

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



BECOME A PATRON

~ CHAPTER 6 ~ ORIENTATION

Mr. McCannon was the most detailed and energetic tour guide James had ever seen. Even when he was given the tour of Aragoria Grandpa Joe, Alden, and Theya weren't as excitable as the spirited school director. James was sure he knew and understood everything about the school by the time they were done. There was the main building with the offices, cafeteria, and common rooms; the dorms for the students; the athletic facility with six basketball courts, an indoor track, weight room, and other fitness features; an art building for basically *everything* art; and another strange building called the R&D building.

He was shown every building and what the faculty and students did in each of them. Mr. McCannon explained how the students accomplished tasks and their interactions with the teachers. They had what Mr. McCannon claimed to be a unique program called Mentoring. Each student—and even the teachers—were given three hours a day to study or do whatever they wanted so long as it was productive and approved by their mentor supervisor.

“You’ll meet your mentor later on at the back to school assembly,” Mr. McCannon explained as he showed James the final stop . . . his dorm room.

“When will that be?” asked James.

“Later today during the dinner hour. There’ll also be some fun activities and a dance afterward in the gym.”

James tried not to look confused. He had no idea what Mr. McCannon was talking about with the dance, but he decided not to worry about it right now.

“I am really excited for you to be here,” Mr. McCannon said as he paused in James’s door. “When your grandfather called me to see if we could get you in. . . .” He shook his head and laughed quietly to himself.

They must really have a good relationship, James thought.

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“Well, I guess I’m glad to be here too,” he added.

“You know . . . you’re not the first Nielsen to come to this school,” Mr. McCannon said with a slight twinkle in his eye.

“What do you mean?” James couldn’t help but show his confusion now. All of his family on the Nielsen side would have been the Guardian of Aragoria. They wouldn’t have had time to go to a boarding school.

“Your great-great-grandfather—also named James—attended here. He made a huge impact. It’s still apparent today even.”

“How would you know about that?”

“I can be a bit eccentric with my jobs,” said Mr. McCannon. “And history is one of my passions. I’ve studied a lot of the history of this area and the school as well.”

“How long have you been the director?” James wondered.

“Oh, this is my first year.”

James gaped. “What . . . ? How then . . . ?”

“Like I said,” Mr. McCannon explained with a wink. “I’m a bit eccentric. I was actually a teacher here years ago. But my wife and I took a . . . sabbatical . . . you might say. We just recently returned and were offered jobs here, so we took them.”

James remembered Grandpa Joe mentioning something about two McCannons—the school director and head counselor.

“But, we can talk all about each other’s histories later,” said the fiery director. “I’ve got some last-minute things to do with Mrs. McCannon and others before the big welcome-back party begins.”

James initially didn’t want him to leave. But with a guy like that around, he knew this new adventure would be okay.

“I’ll see you at the dinner,” Mr. McCannon said as he shook James’s hand—he added a near fatherly slap to the shoulder with his other hand.

Why do people like to slap my shoulder? James thought with a grunt.

Without another word, Mr. McCannon strode out of view. James could hear him whistling down the hallway until he exited the building.

So maybe the academy wouldn’t be so bad, James thought as he began to unpack. *With guys like Mr. McCannon, it could even be fun.*

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It was obvious that his roommate had already been there. Two very large suitcases and a duffle bag big enough to stuff a body in it lay on the opposite bed. Stacks of science books, a few old literature, and comic books were placed sloppily on the desk opposite his. Despite the sloppy manner in which his mystery roommate left his side of the room, James couldn't help but notice the immaculate manner in which his roommate's clothes were arranged—all neatly hung and arranged according to color.

James whistled when he saw the crazy organization. "This is the guy I have to spend my days with?" he mumbled to himself.

"Indeed it is," said an unsettlingly but smooth voice from the doorway.

With all of his training to be the next Guardian, James prided himself on never being caught off guard, and yet he inwardly jumped when the man spoke.

A tall, dark-haired man stood in the doorway with clipboard and pen in his hands. He wore a form-fitting black polo with the top three buttons undone, partly showing his lean, muscular chest. His dark, silky hair was neatly groomed and just shy of shoulder length. With his light facial hair accentuating his square jaw, he looked like the ideal European model.

Again, James hardly remembered a time when he was unsettled by anyone or anything. But this man who stared at him with crystal-like eyes sent an icy chill down his spine—he even had to force himself from shaking at his knees.

"Who are you?" James asked, probably with a little more contempt than he intended.

The stranger only raised an eyebrow in response. He paused as he seemed to weight both James and his question . . . or at least the tone of his question.

After a painfully long pause, he finally took a deep breath. "I am Mr. Heinz. I'm your assigned mentor."

"My assigned mentor?" James did his best to regulate his tone.

Somehow, this man seemed to draw out his irritation for his whole school situation—despite the upbeat tour with Mr. McCannon.

"Yes . . . your mentor. It's a part of the Hillside Academy program. Each student is assigned a mentor that will help him or her monitor their progress and even provide . . ."

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“I get it,” James interrupted. He remembered Mr. McCannon’s explanation of the program. Why was this guy repeating it with such condescension? “You’re my babysitter while I’m here.”

Mr. Heinz’s jaw tightened. James did his best not to smirk, though a smile did touch his eyes. He must have really gotten to Mr. Heinz with that remark.

“For those who like to cause trouble,” Mr. Heinz responded with a forced smile and slightly clenched teeth. “I suppose you could say I become more of a probation officer.”

James’s eyes widened, but not at Mr. Heinz’s words. *He’s got some sharp teeth*, he noticed.

“Anyway, I look forward to working with you, Mr. Nielsen.”

