

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

~ CHAPTER 4 ~ THE END OF THE FAIRY-TALE

James waited impatiently in the Grand Hall while Grandpa Joe met in audience with the high council of the Aragorians. He paced anxiously back and forth, occasionally pressing his ear up to the door to see if he could hear anything.

Nothing.

Darn fairy carpentry. Like everything else, it was above superior in quality.

James sat down and anxiously bounced his knee as he tried his best to calm his nerves. *Soon*, he thought. *Soon, I'll be the one in there.*

Five years had flown by faster than he ever anticipated. Long days of various and intense training made it feel like this day would never come, especially when he had first started. But now, the day *had* finally come. James would assume the role of the Guardian. He closed his eyes and smiled at the thought. No—he didn't just smile . . . he beamed.

His grandfather currently held the office of Guardian to the queen which also made him—after the queen—the supreme commander of all military and defensive matters. And surprisingly, the fairy-world was far more dangerous than the human world. The fairy-folk had been in a constant war with goblins for thousands of years which made the clan Guardian a pretty high office.

James had longed for a chance to prove himself in battle. In the time which he began his training there had only been three engagements . . . skirmishes at best . . . between the fairy-folk of that region and some goblins. Nothing of great import, and certainly nothing Grandpa Joe would let him accompany. James had always been a little annoyed at that.

“What are they talking about in there?” he said to himself.

Usually, Grandpa Joe would brief him on what was going to be discussed in these meetings. But this time he hadn't said a word.

He couldn't help it . . . he tried once more to see if he could hear anything behind the door.

“Anxious to be in there,” said a strong voice from behind.

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James jumped back—his face flushed with embarrassment for eavesdropping.

Dagget, a lower-ranking but highly respected captain only laughed. The fairy warrior had always been like an older brother to James. He was there at his parents' funeral and was also among the first who were there when James was shown the fairy city for the first time.

“Don't worry,” Dagget said as he slapped James on the shoulder. “I won't tell.”

“Thanks,” James said as he stared back at the door.

The soldier was always in his uniform. James didn't know what he even looked like without it. The forest-green tunic was custom-fitted to his lean but muscular body. Dark-blue trimmed the edges, and silver embroidery danced and flowed in a beautifully intricate yet simple pattern across the chest to indicate his rank.

“Wondering what they're talking about in there?” asked Dagget.

James shrugged.

“Oh, come on,” Dagget prodded. He pushed at James, nearly toppling him completely over. “We all know you've been itching to become the Guardian forever now. You can't hide it from me.”

“Hide what from you?”

“The fact that you want nothing more than for your grandfather to come out of that door and hand you *Brenindur*.”

Brenindur.

Dagget was right. James really did itch to get his hands on that sword. The power. The sleekness and beauty of it.

James smiled at Dagget.

“There's the James I know,” Dagget proclaimed, slapping James again on the shoulder.

“Ow!” James protested. “You know I don't heal as easily as you fairies do. If I get a bruise . . .”

“What?” Dagget goaded. “You'll give me one to match?”

“You know I can. I've done it before.”

“Pfff. You've yet to beat me in the ring.”

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“Is that a challenge?”

Dagget only laughed and ruffled James’s shaggy blonde hair. At least it wasn’t a punch to the arm.

James glanced back at the door before joining Dagget at a nearby table that had some food. Together they quietly picked at a few of their favorite things. James’s thoughts continued to race with possibilities. All of the men in his family for the last one hundred years had all been made the Guardian when they were sixteen. It was his birthday just a few weeks ago. When would it happen?

“What *do* you think they’re really talking about in there?” James asked.

“Hard to say,” Dagget said over a clump of bread he was chewing on.

James didn’t understand what the others said about Dagget. His reputation was one of a stern officer who never smiled—a battle-hardened warrior. And despite the eternal youthfulness of the fairy-folk, Dagget did look older . . . wiser than most other fairies.

At least that’s what the others said of him.

But James, for some reason whenever they were alone together, would see him loosen up, smile, even laugh and joke and behave as if he were almost . . . a kid again.

“Maybe they’re trying to decide what penalty to give you since you let that goblin go,” Dagget added.

“Hey, that was not my fault,” James argued.

“You let a goblin get away,” Dagget countered. “That’s just sloppy, even for you.”

“This guy was different. I don’t know what it was. He was faster than any goblin I’ve ever seen.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I’m serious,” James defended. “I’m not even entirely sure he was a goblin. He looked different . . . taller and more slender.”

