

## Chapter 6 “Hero Falls”

He felt trapped.

The days ran into weeks, as they waited for Gabby to heal. She didn't seem to be improving. The dwarf was always huffing and puffing about the room, pacing like a jumpy lion in a cage, until he finally couldn't take it anymore and decided to explore the cave they'd entered over a month ago.



“You coming, my boy?”

Sarantos knew he was talking to him because he stared right at him but he was in a playful mood and wanted to cause some trouble. “Coming where?”

“You look anxious and need to find a place where you can relax or, you know, practice magic. So let's get you outta here and check out the caves.”

Wallis looked up from a thick book that had no words in it, at least none that Sarantos could see. He nodded

approvingly to Blayke. It would appear he was going and his bodyguard was coming along, as usual. Everyone knew it wasn't for Sarantos, but the dwarf who was going mad. Confronting a dwarf on a rampage with red in his eyes was the last thing any of them wanted.

“Sure, Switch, just let me grab a few things.”

They hadn't seen Murielle or Sergio in a few days. They'd always wander off like that for days at a time and then come back looking refreshed. They were a lucky glowing twosome who could escape into a world the rest of them weren't invited into, a world where they could forget the anger lurking outside, because any private moment they shared could be their last twinkle. Neither of them knew what tomorrow would bring. They needed that time away to enjoy each other's company and allow their hearts to forget almost everything that was wrong in the world, even where a true hero could avoid falling on a battlefield but instead fall in love - over and over, again. Sergio had been thru so much. His love for Murielle was strong and unwavering.

Sarantos was occasionally jealous of their time together, but he really shouldn't be and he knew it. He felt guilty that a resentful thought ever crossed his mind because they'd been separated for so long and now, it was their time to be together...at least for the moment. Even though Leigh was not at his side, he knew in his heart she would always be there for him and soon enough, they'd be together again.

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The caves were amazing and full of color. The hues intensified the stains in the air as they walked on and on. He searched around for some kind of an unusual gem he



could bring back for Leigh. His mind would drift to her routinely. He was always thinking about how to surprise her. He loved surprising her with gifts of all sorts, although most of the time they were inexpensive and simple. It was the thought that counted though he reminded himself. He never wanted to be like one of those couples that had grown complacent with each other. A day without intrigue or a possibility of a surprise of any sort seemed like no way to live to him. After what seemed like hours of walking, he

actually found a perfect stone. It'd been innocently laying by a pool of hushed water. This treasure sparkled like a giant faucet except when he touched it, then it appeared to break off into tiny small gems. He gasped in awe of such pure beauty.

Blayke stood next to him watching his every move, while the dwarf sang and moved about the cavern like it fed him the elixir of life. Sarantos could understand the dwarf's fascination. He too, could live in a cave like this. Calming sounds with vivid coloration were everywhere. It was beautiful.

Sarantos felt happy as he stared at the gem. It was as large as an orange and blueish in color with a hint of violet, which brought back sudden memories of his dream. He

was never quite sure if it was a dream and Wallis refused to discuss it any further with him or anyone else. It also appeared to have a tiny golden gem buried deep inside. She would love it! He placed the gem carefully inside his pouch and patted it delicately like a fragile baby. The more he thought about the gem though, the more he wondered if it was some sort of magical crystal ball. How cool would that be? With the gem in the middle, it did look like an eye though. Maybe it could be an all-seeing enchanting eye. He grinned to himself. Leigh would surely love it and he couldn't wait to give it to her.

“So Blayke, how do you think Gabby is doing?”

“I'm not sure, Sarantos. One moment she seems fine, but the next she falls into fits of delirium that are accompanied by a high fever. My heart bleeds for her. Wallis has known her since she was a little girl. He took her in for a while after her parents were killed by a horde of raging zombies. She'd escaped with her older brother, Tad, who brought her to the wizard's doorstep one crisp September morning. Wallis knew her parents well and he was one of the few people that they both trusted. Tad stayed for two summers before he fell in love with a local girl and they both moved further up north. Tad knew Gabby was in good hands. She was only six at the time of his departure.

Wallis raised her with the help of a man named Flet, who was one of the finest rangers in our history. She took to the teachings of the ranger like a fish to water and learned some magic as well as alchemy. A child couldn't ask for a better upbringing. Mika used to give her rides around the yard, always protecting her from harm. I've told her a few stories while she sat on my lap over the years, that's for sure. We all ache for her.”

