

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



BECOME A PATRON

~ CHAPTER 14 ~ ADVICE ABOUT PEOPLE

It was an effort for James to focus for the rest of the day. Thank goodness Timothy did most of the thinking . . . and talking. All James had to do was smile and nod encouragingly while also adding a few corrections to the research—though that was seldom. He was quite surprised by Timothy’s thoroughness.

A cool breeze blew through the quad as he sat quietly on a bench, staring at the amber sky while contemplating everything that had happened. Evenings and early mornings were always his favorite times to just think. He had only been to school for two days now and he felt like he had already gone on more adventures than his entire five years in Aragoria.

Still . . . he just felt empty.

Everyone had scurried off to do whatever activity was available for the evening. This place always seemed to be busy. Did no one just take a moment to relax?

“How can I fix this?” James whispered to himself.

He felt bad as he replayed the sparring match over and over in his mind. It wasn’t just a win for him—he had won several matches against others during his training at Aragoria. He purposefully humiliated Tony. Deep down he knew that was his real intent. He wanted Tony to look bad at what he was most confident at.

“Why would I want to humiliate him?”

James knew what his intentions were. He just didn’t understand why he instinctively resorted to it—why he took advantage of a lesser opponent.

His mind raced with all sorts of things he could try. He thought about apologizing to Tony—like that would help. And . . . if he were really being honest with himself . . . he didn’t care. But he did want things to be alright between him and Bailey. Maybe apologizing to Tony would soothe things over with her.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

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James looked up and was shocked to see Alden standing in front of him. Dressed in a button-up shirt and slacks and a shoulder bag, he almost looked . . . human—if it weren't for his pointed ears.

“What are you doing?” James asked, his instincts of keeping the fairy-folk a secret kicking in. “If anyone saw you . . .”

“Oh, I'm fine,” Alden chuckled. “Don't you think I look convincing enough?”

“The clothes, maybe,” said James. “But . . .”

“My ears?” Alden said with a wink as he brushed his hand through his brown hair in a way that drew attention to his leaf-shaped ears.

James nodded.

“I wouldn't worry about it,” explained Alden. “Humans tend to only see what they want to see—or what they only believe in. And last I checked, humans don't believe in fairies.”

“So they'll just not bother about the obvious fact that your ears are pointy and think you're a normal person?”

“I *am* a normal person. Just not a human.”

James rolled his eyes at Alden's playful grin. The man could be insufferable sometimes.

“And a little distraction charm helps a bit too.”

“Now that's a bit more comforting,” said James. “Why didn't you say that to begin with?”

Alden only smiled that comical smile and sat down next to him.

“So what exactly are you doing here?” asked James.

“Just checking in on you. This is an interesting place. I always found it fascinating the way humans 'educate' themselves.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, look at it . . . a building full of rooms where kids are told to sit down in rows, be quiet, and follow orders. Not really a fun way to learn.”

“You're the prince of Aragoria,” James noted. “You are a commander in their army. I thought you'd like orders.”

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“That’s different,” Alden argued. “Learning needs to be fun, explorative, creative—not pent up like little factory workers.”

James smirked. He remembered hearing somewhere that the classroom setting was based on the Industrial Revolution where people were told to . . . sit down in rows, be quiet, and follow orders.

“Anyway,” Alden added with a bit more cheer to his voice. “I’ve heard about this place. It seems to be doing a lot better cultivating that curiosity and creativity than most schools.”

James nodded in agreement. It was only the first day and he couldn’t help but think about all of the things he could do and learn about through the school’s mentoring program.

“You seem a bit down,” Alden observed.

“It was a rough afternoon,” James tried to sound casual. He didn’t really want to explain . . . though he couldn’t think of why.

“I overheard some kids talking about a ‘new kid’ who—what was the word?—thrashed a kid named Tony in the Medieval Club.”

James shrugged his shoulders. “Guilty as charged.”

“Was he good?”

“He was pretty decent,” James admitted.

“But something else seems to be bothering you,” Alden deduced. “Whenever you won a bout when you were training you would beam from ear to ear for the rest of the day.”

“It’s nothing,” James tried to brush it off.

Alden raised an eyebrow at him.

“Really . . . it’s nothing,” James tried not to sound too adamant.

“If you say so,” Alden answered as he stood up to go.

That was a short visit, James thought to himself.

