

# THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



BECOME A PATRON

## ~ CHAPTER 12 ~ **JAMES'S MISTAKE**

When James first heard about the mentoring program he pictured the libraries and classrooms full of students huddled over books, eagerly absorbing as much information as they could. That . . . or complete and total chaos throughout the campus. Why would anyone want to give five-hundred teenagers three hours to do whatever they wanted? Then again, if all of the teachers were like Mr. Heinz—or if Mr. Heinz got his way with running the mentoring program—he wouldn't be surprised if it was like a medieval monastery with everyone huddled over a desk with parchment, a feather pen and ink, and a single, solitary candle to light their studies.

Fortunately, it was nothing like that. There was a general bustle throughout campus as students kept busy in their studies or working on projects. Overall it felt . . . productive. James felt good being productive.

When he and Timothy got to the library he was even more surprised. James vaguely remembered that everyone needed to be quiet and non-disturbing in libraries, however, this library felt like Aragoria's main market. Students were everywhere . . . and they were all busily moving, searching, discussing . . . it was *not* the quiet serene sanctuary of learning that he expected.

The vast room was easily three stories tall with a narrow metal balcony wrapped around the walls twenty feet up. Students slid along the bottom half of the bookshelves on tall ladders or darted to the upper balcony on the thin, metal, spiral staircases.

Timothy chatted non-stop the entire time from their classroom to the library. He beamed at the idea of the “new kid” joining him in his mentoring project. James still didn't quite know how to handle his unwarranted popularity, but apparently, Timothy was loving it.

He wanted to be polite and actually contribute, but James's focus was too far gone. When Mr. Heinz had dismissed the class he was eager for a chance to talk to

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Bailey, but she had darted out of the class so quickly that he missed his window of opportunity.

*When will I ever get to really talk to her?* he wondered.

He didn't get to think long on his question. A loud bang sounded next to him. He jumped at the sound and quickly spun to see that Timothy had dropped a stack of thick, heavy books down next to him—a small plume of dust subtly lingered above the texts in the sunlight. The excitable little fellow smiled broadly at James, then quickly darted back to the shelves.

James's eyes widened. *He can't be serious about reading all of these . . . can he?*

The books ranged from advanced metallurgy to specific historical periods—some even looked like they might have been written during the dark ages themselves.

He leaned back, stretching in his chair, and moaned softly to himself as he rubbed his eyes. "You really got into a mess this time, James," he mumbled to himself.

Another loud *plop*. Timothy had returned with another equally large stack of books . . . and still talking in rapid-fire.

"I was even thinking that if we get our swords done then maybe next term we could look into how to use them. You know . . . ? Learn actual fighting techniques and such."

James smiled—but half-heartedly. He wished he could tell Timothy the truth. He ached to just leave since he already had advanced knowledge of almost everything Timothy was wanting to study and do . . . aside from the actual making of the swords. He never really got *that* far in his training. Though Dagget had always told him how in ancient times a warrior was never given full warrior status until he or she *made* their own weapon.

The thought of actually doing some swordplay, though, made him smile. He would hate having to pretend to be a beginner. He wondered if there was a way around it.

As if it were an omen sent from the mother goddess, James glanced out of the window to see a group of students clustered on the fields outside with various items from the medieval era.

"What's that?" he asked, nodding to the group outside.

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Timothy looked up and huffed with disdain. “That’s the Medieval Club.”

James looked at him perplexed. “Why don’t you jump in with them for your mentoring?”

Timothy’s eyes shifted from side to side in embarrassment.

James recognized that look. “Did you get rejected from the club?” he asked.

He couldn’t help but feel a sense of wanting to protect the kid. Sure, he was a bit much—slightly annoying even—but James somehow felt his heart go out to the boy.

“I didn’t ‘pass’ the entrance exam,” Timothy said, those last two words with a pretentious tone.

“Entrance exam?” James questioned.