“Whatever happened to Flet? I've never heard his name mentioned before.”

“Of course you didn't. Wallis keeps people to himself unless the need arises, just like Gabby. I almost didn't recognize her myself to be honest. Last I saw her, she was about 15 years young and even though she's still young — she changed pretty dramatically.”

“Now, I understand why Wallis feels so responsible for her.”

Blayke never said another word, but shook his head slowly. They moved toward an exit on the far side of the cavern and followed the humming dwarf into another large opening. This one had three exits, excluding the one they just came in through and it was a lot darker than the cavern they'd just left. Sarantos shivered.

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They continued to move through the barely lit cave. A few stalagmites and stalactites glowed with enough lichen to allow them to see the darker openings and a trace of each other. He listened intently while allowing his eyes to adjust. The dwarf



appeared to be on a stroll through a park in the middle of the day. Blayke suddenly stopped, but the dwarf continued to move forward as he pulled out his axe and casually swung it around by a stalagmite. Sarantos watched in disbelief as something flew through the air and rolled along the floor in front of him landing at his surprised feet.

What in the world?? A dark, somewhat human face stared up at him from just one eye, while the other eye was a black socket with nothing inside. Worms moved freely in and out of its mouth. What was left of the teeth were rotten. The hair was stringy with foul maggots and dried blood. Blayke touched it with his sword.

“Zombies.”

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Speaking of the devil...they were just talking about zombies killing Gabby's parents! Things happened coincidentally like that in any world and he guessed this one was no exception.

He watched in amazement as the dwarf easily sidestepped three more zombies bringing his axe around and removing another head as he turned fluidly without missing a beat decapitating his next victim in stride. The third one proved a little more difficult, although he thought they should not be able to think, the last one in view approached Stitch with caution after seeing what he did to his comrades. Clever zombie. Maybe they did have some intelligence after all.

Blayke moved toward him and just in time too. Four more slow-walking creatures with limbs hanging to the ground, appeared out of the darkness right in front of him, moaning and groaning when they saw their enthusiastic dinner standing right in front of them.

He found himself being pushed aside, as Blayke moved in with his swords blazing. He took out two at the same time moving gracefully with both swords lunging around for one last swipe cutting off the heads of the two remaining zombies, simultaneously.

The dwarf would allow the zombie to get within arms distance of himself and then back away. He was teasing it.

Good grief, what was he thinking?

“Silly creature. Come to daddy, smelly vile unholy one. Sarantos, I have to let it have some fun before I end its pathetic life, don't you think?” The dwarf was laughing the whole time, but never removed his hungry eyes from the walking dead.

“End your game, dwarf.”

Blayke clearly didn't have the same sense of humor as Switch.

“You, my friend, are always a joy-kill. Someday I must teach you how to enjoy your life, like a dwarf. There is sport in everything.”

Then he took its life, swiftly and without cruelty. Sarantos couldn't help but feel it was sadistic to not take its life, if it was even life walking around as an undead.

The brief moaning and swordplay ended leaving the cavern in what appeared to be an even deeper silence.

“We should be getting back,” said Blayke.

“We just got here. This is the first time in so long that I've felt at home. Sarantos, where I come from zombies are quite common. I suppose like wolves or wild dogs in your world.”

“Sure, I suppose I understand, Switch,” although he knew he'd never willingly approach a wolf or wild dog. Besides, killing a zombie is much different, it's not part of the natural ecosystem.

Blayke gave into the dwarf's wish and they wandered the majestic caves some more and for the better part of the day.



Sarantos borrowed a vial from Blayke to bring back some of the water from the pool where he found Leigh's gem. Wallis might be interested in the liquid he reasoned. He'd learned so much from his friends and one of the most important messages was to always be aware of your surroundings. The earth offered many gifts to those willing to see, both harmful and helpful.

To ignore a gift could prove dangerous as they were sometimes lifesaving. It just depended on what it was or what you did with it.

He'd enjoyed the time out, maybe as much as the dwarf. Being inside those four walls waiting for someone to live or die was driving him too over the edge of the wall and into an abysses of insanity. He felt a little guilty about that but knew that



no matter what, a person still needed to enjoy the life they were given. That's how he dealt with his fractured emotions during their currently stressful situation.

