

# THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

## ~ CHAPTER 10 ~ REUNION

A sweet and savory aroma was the first thing that James noticed. He smiled as he slowly woke up, but still kept his eyes closed. He breathed in the familiar, warm air of his old home. Aragoria . . . the city of fairies.

“I know you’re awake,” he heard Theya’s voice.

He rolled over in the small but comfortable bed to see her sitting in the corner of the room just off to the side of the hearth. She held an old leather-bound book in her hand, her journal lay open in her lap as she periodically took notes. She was always studying something. Her famous “revitalizing stew” simmered in a small cauldron over the fire.

“How could you tell?” James asked as he sat up in the bed.

The room was not his old quarters, but one of the single rooms of the infirmary. Little to no decorations hung on these walls, though it seemed that everywhere else in the city there were bright, colorful tapestries that always seem to come alive hanging on every spare space that could be found.

James always found that ironic. *Why do they make these rooms where people are supposed to heal so dull?*

“Your breathing changed,” Theya answered.

“You could tell?” James asked incredulously.

Theya only shrugged.

James was certain she was making it up. He must have made a noise or something.

“Anyway,” she said as she set her books down and began dishing up some soup. “Your orders are to rest and eat.”

James had no objections to that. He had always loved Theya’s stews. There was just something about them that always seemed to boost his spirits.

She glided over to his bed with that warrior-like grace. Not only was she a scholar but the captain of the Queen’s Guard. James had always thought that she was

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beautiful—like an older sister. But something seemed . . . different . . . as he watched her approach.

“Thank you,” he said as he took the bowl from her.

Briefly, his fingers brushed over hers. Briefly, he thought that *her* breath caught for a split second. James noticed his own heart skip a beat.

*What was that?* he wondered. *That was very different.*

“You better eat all of it,” Theya ordered, her familiar self-important mannerism returning. “I had to cancel my appointment with the lore-master to make it for you.”

“You know you would have done it anyway,” James teased.

“And be grateful too!”

“Alright . . . I am grateful.”

He really was. He had only been gone for a few weeks and missed fairy-food terribly. Just as he expected, the soup warmed him to his toes. It was always perfect—he never had to blow on it to cool it down. New energy rushed through him and he felt like he could go through the training runs for a week.

“Oh, no,” Theya ordered as he began to stand. “You need to eat at least two bowls before you get out of bed.”

“What?” James protested.

“You just went through a grueling healing process to remove a ghoulish taint.”

“But, I feel fine.”

“You need to rest more. If you don’t fully rest, the healing process can be just as damaging as the infection itself.”

James raised an eyebrow at her. “Really?”

“Okay, not *just* as bad,” Theya conceded. “But it really was a hard process to get the taint off of you. One of the healers who participated is in his own recovery room right now.”

“It’s really that bad?”

Theya nodded. “James, rarely do we ever go into the Netherworld. There are dangers there that even we can’t predict.”

“But it does have its advantages,” said a raucous voice from the door.

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James choked on his bite from the sudden burst of Alden. The fairy prince strode in confidently—like he always did. He smiled playfully at James, and his eyes always had that twinkle, as if he were always planning a prank of some sort.

“Don’t even go there,” said Theya.

“Why not?” asked Alden.

“Your ‘advantages’ are untested theories.”

“What do you mean?” asked James.

“Alden has this crazy theory that you can be in two places at once,” Theya answered with obvious contempt.

“It’s not a crazy theory,” Alden defended. “Look, we know there are many different worlds, or as the mortals call it, dimensions. James was just in the Netherworld himself.”

“Don’t remind me,” said James.

“Well, if there are multiple dimensions for our world, what if there were multiple dimensions of us?”

“Huh?” James had no idea what Alden was even saying.

“Think about it,” said Alden. “We have a body, we also have a soul . . . or a spirit. There’s a Mortal World, the Magic World, the Underworld, the Otherworld, the Netherworld, the Spirit World and the Shadow World. . . . What if, while our body stayed here our spirit or soul could be in another dimension?”