“Their club president has high expectations on who joins the club. Apparently, I could not meet those expectations in the swordplay area.”

James suddenly understood. He didn’t know if it was the history, the intrigue of the time period, or what-not, but something about the medieval era . . . or maybe even the group of kids who made up the club . . . was attracting the young man. He didn’t have to say it, but James understood that he desperately wanted to be in the club. His rejection was most likely the reason behind his project and the eventual practicing with their swords next term.

“Why didn’t you get in?” James asked.

Timothy’s face flushed. “I didn’t pass the swordsmanship test.”

Yep . . . James was right. “Who is the president?” He asked as he looked out at the group.

A quick observation of how they were using their practice swords and James nearly laughed out loud. Their forms were completely wrong and horribly sloppy. Either Timothy was a complete klutz or the president of this “Medieval Club” was a total nincompoop.

“Tony Fields,” Timothy spat.

James’s eyes widened with surprise. Tony was the president of the club? How much had his friends really changed in five years?

“I’m actually really good with everything they do in that club,” Timothy said quickly. “I know all of the histories. . . .”

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*Then why do we need all of these books?*

“And I’ve been practicing a bit with Kaleb Davis. He’s a senior who fences, but he isn’t in the club. He only laughs when I talk about it. I could beat almost everyone in that club in a match.”

“All except Tony?” James guessed.

Timothy’s face reddened, though James didn’t know if it was in anger or embarrassment.

“Yeah,” he said. “Him and his girlfriend, Bailey Porter.”

“Bailey Porter’s in the club too?” James perked up.

“Yeah. But she doesn’t do the sword part of it that much. She’s their current ‘champion’ in archery.”

James couldn’t hide the excitement that began to grow within him. He smiled from ear to ear.

“Are you okay?” Timothy asked.

“Let’s take a field trip,” James answered and quickly darted to the door.

“What?” Timothy asked confused, but he was soon by James’s side as they made their way through the school and out to the field. “What are you doing?” he gasped once he realized where James was going.

“You said you wanted to learn a bit of swordplay,” James answered.

Timothy stammered—lost for words.

“Well, I believe in a more . . . practical approach to learning,” James winked at the boy and continued.

Groups of kids clustered in small groups throughout the field, a strange mix of medieval era armor and imitations mixed with modern styles of clothing. It looked slightly . . . comical. James quickly took in the various groups. Most of the groups had wooden shields and staves to use as practice swords or quarter-staffs. Some looked to be reading books off to the side. Another group donned various costumes of players and were reciting lines of a play. Towards the rear of the field, James noted a group practicing archery. His eyes quickly sought out and found Bailey. He was impressed when she loosed three quick shots, all of which hit the center of the target.

*She really was good.*

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“James!” a loud voice rang out.

James instantly recognized Tony’s voice. He looked to see his childhood friend quickly making his way over to him.

“Hey Tony,” he answered with a smile.

“How are you doing?” Tony asked as he clasped James’s hand and pulled him in for an awkward hug.

*What was that?* James wondered.

“I’m doing fine.”

“Come to join our club? I would have told you about it sooner but you’re kind of difficult to find . . . surprisingly.”

James gave a half-smile. “I just found out about it, thanks to Timmy here.”

Tony glance imperiously at Timothy who visibly shrank behind James.

“So . . .” James continued, rubbing his hands together. “How *does* one join this club?”

“Well we don’t just accept anyone,” Tony shot a glance at Timothy that James could have sworn was meant to be demeaning. “We have a few tests and such to see if you’re worthy.”

James chuckled. “Worthy?”

“It’s what all of the knights in medieval times aspired to.”

That was true. Courtly love and chivalry were more than just romance stories. It was an ideal that the knights tried to live up to in all aspects of their lives. A sort of honor code. Still . . . James thought Tony and these kids were taking it a bit too far.

“So do you think I could be worthy?” he asked—he tried not to, but couldn’t help the slightly mocking tone in his voice.