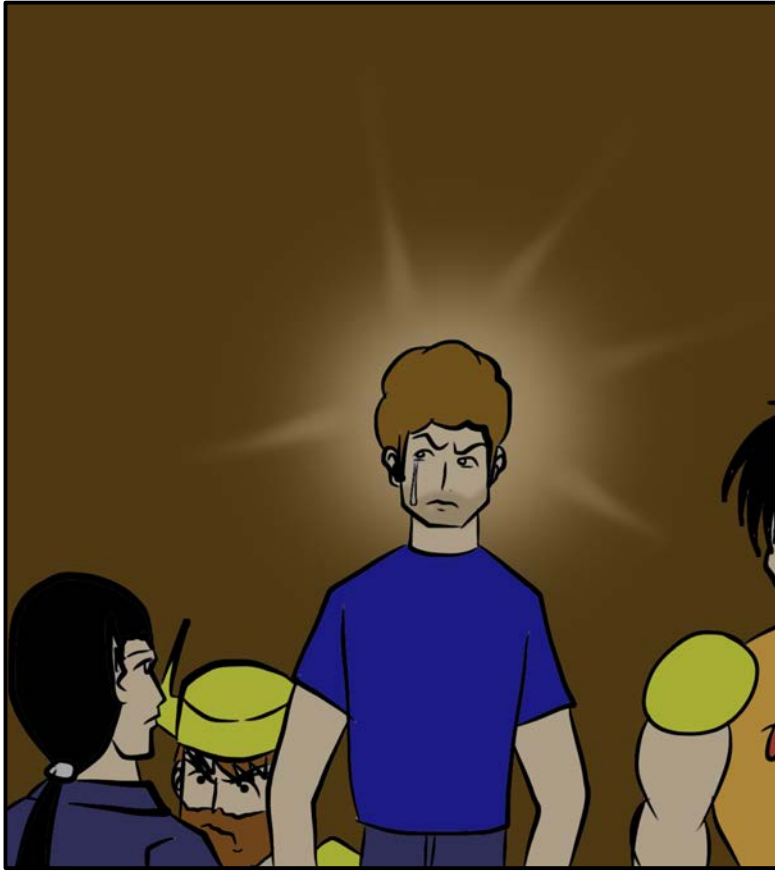
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The room was lit by tender candlelight and the warm fire blazed inside the dark stone walls. The silence around the crackling was deafening.

Sergio was sitting in a chair surrounded by the glow drinking an unknown liquid. His handsome profile was settled against the stone wall like a mural of charm but secrets were filling the opening of a dark and sinister film that was brewing here.

Sarantos shivered and wondered where everyone had gone. Sergio looked their way. His face was solemn.

“Where did that old wizard get off to?” The dwarf's voice was rough and brutal, contrasting the expression of Sergio.



“She’s gone.” His voice rang with a sadness that caused a lump to fill Sarantos throat and a tear to fall down his cheek.

He knew what Sergio meant. It felt like the air got sucked out of the room and for a moment he couldn’t breathe.

Blayke sat down in the chair next to Sergio and stared into the fire, his eyes blank and devoid of hope. It was an emotionless expression that Sarantos was sure the man had practiced over many years of rough living to avoid the pain of a moment such as

this. His life had been built around always protecting someone. There were situations where Sarantos had witnessed this man never using emotion as a substitute for achieving his goals, even if it meant fighting beside a fallen comrade. What he did when he was alone with his heavy heart in the privacy of his own room was anyone’s guess. He was a strong man but behind that strength was a gentle man filled with compassion, understanding and a great sense of humor that only peeked out rarely in the twinkle of his eye but never lasted long enough for anyone to use it against him...to ever make him feel weak. At least, that’s how Sarantos viewed this classic fighter he called a loyal friend.

The dwarf began grumbling and walking around the room, almost rocking himself like a child. His gait grew louder and louder until he slammed his fist down on the table, but not before Sergio and Blayke casually lifted any breakable item on its surface. They both knew their friend’s rage would get the better of him. Dwarves didn’t hide their emotions very well, not in grief, love or anger.

Switch didn’t care! It was his expression of his life, his need to release who he was

without worrying about what others thought. It was a dwarf's need to purge their emotions outward, in order to handle it. It was the way he was.



These amazing people had taught Sarantos how to appreciate and respect the need for each person to express themselves in the way they needed to without worrying about criticism. This was a bit different than humans who could sometimes be very cruel to people who didn't follow the norm. Yet these friends still possessed a rare understanding of human nature too. They would all be life-long friends for sure, not because of their similarities but because of their acceptance of their right as an individual to be different without hiding who they were. There were no hidden

agendas. There were no fake friendships here.