“Now I’m really confused,” said James as he shook his head.

“See what I mean?” said Theya.

“Well it’s no more confusing or weird than your whole dream magic research,” Alden countered.

“Dream magic?” asked James, his attention turning back to Theya.

Theya’s cheeks reddened. She shot a glare at her brother which only produced a smug expression from him. As if he were saying, *gotcha*.

“It’s nothing,” Theya attempted to brush it off.

“Well, let’s be honest now,” said Alden, the tone in his voice noticeably changing from bantering to sounding . . . proud . . . of Theya. “Even though I don’t fully understand it, it is pretty nifty.”

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“Nifty?” Theya snorted.

Alden shrugged.

“Dream magic,” Theya turned to James, “is an older magic that was lost to us centuries ago. *It’s a legitimate thing.*” She shot those last words at Alden who only shrugged again.

“So is it like . . . controlling dreams?” asked James.

“Kind of,” explained Theya. “There are several branches of dream magic. It ranges from controlling your dreams, giving dreams to others, even going into the Dream World.”

“A Dream World now?” he asked incredulously. “How many worlds are there?”

“Who knows for sure,” Theya answered. “For all we know there is an infinite number of different worlds.”

“But see what I mean?” proclaimed Alden. “It is fascinating . . . but *just as weird* as my theory. Dream World.” He said the last bit with a chuckle.

James shook his head. He couldn’t make heads or tails of what either of them were saying—but it was fun to watch the two siblings banter.

“I think I’m ready to get up now,” he said, defiantly throwing the soft but heavy blankets off.

“I said no. . . .” Theya protested.

But James only ignored her and quickly stood. His vision blurred just slightly as a rushing sound roared momentarily through his head. He staggered just a bit but quickly regained his footing.

“See what I mean,” Theya chided.

“Oh, come off it,” said Alden as they both reached out to help James steady himself.

“I’m fine,” James assured them. “It’s just a head rush.”

Alden smiled as if he knew it all along.

*But he did move to help me just in case,* James smiled to himself.

A few quick jumps to get the blood flowing and James felt completely renewed. As soon as he was sure that he was feeling better, the door opened and a messenger appeared.

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“Lord James,” he stated. “Lord Andel and Queen Tina request your presence.” He turned and left just as quickly as he appeared. He didn’t even wait for a response.

“Wonder what this is about,” said Alden.

“You don’t know?” James asked.

Alden shook his head.

James felt a tightening of his stomach. He was always worried that he’d get in trouble somehow. His whole time at Aragonia he kept wondering if ever he was doing something wrong. It was a simple paranoia. He always did his best to follow the rules, but for some reason whenever he saw Lord Andel, Captain Rosden, Grandpa Joe, Queen Tina, or any combination of those four together, he instantly worried that he had done something wrong and was about to get a severe chastisement.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Theya tried to comfort him, placing a soft but strong hand on his shoulder.

James, again, felt his heart skip a beat at the feel of her touch . . . despite the twisting of his gut.

*Why am I feeling that?* he wondered.

“Yeah,” Alden added, playfully slugging James in the shoulder. “They probably just want to know what happened.”

“And then punish me somehow for some form of disobedience,” said James.

“No.” Alden attempted to brush off the notion.

They quickly made their way through the city to the Great Hall where Lord Andel and Queen Tina would be. Alden did his best to distract James by babbling on about old fairy-myths and legends. He dwelt a long time on the fabled Hand of Nuada. A magical, pure-silver hand of their ancient ancestor. The legend said that because he lost his hand in battle he was no longer perfect and lost the kingship. But when the new king abused his power, a magician made a new hand out of pure silver to replace the lost limb thus renewing his perfection and kingship.

Alden went on and on about where he believed the lost tomb of Nuada may be and where the powerful hand would be found.

“You know it’s just a myth?” said Theya. “It doesn’t exist.”

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“Sister . . . our whole history is a myth,” Alden argued. “Just because no one has found it doesn’t mean that it isn’t real.”

Theya rolled her eyes.