Dagget raised an eyebrow at him.

“I mean leaner than what a goblin would be.”

Truth be told, James had never seen a live goblin. He had been lucky he was allowed to accompany the patrol last week. Then when they saw something suspicious in

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the shadows and gave chase it had slipped through their fingers. James had been the closest to reaching . . . whatever it was and therefore got the best look at it. They had all assumed it was a goblin, but James wasn't so sure.

“But you still lost him.”

“Will you get off it? Yes. I lost him. Right when I nearly had him, he just disappeared. I can't explain it.”

Dagget smiled triumphantly. Why was it he was the only one who could playfully provoke James and win? “You're right,” he said. “Maybe instead they're planning the Autumn Festival.”

James rolled his eyes at Dagget's lame joke. He opened his mouth to throw out an equally lame retort but was cut short as the doors to the conference room unbolted and began to open.

Queen Tina exited first, her attendants quickly appearing out of nowhere to follow her. She stood tall and regal, but way too serious. Her dark hair had been done with gold and silver strands braided intricately into her voluminous locks. Fairy girls and women had natural gold and silver strands of hair. Tina had insisted that she appear the same. Her dark-red dress was fitted tightly to her. James thought it was a bit too tight. It only added more to her pretentiousness.

James considered her cute. And with her only being three years older than him he even contemplated the idea of crushing on her. But seeing her act way too serious in her role as queen . . . something about it just bugged him.

I wonder what the last queen was like? he thought to himself. *Maybe she was more easy-going.*

Tina didn't say a word to James. She didn't even make eye-contact, though James thought that he noticed her trying hard to focus looking straight forward. Almost as if she were forcing herself to not acknowledge him.

Grandpa Joe—the brought-out-of-retirement-Guardian—followed Queen Tina. James's respect and admiration for his grandfather increased significantly when he revealed the fairy-realm to him five years ago. For an older man well into his seventies, he still moved and even fought with the skill, strength, and vitality of a twenty-year-old.

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Even with his silvery-white hair, people often thought he was somewhere in his late forties. And whenever James saw him dressed in that formal armor giving him an intimidating appearance, he couldn't help but smile whenever he saw his grandfather like that. The uniform was similar to Dagget's but the gold embroidery was woven far more intricately to show his higher rank. And like most fairy clothing, it fitted him perfectly, accentuating his powerful build.

High Captain Rosden walked beside the old Guardian. They spoke softly to one another and James didn't like the looks that they had. Their sober expressions and heavy demeanor suggested something very serious was discussed in their meeting.

James stood at attention as his grandfather and Captain Rosden approached. He did his best to maintain his discipline and focus straight forward. Dagget also stood a bit straighter, though not at full attention—his serious soldier disposition returning.

“At-ease soldier,” Captain Rosden addressed James with a small chuckle.

James always liked Captain Rosden. Ever since his father had been killed in what he learned was a goblin attack, not a car crash, Rosden had stepped up and taken James under his wing; even though Grandpa Joe was now his legal guardian.

“You're doing a good job,” Grandpa Joe said to the captain as he gave a quick inspection of James.

“Well he comes from good stock,” answered Rosden.

James smiled sheepishly as the two old men talked about him. Being allowed to stand at-ease, James couldn't help but be a little fidgety as he waited awkwardly for one of them to finally tell him what was going on. He hadn't been to any of those administrative meetings—though Grandpa Joe usually told him about it back at their quarters anyway . . . just to prepare him for when he became Guardian. Usually, whenever the lords and Queen Tina left they were all in relatively high spirits. Except for Tina—she had always been too uptight.

James glanced at Rosden, hoping he'd give some type of hint of what was going on. Rosden met his eyes and grunted. For the first time in James's recollection, the fairy captain looked uncomfortable.

“Well . . . I'll just leave you two alone then,” he said rather strangely.

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He didn't offer any further explanation or hint or . . . anything! Why was he acting like that?

James turned to his grandfather perplexed. "Are you going to tell me what was going on?" he asked. "Or will I have to wait until dinner tonight . . . again?"

Grandpa Joe scratched his cheek as his eyes drifted off in thought. After a brief pause, he finally looked up to one of the passageways that led to a balcony which overlooked the city.

"Walk with me," he said as he began making his way in that direction.

James followed the order.

