

“Incredible!”

“Splendid!”

The warmth and beauty of the place was undeniable and each person spoke or gasped in awe.

A mystical feel enchanted his heartstrings.

He heard the plants again and life once more danced all around him. There was laughter. There was love. The woods were truly happy that their group found this cabin. The smell of food was rather inviting.

Wallis took the lead with Mika beside him. They slowly started up the long stone path. The rest of the group followed carefully.

As they walked the path, the roses that decorated the arbor changed colors. Now they matched a rainbow. The stones had faces on them that winked, smiled, looked shocked, agitated or even yawned. Bees the size of his fist danced in and out of the roses collecting pollen. Some of them stopped to sniff them out but quickly realized they were not regular flowers causing them to stick out tiny little tongues and buzz away. They were quite agitated.

The path went up a large bridge. A beautiful calm pond lay underneath it.

“Who goes there?” The voice came from the water.

Sarantos looked over the bridge and a huge koi almost the size of a tuna had its head above water and squirted him in the face.

“I said who goes there?”

The dwarf was laughing, as Sarantos tried to wipe the water from his eyes.

“We go here, koi and if you keep bugging us, we’ll make a nice dinner of you!”

“Shorty.”



“What’d you say, koi?”

“You heard me. Now, what’s your name, shorty?”

“What? You’ll never find out! Wait until I get down there and teach you a lesson...”

The dwarf was too slow as a spout of water drenched his face and beard.

“Stop this nonsense. It is Wallis the Wizard and his companions.”

“Oh, who cares.” And with that the fish disappeared under the water.

“Good grief,” said Sarantos.

“Look, Sarantos!” Leigh was pointing at something in the water and his eyes tried to follow the direction of her hand.

“My god, what are they?”

“Water lilies!”

“They’re so incredibly glorious. A tiny island made up of lilies.”

“Maybe using only one as a bed large enough for two!”

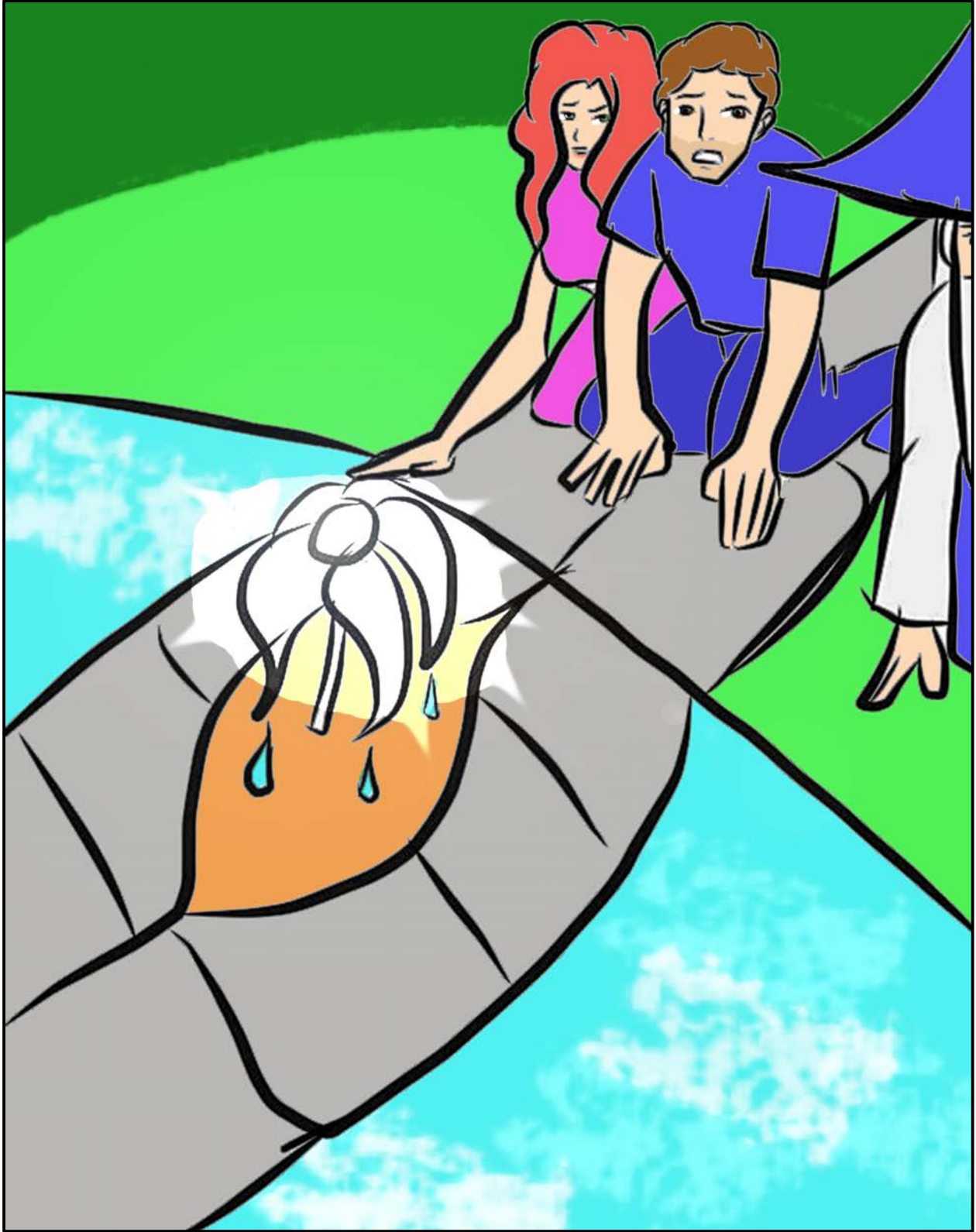
“I want to bathe in that water.” Murielle’s voice was soft and seductive.