Normally he’d get up and see his old friend out. But today he just wanted to be alone. He coughed as something suddenly slammed against his chest and landed in his lap. He looked down to see a well-seasoned but well-tended, dark-brown baseball mitt.

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Alden, surprisingly, began tossing a baseball up in the air and catching it with his own mitt.

“Ow!” he said as he rubbed where the mitt had hit him—he also raised an eyebrow at Alden in confusion. “Where did you get a baseball mitt?”

Alden smiled. “These were your fathers.”

James nearly gaped. “My dad knew how to play baseball?”

“He never really could teach me the game,” said Alden, his eyes revealing his confusion of all of the rules, numbers, and strategies of baseball. “But when he first became the Guardian he taught me how to throw and catch and we would spend hours playing catch.”

James fingered the old mitt on his lap. His dad had played a sport? The idea seemed so foreign. And why hadn’t ever played catch with him? A small sense of frustration began welling up inside of him.

My dad had time to play catch with Alden but not with me . . . his own son.

It had been Grandpa Joe who had taught James to throw and catch. Those were the memories he cherished. Now, he both longed for the chance to play catch with his dad and felt angry at . . . something.

“Come on,” Alden urged, throwing the baseball into his mitt and backing up several paces. “Let’s toss.”

James reluctantly stood. All he wanted to do right then was sit and think . . . wallow, really. But he knew that a game of catch might be good.

“Why don’t we just spar like we used to?” he asked in mock tones.

“Well,” Alden began as if entertaining the thought. “I’ll bet Tony would enjoy watching *you* get thrashed.”

James’s competitiveness flared for an instant. He sneered at Alden. That guy knew how to push his buttons.

“Maybe we’ll have to settle for simply throwing heat,” he winked as he caught the first throw from Alden.

“What’s throwing heat?” asked the fairy.

Aha! James thought. *My dad didn’t teach you everything.*

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His sneer turned mischievously crooked as he wound up and delivered a laser-beam of a throw straight towards Alden. He had always been the natural pitcher.

The fairy prince's eyes widened for only a split second but he quickly snatched the ball out of the air before it struck. The crack of the ball hitting the leather echoed through the quad. Several students stopped in their tracks wide-eyed to see what just happened.

“Not bad,” said Alden as he withdrew the ball from his glove. “I think I get it.”

He smiled at James, and, for a brief second, it was James's turn to be afraid. He recognized that smile. It usually came before one of Alden's so-called “lessons” which left him bruised and sore.

Alden went into his own wind-up. It looked a bit clunky—like he was still unsure of the movements of throwing a baseball—and yet more fluid and poised than most practiced players. He stepped into the throw and released. James had only a split-second to find the ball as it sped towards him and react. Another loud crack of ball meeting leather. With an icy-hot sting exploding in his palm and racing up his arm, James gritted his teeth and smiled. For a brief moment, he regretted instigating this. But his competitiveness overtook him.

More students began watching from a distance as the two exchanged throw for throw, each as hard as they could. Each throw echoed loudly off of the buildings and plumes of dust could be seen in the evening sunlight exploding from the mitts.

James felt his hand sting near to the point of unbearable, then suddenly it went numb. “Alright,” he conceded. “You win!”

He tossed the ball lightly at Alden who dramatically caught it while sweeping an over-exaggerated bow.

“Thank you. Thank you,” the fairy said, pantomiming his gratitude towards a cheering crowd.

“Where did you learn to throw like that?” asked James.

“Your dad.”

Again, a surge of mixed emotions raced through James. He actually felt proud that his dad was a decent athlete, but also anger that he never taught him, or even simply played catch. He also felt a stab jealousy that Alden got that privilege and not

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himself. He consoled himself with the thought that it probably happened before he was even born. That way he didn't have to feel any anger towards his friend. . . . At least any anger that did pop up was easily subdued with that notion.

After a few more tosses James noticed that he no longer felt "off" like he did earlier. Alden always had that effect on him. Or was it him throwing out his anger with those fast pitches? Either way . . . he was grateful for the help Alden gave.

"So what's bothering you?" Alden asked as they continued tossing.

James opened his mouth to answer but stopped to quickly look around. The quad was relatively empty now that the pitching match had ended. Only a few students remained in the far corners of the grassy area. All of them relaxing in the shade, reading books, and *all* had earbuds in. James breathed a sigh of relief. He wanted to get his thoughts out but he worried about what others might think if they overheard . . . let alone the inevitable topic of the fairy-folk.