Not that long ago James would always have to do a small skipping or running step to keep up with Grandpa Joe when he wanted to get somewhere quick. Walking with a purpose was what he called it. Not so fast as to seem unable to stop and talk, but not so slow either to look like you were wasting time. And with his long legs, Grandpa Joe's purposeful walks always felt like a workout for James. But now, James had actually passed him up in height and he matched Grandpa Joe step for step.

They silently made their way through the palace and up to their favorite balcony. The whole city stretched out before them. The entire cavern was brilliantly lit with thousands of blue-flamed torches and braziers. The fairy-folk bustled about below doing their usual daily business. James stood firmly with his hands behind his back, trying to impress the old soldier.

Surprisingly, Grandpa Joe completely slumped over with his elbows resting on the granite rail of the balcony. Everything in the city was granite. The entire city had been expertly carved out of a single enormous granite deposit. In that way, everything about the city was connected . . . it was all one giant intricate complex of sparkling white majesty.

James had rarely seen Grandpa Joe become so casual since they had arrived at Aragoria. For a brief moment, he didn't know how to respond. Slowly, he also leaned against the rail. He took a deep breath—this was nice. He somehow didn't feel the weight or stress that he usually did around Grandpa Joe and the whole mantle of Guardianship.

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He smiled and looked over at his grandfather, but there was no smile given in return. The old man gazed over the city as if in deep contemplation. When he noticed James looking at him, then he smiled, but it was the smile of one who was sad but was trying to stay upbeat. James caught a small glimmer under his grandfather's eyes. Was he crying?

“Grandpa? What’s wrong?”

“It was a difficult meeting,” Grandpa Joe answered quietly.

“Yeah . . . but you’ve never acted like this after one of those meetings.”

Grandpa Joe tried that smile again, but it felt more forced. He grunted and cleared his throat. Standing up straighter, he took on a more resolved demeanor. His face became hard and stern again. His entire presence quickly demanded respect from everyone.

“There was a lot of debating,” he began as if he were both explaining and making an announcement. “And many of the lords, myself included, are in agreement.”

“Agreement about what?”

James felt his heart beat faster. This was it! He was going to be named the next Guardian. That’s what was going on. Grandpa Joe was getting emotional because he was both sad to be done but proud of James and his accomplishments.

He was ready. He knew he was ready. He fought hard to control the excitement building up within him.

Today was the day!

Finally!

Grandpa Joe is going to let me know about it right now and then later tonight there’ll be a big ceremony . . . and a celebration and . . .

“We’ve decided that it’s time that the Nielsen Family step down from the position of Guardian.”

James felt his heart plummet straight to his stomach. He must have heard that wrong.

“Wait . . . what?”

Grandpa Joe took a deep breath. “We are retiring—both of us.”

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“What?” James asked again, this time in protest. “What do you mean retiring?”

“Just that.” He paused to let his frankness sink it.

James only stared at him confused and even indignant.

“We’re done, James,” Grandpa Joe explained. “We’re leaving and Queen Tina will select a new Guardian.”

“You can’t be serious!” James nearly shouted--his discipline that was so rigidly trained into him all but collapsing.

“I am always serious.”

“Grandpa . . . what about the last five years? Five years of working as hard as I could so that one day I would be able to be the Guardian. Just like you . . . and my dad and your dad and your grandfather.”

“I know . . .”

“So tell me why we are leaving!” James demanded.

Grandpa Joe took another deep breath and returned to leaning against the rail. He didn’t say anything, but his expression betrayed a deep . . . something . . . within. As if that something was weighing heavy on his mind.

“Grandpa,” James said after a few minutes of silence. “I don’t want to leave.”

Grandpa Joe’s eyes flickered towards him, that fiery resolution returning. James recognized that determined look all too well.

Maybe he’s changing his mind, James hoped. Maybe he’s psyching himself up to go back and demand to stay.

Grandpa Joe suddenly stood tall and strong. “I have made up my mind,” he said sternly.

James felt gutted.

“Pack your things. We are leaving tonight back for the cabin.”

With that, the old man stalked away. James ground his teeth in anger. Why would he do this? Was it just his decision or was he ousted? He made it seem like it was his decision, though he did say that the other lords agreed with him. Either way, James knew that any and all of his protesting would do absolutely nothing except make

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Grandpa Joe angrier. There was nothing else to do but to return to his quarters and pack what few belongings he had as instructed.

“Wait a second,” James called out to Grandpa Joe, though it was more him vocalizing his realization. “Going back to the cabin. . . . Then that means . . .”

The words didn’t even escape his sudden dread.

High school!

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~ Michael ~