James smiled politely, but he could sense the lie behind Mr. Heinz’s words. “And I you.” He forced the words out. Why was this man so unsettling?

Mr. Heinz forced a smile and handed James a small flier and left without a word.

James took a quick glance at the flier. It advertised the back to school banquet, Meet-Your-Mentor Circles, and a school dance that were all happening that evening.

“You certainly like to get a jump on meeting your students?” James called out to Mr. Heinz sarcastically.

But when he looked down the hallway the strange and eerie teacher was gone.

* * *

At the dinner—or as Mr. McCannon liked to call it, the Back to School Banquet—James sat quietly to himself off to the side. His earlier encounter with Mr. Heinz left him chilled to the bone and somehow only made him more irritable and annoyed about being at the school. And the more he dwelt on that the angrier he became at his grandfather . . . or whoever was responsible for him not becoming the Guardian.

“Is this seat taken,” said a voice.

James looked up to see two women standing with their plates of food on the opposite side of the table to him—obviously two teachers here at the school.

“No,” James said politely but with a bit of indifference as well.

They both sat and began eating and chatting at the same time.

“I’m Mrs. McCannon,” said the slightly older looking one.

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Her voluminous, reddish-brown hair fell in delicate but strong waves past her shoulders, and her skin had a tannish-gold hue. All of it blended beautifully with her deep red blouse. From the look of her, James guessed she played some elite level sport.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said as he shook her hand. “So, you’re Mr. McCannon’s wife?”

“I am, indeed.”

“How long have you been married?”

“Too long, it feels,” she said with that same playfulness that Mr. McCannon had and a wink.

“And I’m Ms. Smith,” said the other lady.

Ms. Smith also looked slightly athletic, but more of the subtle build where one might not suspect her to be capable of something physical, then surprise you by beating everyone in a race. She had dark brown hair that was done neatly, but simply, which matched her deep brown eyes.

“Pleased to meet you too,” James said politely . . . but still standoffish.

“So, my husband’s been saying good things about you,” said Mrs. McCannon.

What could he possibly be telling her? James thought.

“He says you’re just like your father.”

James looked up at the two women. “He knew my father?”

“We all did,” said Ms. Smith. “He was a truly great man.”

“He talked a lot about you before he passed away,” Mrs. McCannon added. “We were so happy when we heard you were coming here.”

“Seriously?”

Both women smiled at him.

“Yep,” said Ms. Smith. “There it is. There’s your father in you. It’s your nose.”

“Oh, I think he has the same chin,” Mrs. McCannon countered.

“You’re both wrong, ladies,” said Mr. McCannon as he came up behind them. “It’s the way he talks. Couldn’t you tell?”

“He hasn’t said more than a few words,” said Mrs. McCannon.

“Probably because you’re doing all of the talking,” Mr. McCannon teased.

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Mrs. McCannon elbowed her husband in the gut. He grunted as all three of them laughed. There was a gleam in all of their eyes as if they were being reunited with a friend. James thought the interaction enjoyable but suddenly felt very overwhelmed by the three adults hovering over him.

“Um . . . excuse me,” he said and quickly got up and left the cafeteria.

A well of emotions began to build within him. He knew he wouldn't be able to contain it, nor did he want anyone to see. He sprinted as fast as he could across campus and to his room. He burst through the door, scaring his roommate who was a tall skinny kid with a square face and thick glasses.

“Sorry,” James sputtered. “I just needed to be . . . alone.”

“Oh,” the roommate said still a bit shocked. “I guess you're James. I'm Isaac.”

“Hi, Isaac.”

James did his best to calm his breathing down. *This kid really needs to leave soon.*

“Well . . . then. I'll just head on over to the banquet.”

Isaac left without another word or question.

As soon as the door shut, James let out a deep breath, then let the emotions erupt from within. In an uncontrollable rush, he knelt beside his bed and began to sob. Why was he feeling this way? Was it the anxiety of leaving the only home that he ever loved? Being alone with no family to help him?

While those may have been contributing factors, James felt it to be something else. Deep down, he saw, for the first time, a glimpse of who his father really was. And despite their rough and distant relationship, he suddenly realized he was a good man.

James heard a light knock on the door. He sniffed and did his best to wipe his face.

“Come in.”

The door slowly opened and Mr. and Mrs. McCannon stood outside.

“James. . . . Are you alright?” asked Mr. McCannon.

“I'm fine,” James bluffed.

“We're sorry if we came on pretty hard,” said Mrs. McCannon.

“It's fine. Thank you.”

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“We just wanted to make sure you were okay. You left in quite a hurry.”

James wanted to say he was just fine. He wanted to quickly brush them off and have them leave. But the way they talked about his father. . . . They were the first people he met who truly loved his dad. It was somehow different than the way the Aragorians talked about him. It felt more . . . genuine . . . that would be the best way to describe it.

“I’ve just never heard anyone talk about my dad before like you guys do,” James confessed.

Why did he suddenly say that?

The McCannon’s smiled.

“He really was a great man,” said Mrs. McCannon as she gave him a comforting hug. “And so proud of you.”

“His one regret was that he wasn’t around you more,” Mr. McCannon added.

James bit his bottom lip to keep it from quivering. “Thank you.”

“We’ll let you collect yourself,” said Mr. McCannon. “Come to the Back to School Night when you’re ready.”

“I will.” James wasn’t sure if he really would or not.

The couple again smiled and left. James again let the tears run. “Dad,” he said. “Whatever happened between us and our family, I’ll make it right.”

Just as if it were sealing the oath, James looked up just in time to see a bright shooting star streak across the night sky.

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From my family to yours...thank you so much!

~ Michael ~

