

# THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



**BECOME A PATRON**

## ~ CHAPTER 5 ~ **HILLSIDE ACADEMY**

Being angry didn't even begin to describe how James felt. Today was the dreaded day—the first day of school. He almost felt sick to his stomach. Not only was he returning to the human world, but he would also basically have to do it alone. When Grandpa Joe told him that he had been enrolled in the prestigious private school, Hillside Academy, he wanted to retch.

He remembered going past Hillside Academy as a kid and making fun of it as being a “rich-kid’s school”. It was always a nice place, but he frequently got the impression of it being more of a prison than a school. He couldn’t understand how it was a nationally ranked school.

Grandpa Joe wouldn't even budge on the idea of him not attending Hillside Academy. Not even when James proposed that he go to the regular high school but still live in the cabin with him. The man was intolerably firm, obstinate, and hardheaded.

“I've spoken to both the school director and head counselor,” Grandpa Joe said as they drove into town.

The sun wasn't even up yet but there were a surprising number of people out working and driving this morning. James chalked that up to Hillside still being a small, country, farm town. That . . . or it was everyone working at the resorts getting everything ready for their high paying tenants.

“The McCannons are old friends of mine,” Grandpa Joe continued over the rumble of the old pickup truck. “They know of your situation and will make sure you get the best help as you adjust to the school.”

James perked up in his seat. “They know of my situation?” he asked.

Did Grandpa Joe mean the fact that he just spent the last five years living in a subterranean city with fairy-folk?

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As if he read James's mind, Grandpa Joe continued. “They *know* that in some areas you may be behind your classmates due to you being homeschooled.”

James snorted out a laugh. “Homeschooled? That’s the story we're going with?”  
“What else would you suggest?”

“Oh, I don't know, maybe I was living abroad—experiencing the world. Even moving from another state would be better.”

James rolled his eyes and looked out the window indignantly. He was surprised he was able to squeeze in such a retort. Normally up to this point, he hadn’t even been allowed a single word of protest.

“Homeschooled. Pfff.”

“Living and studying abroad, eh?” Grandpa Joe mused.

He even cocked his head to the side as if he hadn't considered the idea—but now that it was mentioned it might have been a better approach.

“Hmm. where would you have come from?” he asked

James looked at his grandpa perplexed. “Huh?”

“If you were studying abroad,” Grandpa Joe asked again. “Where would you have lived for the last five years?”

James thought about it for a second before he realized that he had never even considered where he'd like to go if given the chance. His whole life had been focused on training to become the Guardian. He *had* studied the history of the world . . . albeit a different approach since it was the history of both humans and fairy-kind. He still was taught a lot about the world and its histories, both human and fairy.

“I suppose . . .” James began as he thought about all of the different countries he learned about during his training. “Egypt,” he finally said. “Yes, Egypt.”

“Really?” asked Grandpa Joe in surprise.

If James had been paying attention, he might have caught the slightly mocking tone in Grandpa Joe's voice.

“Yeah,” he answered confidently. “I'd like to have studied the myths of the Egyptians to see how they relate to the history of the fairy-folk.”

“But you know that history,” Joe prodded.

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“I know. But to be able to study it in the actual place would be better.”

“So you'd prefer to come to this private school with the story that you spent the last five years studying abroad in Egypt?”

“Yes!” James confirmed already playing out how he'd tell that story to all of the kids at the school—impressing them with his vast knowledge of mythology.

“*Teba'a aabeet law bitfakar eno hayehsal keda,*” Grandpa Joe said.<sup>1</sup>

James's jaw dropped. Did Grandpa Joe just speak to him in . . . Arabic? He didn't know if he was asked a question or . . . whatever. But Grandpa Joe did look at him as if he expected a response.

“You have no idea what I just said, do you?” the old man asked with a slight hint of smugness, his smile revealing the wrinkles of his age.

“Um . . . no.” James stammered, still in shock at what he just heard.

He had no idea that his grandfather could speak any other language, let alone a difficult one like Arabic.

“Sixty percent of the students here are foreign exchange students. Twelve percent of them from Arabic countries. If you go around toting that you spent five years in an Arabic country, and can't even understand a little Arabic, they'll call your bluff. You'd be the laughing stock of the whole school . . . maybe even the whole town.”

“So, what are you saying?” James asked irritably.

“I'm saying, you've got to think things through,” Grandpa Joe answered with his usual patience, though James could sense that it was wearing a bit. “You've got to try and see the bigger picture. Then you can come up with the best plan and execute it.”

“Did you think things through when you retired us both from being the Guardian without asking me?” James asked with a bit of venom.