James wanted to add to the conversation but he couldn’t think straight. He kept worrying about what was to come. Sweat beaded on his forehead. His stomach churned and he wished that he had either eaten another bowl of stew or not eaten at all.

All three of them became silent as they entered the vast hallway. Everything looked different. Only the torches in their sconces on the pillars provided the light. The hearth sat cold and dark as if it hadn’t been lit for days, neither were the candles on the silver chandeliers lit. James noticed that the sparkling white granite walls were decorated with new tapestries. Not the usual, lively and brightly colored tapestries, but a . . . less lively kind. The colors were dull and dark, and even seemed to absorb the light, making the hall seem far darker than it usually was.

“Strange,” James muttered under his breath.

Even stranger was the fact that Tina was wearing an all-black dress. It was the usual design, fitting tightly to her body, shoulders, and arms, but flowing freely from the waist down and also long and loose at the forearm. A gold-studded belt fitted around her waist and she looked to be sitting a bit more stiffly than usual.

James had never really gotten along with her while he lived there. But something was definitely more ‘off’ about her than before.

*I bit pretentious*, he thought to himself as he observed her new dress. *We’ve only been gone for a few weeks and already things have changed so much.*

He bowed formally to Queen Tina and saluted Lord An del and Captain Rosden who both wore their armor and stood off to the side of the throne.

“My lords,” James said, trying to show as much confidence as he could. “My . . . queen.”

Why did he stutter there?

“It’s good to see you, James,” An del said with a smile.

James smiled back, but still felt uneasy about the summons.

“Oh, relax,” Rosden added as he embraced James. “You’re not in trouble.”

“I’m not?” James asked in surprise.

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A loud laughter came from the side of the hall behind a column. “I told you he would think he was in trouble.”

Dagget emerged from behind the pillar and James felt an immediate rush of relief. The room even seemed to brighten a bit . . . or maybe just his mood. Everyone laughed as his tension lifted.

“No. The real reason we wanted you here was to not only hear what happened but just to see you again,” Andel confirmed. “We’ve missed you and your grandfather.”

James smiled and even swallowed a small budding lump. “I’ve missed you all as well.”

A loud clearing of the throat sounded behind Queen Tina. James looked up to see a strong-looking boy not much older than him and wearing the uniform of the Guardian. James felt his face flush and his fists momentarily tightened.

*That should be my uniform,* he thought resentfully.

Taking a deep breath, he let the anger go as best he could.

“James,” Tina said with her usual cold, monotone voice . . . the one she used when trying to be formal or seem more important—James always thought it pretentious. “This is Blake—my new Guardian.”

James smiled tightly. “Pleased to meet you,” he said with slightly clenched teeth.

“And you as well,” Blake said. “I’ve heard many great things about you and your family. I’ve got some large shoes to fill.”

The words were cordial, but James didn’t like his stare. There was something behind it. He felt uncomfortable looking at the boy.

“So?” Dagget prodded. “Tell us what happened.”

James recounted everything from seeing the bonfire that changed colors to the forest fire that erupted and the strange scene that he found.

“When I was surrounded by the ghouls in the Netherworld,” he continued—he noticed several shudders from those listening when he mentioned the ghouls and the Netherworld. “There were also some goblins . . . and three guys there. One was obviously in charge. He’s the one who spoke to me.”

“Can you describe them?” Rosden asked. He, out of all of them, listened most intently.

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“No,” James admitted. “They stood too far back in the shadows. I could barely see them.”

Rosden showed only the slightest sign of disappointment.

“But just when they allowed the ghouls to take me I was rescued.”

“Who rescued you?” asked Dagget. “I saw you come out of that strange doorway, but I couldn’t see who it was who brought you.”

“I’m not sure about that either,” said James. “It was a man who wielded a bright sword named Ryan. . . . And he rode on a lion with wings.”

Everyone’s eyes shot up at him in rapt attention.

“*Ryan* rescued you?” Andel asked, his expression becoming very solemn.

“Yes. . . .”

James looked at the others. All of them suddenly became very serious. Tina and Blake even exchanged a tense look.