Tony must have missed the taunt. He smiled excitedly. “Well, we’ll have you take a history test, recite an original poem, test your archery, sword handling, and . . .”

“Any way to bypass all of that?” James interrupted. “I’m *really* eager to join. And my new buddy, Timmy, would like a shot too.”

Tony burst out laughing. “Bypass the tests?” he asked incredulously. “And have ‘*Timmy*’ join too?”

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“What’s wrong with that?” James asked. “Ask Kaleb Davis and he can vouch for him. He’s great at swordplay . . . and I’ve seen how much he knows with history.

Tony only shrugged as he continued laughing.

“Tell you what,” James said his tone growing slightly harder. “I’ll bet that I can best you in three bouts with your little wooden swords. You beat me once and I’ll do all of your tests. I beat you all three times and Timmy and I get to be in the club.”

Tony’s eyes widened with shock. By this time students began to gather around them and a murmur rippled through the crowd. Tony looked around from side to side, clearly not wanting to be one-upped by the ‘new kid.’

*What am I doing? James thought. He’s my best friend. I shouldn’t be embarrassing him like this.*

But would his best friend treat others the way Tony treated Timmy? James had been away from human interaction for a long time, but he still recognized a bully when he saw one. This wasn’t even the real reason he came out here. His real motive was to see Bailey—who had also started making her way over when she saw the group gathering around Tony and James.

“Trust me, James,” Tony said, drawing himself up to look confident again. “You don’t want to face me.”

“You’re that good?” James grinned. “If it’s anything like your batting when we were younger I think I’ll be fine.”

‘Oohs,’ sounded throughout the crowd accompanied by a few snickers. Tony’s face reddened and his eyes flared.

“Fine,” he conceded through gritted teeth. Then raising his voice . . . “to the practice grounds.”

An excited cheer erupted from the crowd and everyone quickly made their way over to a portion of the field that had been roped off in the shape of a square. A student named Zack who was familiar with the proceedings helped James put on leather shoulder pads and gauntlets.

James smiled as he prepared. He missed this . . . a good sparring match. Though he did wonder how good Tony was.

“Excuse me.”

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James looked up to see Bailey squeezing through the crowd to get to him.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Having a good sparring match with an old friend,” he answered.

“Did you have to embarrass him like that?”

“He embarrassed Timmy,” James countered.

“He’s your best friend.”

“Maybe Timmy’s my best friend now.”

Bailey gave a look that felt both a plea to stop and a glare for what he did. As if embarrassing Tony was also embarrassing her.

“I’ve been gone for five years,” James whispered to her in a more serious tone.

“And apparently my ‘friend’ over there is not the same kid as when I left.”

“He’s not the only one who’s changed,” she also whispered coldly.

“Three bouts!” Tony shouted about the crowd. “I win one, we’re done. You win all three, you and . . . Timmy . . . get to join the club.”

James gripped the practice sword and tapped the inside of his shoes—an old habit he kept from when he played baseball as a younger kid. He spun the wooden stave around a few times to get a feel for it. He hoped it didn’t look too flashy. If he wanted to he could have impressed them with a few advanced practice routines that he did every day while training to be the Guardian, but he figured it’d be best not to.

*‘Try to see the big picture,’* Grandpa Joe’s words echoed in his mind. *Am I being short-sighted?* He questioned.

He didn’t have time to answer. A bell rang out from somewhere and Tony was suddenly rushing towards him with his practice sword held tightly to the side.

*He’s going to try Dawn Breaks the Sky.*

Not that he was trying that particular form. Fairy forms of fighting were different than humans. But how would anyone other than James know that?

Still Tony swung upwards as James predicted. Instinct quickly took over and James whacked at the precise point to counter the upwards blow, removing all momentum of Tony’s strike. Rebounding from his counterattack, James snapped his wrist to strike Tony at both shoulders. It was over in a split second and everyone stood in silent shock.