“First off,” Grandpa Joe countered, his jaw tight. “That was not a decision that was made lightly. Of course, I looked at the bigger picture. That is why I felt the best thing to do was to step down.”

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<sup>1</sup> Arabic for, “You'll be crazy if you think this will happen.”

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“So, step down,” James interjected. “And let *me* take over as we had planned. Why did you think it best to take that away from me?”

“Secondly,” Grandpa Joe continued, ignoring James’s question. “And to be bluntly honest, it was a decision that didn't require your approval or input. It wasn't any of your business yet.”

James felt a knot tighten in his gut. How was it *not* his business? He was next in line to be Guardian. It would have been any day that he was going to get the job. Did Grandpa Joe really believe that this decision didn't affect him?

He wanted to argue. And while a slew of retorts and complaints raced through his mind, he was too angry to even keep those organized. He figured it best to just not say anything.

“You’re doing it again,” Grandpa Joe chided with a loving chuckle

“Doing what?”

“Stonewalling.”

“So?”

James folded his arms. He could be just as hard-nosed as Grandpa Joe could. He shot as cold and hard a stare as he could at the old man—challenging him to . . . well, he didn’t even really know what he was “challenging.”

Grandpa Joe just smiled. “Your father used to do the exact same thing.”

In one small sentence, James’s defenses suddenly collapsed. He hadn’t seriously thought about his father for a long time now. The last time they really talked about his father was the night of the funeral.

“What do you mean?” James asked. All hints of defiance in his voice had vanished.

“From the time your father was old enough to know what he wanted—which was pretty young—he would always protest the exact same way . . . stonewalling.”

James smiled a bit. It was nice to know that there was some connection between him and his distant father. “Did he always get what he wanted?”

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Grandpa Joe chuckled. “Sometimes. I learned to pick my battles with him. Sometimes I would be just as obstinate, other times my patience had run so thin I would just give in. It always seemed to be the wrong choice though.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean . . . that in all of my arguments with your father, from the time he was a young boy until he died, when I look back on them, the outcome always seemed to make things worse with our relationship.”

“Didn’t you forgive each other?”

“Oh, we certainly said ‘sorry’ to each other as often enough.”

James noticed how Grandpa Joe paused to swallow . . . something. A small glint appeared in his eyes. He blinked a couple of times as if to fight off any emotion seeping through.

“But there never seemed to be any real intent behind our apologies. I don’t think we ever really forgave each other for any of the arguments or fights we had.”

James found himself shocked. He loved his grandfather—they had such a wonderful relationship between the two of them. But what Grandpa Joe just describe between himself and James’s father was exactly how *he* had felt.

Was James’s father just really bad at relationships?

“Anyway,” Grandpa Joe said, shaking off the topic. “We can’t dwell on the past now . . . can we?”

James shrugged. “I guess not.”

James felt like something was missing. Something was nagging him in his gut about that. Something about the past had to be done.

*We can’t just sweep it under the rug, Grandpa, he thought to himself. Something needs to be fixed. No . . . healed.*

“Besides,” Grandpa Joe’s eyes brightened with excitement. “We’re here.”

James looked out of the window as Grandpa Joe pulled through a gate and his jaw dropped. He couldn’t believe that such an immaculate place could be found in the small town of Hillside. He remembered several multi-million-dollar resorts with fancy gardens, restaurants, golf courses and other crazy luxuries for the traveling wealthy. All

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of those places were extremely well kept . . . at least James remembered them being well kept.

But nothing compared to this.

The grounds of the academy exploded with colors. Flowers of every kind seemed to flourish to their fullest. James thought it interesting that so many flowers were still in such vibrant bloom so late in the year. Various patches of trees throughout the valley and hills began to show the changing of leaves for autumn, yet it still looked like springtime at the academy. Even the grass was a perfect, vibrant green that looked both bright and deep at the same time. Each blade looked so perfectly trimmed that James almost thought it to be fake grass.

“Welcome to Hillside Academy,” Grandpa Joe said as he put his truck in park and killed the engine.

James’s gaze drifted from the Eden-like grounds to the structure before them. A tall, Nordic-looking building stood at the front of the campus. Its tall doors and pillars carved with intricate patterns that James immediately recognized as Celtic and Nordic in origin. Modern looking wings expanded the building fifty feet in either direction which made the whole building look like a Norse long-house and a twentieth-century school building had a child.

“Was it always like this?” James asked as he and Grandpa Joe finally got out of the truck. “I don’t remember it being like this.”

“Well, you’ve got to remember,” Grandpa Joe answered with his warm smile. “You were eleven last time you were here.”