Sergio took her hand and kissed it. “Maybe, we will, my love.”

Something was buzzing and moving towards them. It wasn’t the bees, but about ten dragon flies the size of a shoe box that appeared to be scanning the area. They were stunning.

“Look.” The wizard’s voice was strong but hinted of surprise.

At the end of the bridge, the path broke off in two directions and met again at the door, but the real shock was what stood in the middle of the path.



It was a giant flower the size of two sunflower faces with white petals that hung down like a weeping willow tree. Tears dropped steadily on the ground and emptied

into the pond. It was angelic.

When they approached closer, he could hear soft weeping sounds. The white petals were mixed with an iridescent glow. They all dropped to their knees.

Sarantos couldn't explain it, but the desire to fall in front of this flower of death was overwhelming. They finally found it! They had made it.

"Thank you," he whispered.

The woods rejoiced. Sarantos was surprised that they wanted them to find and remove this incredible flower.

"Wallis, how can we remove this flower. It belongs here my friend. I know it. You know it. We can't claim it for our own, not even to help Sergio."

The wizard lifted his head and with sad eyes looked at Sergio. "I know."

Murielle was weeping and Sergio held her close kissing her hair.

"Oh, Sergio. We came all this way for nothing. We lost Gabby and are no closer to releasing you than we were yesterday. My heart is heavy with grief."

He never said another word but stared at the flower and kissed her hair. Tears glistened in the corner of his eyes.

Sarantos wanted to scream at someone, but it wouldn't do any good. The noises surrounding the cabin continued, as though nothing important had happened.

Blayke held Aurora's hand and the big cat shed a tear. Even the dwarf kept swallowing frequently trying to avoid an emotional outburst.

Wait, something's wrong. This can't be right! We were allowed to come all the way here Sarantos reasoned. In his heart, he knew the woods surely wanted them to find this place and to locate the flower, but if they couldn't take it with them what would be the significance of that?

Then he knew. In the blink of an eye, he knew. He wanted to laugh, to jump up and down, but his knees were weak. He felt giddy again.

The woods laughed and chatted incessantly about love and life.

He stood up quickly and pulled Leigh back to her feet.

"Everyone get up. No more tears. No more sorrow."

"What?" The dwarf stood slowly trying to compose himself. "Don't make me hurt you, Sarantos."

"No, you don't understand. Remember the reason."

"What reason?" Wallis looked curious, but angry.

He started chanting, "His head pounded in misery, she is the love of his life, she's always on his mind, he's miserable without her, he dreams about her endlessly..."



Wallis didn't look satisfied. "What are you talking about boy? Is this a new song you've come up with in the middle of our despair?"

"Think, wizard. Remember, all of you. Remember the reason we came here."

"Yes, Sarantos for Sergio."

"Yes, yes, of course, but what caused us to look here, for this place? It's right in front of you, can't you see it? Can no one else see it except me??"

"No Sarantos, explain yourself, or me axe will help you along."

"Okay. You and I are meant to be...I can't live without you!"

"What?" The dwarf moved closer to him and had his hand on the handle of his axe. "Maybe, if I just knock him in the head, it'll stop the incoherent ranting and raving. This place put a spell on him, that's for sure. Settle down, boy, I don't want to hurt you."

“Oh, silly dwarf. Love, can’t you see. Love that’s lasted a thousand years. It never dies, no matter what happens, it never dies. You have to find a way. Love always finds a way!”

He turned Leigh around in a circle and Aurora jumped up and joined them. “Yes, yes, Sarantos. How simply marvelous! You must be right, you must.”

The rest of the group looked at them like they were all insane. Leigh was caught up in their crazed joy and became a part of their dance, though not knowing why.

A breeze rustled and heavy footsteps approached them from the other side of the bridge. Hummingbirds swarmed and dragonflies danced. A beautiful voice sang a lovely, but sad song about love.

They all turned.

A soft voice that rang with compassion and love filled their hearts with kindness. “Wallis, is that you? Wizard, is that you?”

The wizard lifted his eyes and tears flowed down his face like a waterfall trickling unopposed down a mountain side.



He ran towards her, weeping and calling her name.

“Moonflower, Moonflower, my Moonflower. I should have known, only you could have this type of sense of humor.”