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“That’s one,” said Zack, who had stepped into the ring as the official, after a long pause.

Tony looked around in wide-eyed shock. It took him a second to remember that he needed to return to his corner for the second round.

“Come on, Tony!” a student called out. Cheers from the crowd went up, most cheering for Tony—their champion.

James, again, spun his stave to stay loose, then tapped the inside of his shoes.

The bell rang again. Tony approach—this time more cautious.

James stepped out into the middle of the ring. Both boys circled each other, Tony held his stave at a middle guard position while James let his hang at his side casually. He couldn’t help but smile antagonistically at Tony. The poor kid still looked a little dazed from being beaten so quickly last round.

James took a single step towards Tony who instantly backed away. The cheers quickly shifted to jeers and taunts—a peal of laughter at Tony’s abrupt hesitancy permeated the crowd.

James looked at Tony and gave him a cheeky grin. That pushed Tony over the edge. It was very clear he was not one to be humiliated in front of a crowd. He lunged, swinging his sword towards James’s shoulder. One thing about fighting fairy-style, it relies more on agility and turning your opponent’s momentum against them. James had trained this way for hours on end for the last five years. It wasn’t even a thought . . . more of an instinct . . . as he ducked, side-stepped, and spun gracefully on the balls of his feet. Tony, on the other hand, lost his balance and tumbled awkwardly into the crowd and out of the ring.

“That’s two,” Zack announced.

Tony, with the help of his club members, quickly regained his footing and jumped back into the ring, his face red with indignation. He glared at both James and Zack, obviously not pleased with the call.

“By *your* rules,” Zack emphasized, “if someone steps out of the ring the point goes to their opponent.”

Tony was obviously flustered. Had this guy really never been beaten? It made sense then why his own rules would come back to bite him.



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James could see Tony's jaw tighten and loose rapidly. "Different when the rules work against you, huh?" he couldn't help say.

Tony seethed with anger as he lost all control of his temper. Not even waiting to go back to his corner and have Zack call out the next round, he threw himself in a complete wild frenzy at James.

This time, James retreated, circling backward so as not to be overwhelmed by Tony's onslaught. Tony yelled in anger as he hacked away. James, however, focused on his training and breathed slowly and methodically as he parried attack after attack. Just as Dagget had shown him, as he maintained a level of serenity, things began to become clear and focused. Tony's movements even appeared to slow down and a pattern of attack quickly revealed itself.

*Amateur, James thought. Still so much to learn.*

He remembered reading a book written by Alwen the Exile, Andel's father, who mentions that across all cultures and races, even in the various human cultures, to disarm an opponent is far more effective of a defeat than killing. As James quickly familiarized himself with Tony's erratic pattern of attack, he knew exactly what he needed to do.

Tony swung, his blows hard and fast, but sloppy and nearly uncontrolled. James countered. This time stepping into the attack, he executed the Dagget Disarm. He parried Tony's high arcing swing, quickly catching his wrists in his hand while he delivered a few slaps in various locations to discombobulate Tony. The final slap landing at a precise point that sent Tony's practice sword flying. In the same fluid motion, James spun around to be behind his opponent in time to catch the falling sword.

A hush through the crowd came over as Tony, totally humiliated turned to see James holding both practice swords ready to strike.

Tony raised his hands slowly. "I yield," he said softly through gritted teeth.

As if given permission, the crowd's cheers split the air. Zack and Timothy were the first to reach James as the rush of students who surrounded him congratulated him on his victory.

Through the crowd of smiling faces and waving hands, James spotted Tony pushing his way out towards a bench. He watched as his old friend sat down gingerly,

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wincing in pain. Bailey was quickly by his side, gently feeling for where he hurt. Then, more painful than any blow with a practice sword, they both looked up and met James's eyes. Suddenly, as he looked into those cold stares, James knew . . . he had just lost his friends.

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~ Michael ~