“I never really left,” James corrected, hinting that his time in Aragoria was local enough to not really be considered gone.

“Okay, I’ll give you that. But in the last five years how often did you come into town? Or did you just sit from afar and look at it?”

James pinched his lips together realizing that Grandpa Joe was right. He would have to finally admit that he was never really here in Hillside. And a lot could change in five years.

“Come on,” Grandpa Joe slapped James on the back.

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“Ow!” James protested.

Grandpa Joe winked. “There’s someone I’m anxious for you to meet.

James followed Grandpa Joe to the main entrance. He had no idea what to expect as they reached the large doors. For a brief moment, he was sure that when they step in he would see a long hearth in the middle of a great hall with a roaring fire and a boar on a spit rotating slowly over the flames. He could imagine a ruckus crowd of bearded warriors draped in furs with swords hanging off of their belts, golden torques around their wrists and necks, and bull-horn goblets in their hands.

However, inside the building was not just a modern design, but a complete and totally new, 21st century feel. Brightly colored abstract paintings dotted the walls in no particular pattern. The walls themselves were also painted in bright colors. Green, blue, red, and yellow chairs, sofas, and even large bean-bags sat off to the sides as waiting areas for guests and places to casually study for students. A large grand piano sat in the middle of the hall. James’s eyes nearly popped out when he saw a kid who looked to be about eight or nine playing a concerto piece.

“Is that one of the students? I thought this was a high school.”

“No,” said a voice from the side with a laugh. “That’s Greyson, his sister attends here. The family is visiting.”

James turned to see a tall man with glasses standing next to them. The man looked skinny, but he also held himself in a way that gave James the impression that he was more athletic than his appearance showed. He had dark brown hair and kind eyes. James blinked in astonishment when he met those eyes. They seemed to carry the same aged wisdom as the fairy-folk. It was really the only way to tell who was older among the Aragorians—the wisdom in their eyes showed that—and this man appeared to have that look.

James brushed the thought out of his head.

“Mr. McCannon,” said Grandpa Joe heartily as he shook the man’s hand.

*Was that . . . ?* James thought. *No.* He could have sworn the two almost went in for a hug as old friends do.

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“You know you don’t have to call me that, right,” Mr. McCannon teased. “It sounds way too formal coming from you.”

“Oh, no,” Grandpa Joe answered and nodded in James's direction. “I won’t let any grandson of mine think that because I’m casual around people of authority he can be too.”

“Grandpa,” James objected. “You know I’m not like that.”

“Don’t even tempt me to bring out the list of the times you were too casual with your superiors.”

“You kept a list?” Mr. McCannon asked incredulously. “Well, you always did have high expectations for your family.”

He winked at James and James instantly liked him.

For a very brief moment, James noticed that Grandpa Joe looked a bit befuddled. The interaction was strange. Almost like a young kid being embarrassingly corrected by an elder. Except, in this case, it was his older grandfather who looked embarrassed and the younger, Mr. McCannon, who was more dominant.

“Well anyway,” said Mr. McCannon. “I am very excited that you’re here James. Come on, let me show you around.”

“Sounds good,” said James, surprisingly cheerful.

“I’ll be seeing you around then, James,” said Grandpa Joe.

James felt a knot in his stomach. It suddenly hit him what it really meant for him to be on his own. He wasn’t worried—just anxious. It was a daunting thought . . . even with all of the preparations.

“You’re leaving already?” he asked.

Grandpa Joe fidgeted. It was the first time James saw him fidget uncomfortably. “I’ve got things that need to be taken care of,” he said, trying to brush off the goodbyes as quickly as possible.

“Grandpa, I’m just here at Hillside Academy. You’ll be right up the canyon just a short ways away. It’s not like you’re dropping me off on the other side of the country.”

Grandpa Joe smiled. Still . . . there was something off about his behavior. “I know,” he said. “But I should get going either way.”



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“Okay . . .” James was at a loss for words. “I’ll . . . see you soon then?”

“Yes,” Grandpa Joe grunted. “Now, be on your best behavior—you hear?”

“Yes, sir.”

There was a moment of hesitation as the two looked at each other. James didn’t wait for any approval or permission—it was not like either of them, but he couldn’t help it—he gave Grandpa Joe a quick hug goodbye. Surprisingly, Grandpa Joe returned the embrace.

“Alright, then.” Grandpa Joe pulled back and looked at James long and hard. Without another word, he nodded in approval, turned, and left.

With that, James was alone. The first time in his life where there’d be no family member to supervise or be near him.

“Well then, James,” said Mr. McCannon with a wide smile. “Let me give you the grand tour.”

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~ Michael ~