"There's this girl. . . ." he began.

Alden's eyes brightened with excitement. His smile stretched across his face like an older brother learning his younger brother's secrets.

"Really?" he asked excitedly. "What's her name?"

James hesitated. "Bailey," he finally said.

"And . . ." Alden prodded. "Is she pretty?"

"She's gorgeous," James let it all out. "The most beautiful girl I've ever seen. And I can't stop thinking about her."

"Ask her out," said Alden.

James raised an eyebrow. "Ask her out? How do you know what that means?"

"I've spent my fair share of time around you humans," Alden winked, then threw the ball back a little harder.

"It's not that easy," James explained. "She has a boyfriend."

"So?"

"So . . . her boyfriend happens to be my best friend." James paused for a moment. "At least . . . he was my best friend . . . when I was younger."

"Ah, I see," said Alden.

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“Plus,” James continued. “I’m pretty sure I ruined any and all chances of being friends with her—let alone ever be *more* than just friends.”

“Why’s that?”

James threw back the ball, also adding a bit of a zip to it as his earlier frustration reemerged. He told Alden the whole story of that day how he befriended Timothy, learned about the Medieval Club, and used Timothy’s plight as a means to try and talk to Bailey but it ended up being a sparring match with him humiliating Tony. As he neared the end of his tale they had finished their game of catch and now walked side by side through one of the various trails in the campus gardens.

“I guess I’m angry more at myself than anything else,” James finally said.

“How come?” asked Alden.

“Because I know deep down that it wasn’t about beating a bully for Timothy. It was all a shot at trying to impress Bailey by showing I was the better sword fighter.”

Alden laughed . . . rather loudly too.

“What’s so funny?” James asked defensively.

“You!” Alden finally answered once his laughter subsided. “You honestly thought that by showing off your skills with a wooden stick you would win over a girl that easily?”

“Well . . . yeah.”

Alden continued to laugh but softer this time. “Typical youngling.”

“What do you mean?” James felt his face go red with frustration.

“It’s good that you recognized that it wasn’t about putting a ‘bully’ in his place,” Alden explained. “And there’s nothing inherently wrong with showing off to try and impress a girl—at least a little bit.”

“So what did I do wrong?” asked James.

“Your mistake was that you tried to show off by putting another person down.”

James looked at Alden confused. “But Tony is a bully.”

“It doesn’t matter if he’s a bully,” Alden retorted quickly. “If it wasn’t about impressing a girl then you’d probably be okay with what you did. But because you *did* try to impress a girl by *belittling* another—and her boyfriend to boot—that’s why

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she didn't reciprocate. Nothing good is ever achieved—nor is anyone ever truly impressed—when others are torn down and belittled.”

“So what do I do?”

“If you ever want to impress *anyone*,” explained Alden. “You have to show them that you're the better option by simply *being* better. You don't have to tear down another to show you're better. If anything it shows that you're actually weaker.”

James shifted uncomfortably in his shoes. “What do you mean, weaker?” he protested. “How is me beating Tony in a bout showing that I'm actually weaker?”

“It's not about you 'beating' him,” Alden continued patiently. “It's about *how* you beat him. You're intent wasn't about just winning. Deep down it was about humiliating and embarrassing him. And did that happen?”

James pursed his lips tightly and drew in a deep breath. “Yes.”

“And how do you feel now?”

“Not good,” he admitted.

“And how do you think your chances are with winning over this girl?”

James hung his head. He knew that Alden was right. He knew deep down that humiliating Tony was the wrong way to impress her.

“I've ruined my chances, haven't I?”

“Not entirely,” Alden said with a reassuring pat on the back.

James looked up at his fairy friend quizzically.

“Do you really like this girl?” asked Alden.

James nodded emphatically.

Alden smiled playfully again. “Can you get out again tonight?”

“Tonight?” James asked bewildered. “I already got in trouble from last night. You want me to sneak out again tonight?”

“How bad do you want to win over Bailey?”

James let out a deep breath as he let his shoulders slump. He didn't need to say it. It was obvious how much he wanted to be with her.

“Meet me tonight at the brook,” Alden instructed.

James knew exactly where he was talking about. They had gone there many times when James was still in training. But why would he need to go there?

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“And don’t worry,” Alden said with another wink accompanied with a punch to the shoulder. “If you actually use what we taught you, you won’t get caught this time.”

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~ Michael ~