It was another beautiful moment for Sarantos, even though it was marred deep in sadness. Gabby's friends gave him many gifts and in the short time he knew her, she had to be quite special to walk among them.

He slowly sat down next to Blayke. The dwarf threw himself on his bed and for the next hour or so wallowed in tears, moaning and yelping. Everyone else was silent.

They just listened and watched their own shadows - solemn, dark and unmoving. But, on some rare occasions the flicker of the flames made their shadows appear joyous, in an Edgar Allen Poe way...although slightly on the creepy side.

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Sergio broke the silence. "I don't know when they'll return. The friends of Wallis that live here left for about a month. They had somewhere else to be. Everyone else went with the wizard. They took Gabby's body to her brother."

He and Blayke nodded their heads at the same time as a gesture that they understood.

"How was the wizard," Blayke asked?

"I'm not sure. He loved that girl and always felt responsible for her life. It doesn't matter if she volunteered for this job. He thought he was her guardian for her entire life. He feels responsible for sure."

"He shouldn't," said Blayke.

"No, you're right. It's my fault. If I hadn't gotten myself into this situation in the first place, we wouldn't be on this journey."

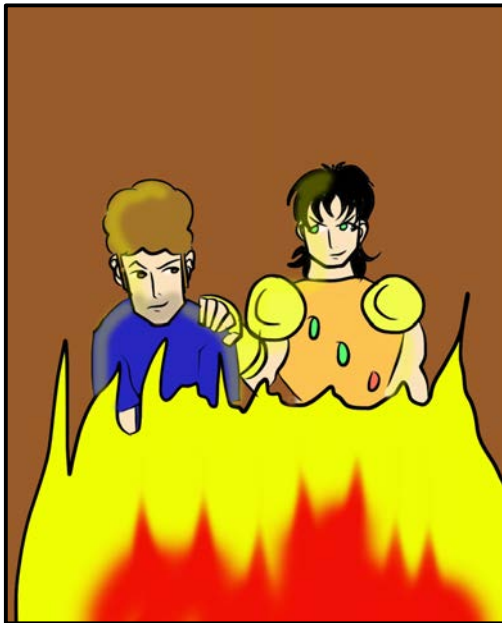
Sergio momentarily lost his always controlled sense of composure.

Blayke patted him on the back. "No, my friend. You of all people know we are each responsible for our own actions. We are where we are because of our own choices, even if at times we choose to place blame elsewhere, it has no lasting meaning. It makes us feel as though we have control over someone else's life, but we are not allowed to have that kind of power. Our life is about learning, loving and sharing the journey with others. If sometimes the journey is cut short with some of our brothers and sisters, then the memories of those grand moments we carry with us forever. They're part of our journey and Gabby now travels in our hearts and minds where we'll always find her presence. She is at peace. She is comfortable at last. So be at peace too, my dear friend, and enjoy her company still as you feel her warm smile

fall upon us right now. She will watch over us. She still wants to see you happy and fulfilled. You deserve it. We all want that for you. That is why we are here. No one forced us to come.”

“You, Blayke sound like a king gifted with the wisdom of the ages. Thank you for that. My weighted heart needed it.”

“It’s you I should be thanking. After all, being around the elves teaching all those youthful years of mine were a blessing and time well spent after all I guess!”



Sergio smiled and placed his hand on Blayke’s shoulder.

Blayke’s long arm reached out and Sarantos felt the warmth of his large hand as it now rested down on his shoulder. The comfort of camaraderie with these men lifted his fallen spirit. He felt like one of the three musketeers. They sat that way for a while as the dwarf’s sobbing slowly lessened and was replaced by the loud snore of a restful sleep.

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Inside these cavern walls he had no sense of time, but he knew he needed sleep.

Murielle nor the wizard had contacted Sergio yet, so he washed himself up after using hot water from the heavy pot hanging over the fire. The cold had made his skin seem dried out, so he put some thick salve on his face, hands and legs. It was a skin cream that Brad had given him to help against the blistery cold. It certainly soothed his skin and by the time he sat on his bed he felt better. That toasty comfortable feeling that comes after a warm bath, comfy robe and soothing hot chocolate was what he now felt.

He was almost ready to lie down and allow himself the pleasure of sleep, but

remembered the gem for Leigh. He hadn't really gotten a great look at it in the dark cavern, but in this room the fire burned brightly and he had a small lantern by his bedside. He thought it would be a perfect time to check it out.