“Who’s Ryan?” he asked.

Suddenly, Rosden started laughing. Then Andel joined. Then Dagget, Theya, and Alden, all began laughing. Tina, Blake, and James also joined but theirs’ was shaky at best.

“Ryan,” Rosden started once the laughter subsided. “Is a very old friend.”

“I guessed that much since he—you know—rescued me,” said James.

“We have to find him and bring him back,” Andel said joyfully. “Why would he return and not let us know?”

“I’m not sure,” answered Rosden.

“My lords,” Tina interjected. “Perhaps reunions could be postponed for the time being. Just until we get the matter of James here resolved.”

Everyone gave Tina a quizzical look. What needed to be resolved?

“I suppose so. . . .” Andel conceded.

“I mean,” Tina continued. “It’s been a long night, and it’s nearly morning. The school will be wondering where he is if he doesn’t return soon.”

“Wait. You know about me being in the school?” James asked.

Tina blanched for a second. “Y-y-your grandfather felt it necessary to report to me about your arrangements now that you’re both . . . retired.”



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James pursed his lips. He still felt angry about the abrupt ending of their tenure. Now, without telling him he was doing so, Grandpa Joe gave them a report on where he was.

“I don’t remember receiving that,” Andel said, raising an eyebrow at Tina.

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“Sir,” Blake stepped in. “This report only came today, so Queen Tina hadn’t had the opportunity yet to update you all on the Nielsen’s.”

Andel and the others seemed to accept this, but something about Tina and Blake did not sit well with James. His gut feeling screamed to him that something was wrong.

“I suppose then we should return you to your school,” said Andel as he nodded in Dagget’s direction.

Dagget saluted and quickly motioned for James to follow him out.

“It’s good to see you again,” Andel said as he shook James’s hand.

“And you as well,” said James.

Andel leaned in close and whispered softly. “Tina may not approve . . . but do feel free to come back and visit whenever you can.”

He winked as James began to follow Dagget out of the great hall. James smiled and nodded in return.

As they exited the city James felt a deep sadness overcome him . . . as if he were leaving his home. Dagget led him through the rear tunnels and out of the backdoor which was closest to the town, Hillside. From the entrance high up on the hills, James looked out over the valley and could see the town just a few miles away.

“Aren’t you going to come with me,” he asked as Dagget halted at the entrance.

“I’m afraid not,” Dagget said. “I need to get back to my patrol.”

“Good thing you’re so vigilant. I would have been a goner.”

Dagget laughed that big-brotherly laugh as he placed a firm hand on James’s shoulder. James took a deep breath as he looked, again, over the valley. A part of him dreaded entering the forest again.

“Don’t worry,” Dagget began as if reading his mind. “We found that amulet on you when you arrived. That was the link that allowed the ghouls to take you. It’s been

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properly disposed of. Nothing from the Netherworld can harm anyone without a powerful link like it.”

“Thanks, Dagget.” The words were comforting and James felt bolstered just a bit. He stepped forward to go but turned back around. “But . . . I just have one question.”

Dagget leaned against the cave entrance, the way he always did when he wanted to show that he was listening.

“What happened out there in the forest? I was sure there was a skirmish going on. But Ryan said there wasn’t any.”

“He’s right,” Dagget answered. “If there were one, there definitely would have been evidence of it when you showed up.”

“So, what does it all mean?”

“I don’t know,” said Dagget. “But believe me, Lord Andel and Rosden will figure out what happened. Now you best be on your way. The morning’s coming.”

James, now more than ever, didn’t want to return. How could he focus on school with all of this going on? Still, he knew it was where he needed to be. He reluctantly nodded and shook Dagget’s hand before quickly making off through the woods back to school. As he ran, he tried desperately to figure out what everything that happened tonight meant—the fire, the amulet, the ghouls attacking him, and the strange dialogue between him and that shadowy character.

Finally, as he cleared the forest and dashed across the clearing and back over the school wall he figured it out. “It was a trap . . . for me.”

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~ Michael ~