He heard the elf chatting softly with Blayke, as he pulled the large gem from his pouch.

It was cool to the touch with only a couple jagged edges. The smoothness of the surface was unusual. This gem appeared already polished. He held it closer to the light of the lantern.

The gem became increasingly warm to his fingertips. A vibration gently started reaching into his fingers, then moving seductively along his hand and finally racing up his arm touching his heartbeat. He could actually feel it. The gem now appeared to be beating in sync with his heartbeat. It matched it exactly beat for beat. It freaked him out!



He lifted the gem into the air to see if the insides had changed appearance. The warmth increased. He stared at the golden gem inside, but instead of a gem it was clearly now an eye looking right at him. He tried to drop the gem. He couldn't. It felt glued to his hand.

He tried to ask for help from the elf, but his voice was gone. Nothing came out no matter how hard he willed it. This was too weird. He looked back at the eye.

It was heartbroken, but gentle like a flushed spring breeze. Hoping to share the secrets of the gem, he deeply inhaled and then let out such

a loud exhale that he apparently got the attention of the elf.

“What? Sarantos, where’d you get that gem? Drop it, now!”

Oh, if he’d cared what the elf said he might have listened, but he knew this being in the gem. It was a long lost love and he was going to help release it. He sensed it was female, and not just any female, but one that had danced with him when the sun abandoned the thirsty ravaged land. He’d removed his armor and she asked if he was okay. He smelt her endlessly fresh hair. Her playfulness beckoned him and he fancied her devoted eyes and shy smile. As her tongue would slip into his mouth, this battle hardened hero falls, not in a warrior’s epic battle, but in the battle of love. He was in love. This woman trapped inside was his love, the one he’d always waited for...

“No!” Sergio screamed.

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Where was he?



He was in a yellow mist. Where was the woman he loved, the one who waited for his return?

He pushed the thick heavy mist aside and tried to find the woman. He knew her name, Annabel. Certainly, she was someone from, from where? He knew no Annabel. Maybe, a past life? Could it be. He called her name softly and then slightly louder and louder.

Silence gripped his consciousness. Something was wrong. He could feel it. All at once, he was able to clear away the mist. A flickering of firelight

filled the room. Sergio and Blayke were looking right at him but they seemed far across the room. Blayke held a beautiful naked woman, that Sarantos knew immediately was Annabel. She was shaking from the cold.

Then Sergio blocked his view as his face filled the entire space. How could that be?

Sergio started talking, but he couldn't understand a word he said.

"I can't hear you, Sergio."



Sergio, obviously didn't hear him. He tried to concentrate on Sergio's lips as he kept repeating the same thing over and over.

He understood the word you, so he focused very hard. "You are trapped inside the gem."

Oh, god. What had he done? Annabel had been the gem's victim and now she'd escaped using him as a replacement. How could he have been so stupid? Leigh's message slapped him squarely against the jaw. Beware of yellow.

He'd starve to death inside a gem, wouldn't he? What was he going to do? This wasn't really yellow anyway...it was gold! Sometimes he just wasn't thinking straight.

"What are you going to do to get me out of here?" His voice yelled out as the yellow mist seemed to close in on him and suffocate the sound.

"You are trapped in the gem."

He watched over and over again as the words kept coming out of the elf. He supposed the elf had no idea or if he even understood what Sarantos was telling him or if he could even listen to him.

"Get the wizard!" Sarantos shouted loudly, but he knew the elf couldn't hear him.

Sergio's image backed away and once again he could see the room clearly.

Blayke had covered Annabel with a blanket, as she ate by the fire. She looked famished. How long had she been in this prison?

This must be a bad dream he thought. It's time to wake up now, Sarantos. Come on, wake up!

He was angry. He didn't want to leave the warm sheets where he and Leigh softly breathed together. The unyielding stars were always calling out his name to travel somewhere else. He tried to focus on the memories of their last night, but all he could do was stare at the beautiful woman with the long blonde wild hair wrapped in a blanket.



She turned and looked right at him. Her eyes were golden and her mouth luscious. He watched her lick her tongue across her plump lips. She teased him and he had no choice but to enjoy the pleasure of such beauty. He gave in to her.

Blayne appeared to not notice and looked angry with her, but spoke to her in what appeared a gentle tone.

How can this be? And now, a long day forgotten with a slip of the tongue. This battle hardened hero might fall...but will always be...in love.

I'm sorry Leigh. That was Sarantos final thought as he closed his eyes.