

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



BECOME A PATRON

~ CHAPTER 8 ~ LIGHTS IN THE WOODS

James wanted to kick the door down in frustration. How could he be such an idiot? Logically it made no sense what he was feeling. He didn't do anything wrong by dancing with Bailey. He didn't know she was in a relationship. And yet, despite all of his rationalizing, he couldn't shake the feeling of being both embarrassed and even frustrated about what just happened.

"And that she's with Tony just makes it worse," he grumbled loudly as he slammed the door. "What was I thinking? This is a mistake. All of this is one big mistake."

He went to the window and stared out longingly at the mountains. The moonlight shined on the slopes giving them a ghostly and mystical feel. James ached to be back there . . . back in the mountains with the fairies. He missed running through the woods with only the glow of the moon and the stars to light his path. He missed gazing at the stars and the many constellations. He yearned to listen to Alden telling him about the stars and the various legends behind every one of them.

"I shouldn't be here!" he said angrily as he slammed his fist against the windowsill in frustration. Pain shot through his hand like a jolt, but he thought it felt good.

"I actually agree with you," said a cold voice from behind.

James wheeled around, almost letting instinct take over and assume a defensive fighting stance. Luckily he caught himself in time. Still, he was shocked to see Mr. Heinz standing in the open doorway.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"I heard some commotion," Mr. Heinz casually countered, ignoring the implied, '*don't you know how to knock?*' tone in James's voice.

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They both paused as they stared at each other. James felt the familiar sensation he always had whenever he was about to spar with Dagget or Rosden—a weighing of the opponent feeling. Was Mr. Heinz sizing him up for something?

“What did you mean?” James asked, breaking the awkward silence.

“Exactly that,” Mr. Heinz answered with a cool air about him. “I agree with you. . . You probably don’t belong here.”

“A bit harsh . . . don’t you think?”

James quickly grasped his hands behind his back so as not to show Mr. Heinz his balled fists. He was always taught to appear calm and in control when facing an opponent. Inwardly he wanted to lash out. But all he could do was squeeze his fists as tightly as he could. He felt the sting of his fingernails against his palms.

“I’m being practical, that’s all,” Mr. Heinz answered.

James clenched his jaw. What was Mr. Heinz getting at? He said the words with such an icy calmness, and his whole demeanor would make anyone feel as if he was truly giving unbiased—even constructive—criticism. But there was something behind all of it. Something very subtle . . . but still there. A sense of hatred for some reason.

Why would he hate me? James wondered.

Then again, he didn’t have the best of feelings towards Heinz either. “I thought teachers were supposed to be supportive and helpful.”

Mr. Heinz gave a small snort of contempt. “I’d like to think that I’m more realistic than other teachers who give superficial support and empty promises.”

James opened his mouth to protest, but quickly closed it. *He did have a point*, he thought.

Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to his words than what Mr. Heinz was saying. There was a genuine sense of hate and animosity behind all of it.

Strangely, for the first time, James *wanted* to be at Hillside Academy. He had always been stubborn whenever someone told him he couldn’t do something. A small smirk crept across his face as he stared at Mr. Heinz.

“Well, maybe we’ll both be surprised then,” he said.

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The change was subtle, but James did notice a small shift in Mr. Heinz's eyes. Almost as if for a brief second, he was caught off guard. Building off of that, James's smirk widened, and he even winked at Mr. Heinz in a taunting manner.

Mr. Heinz gave no more betrayal of emotions or reaction. He sniffed—again with that pompous sense of contempt that he seemed to always have—and left.

James shuddered. The room actually felt like it began to warm up after the bizarre teacher left.

“That guy is weird.”

James let out a long sigh of relief. Finally . . . hopefully . . . he'd have some privacy. He turned to look out the window. He gazed, again, at the slopes of the mountains. They looked close enough to reach with a short run, but James knew that wasn't the case. The foothills that blended beautifully with the mountains made them actually farther than they appeared.

“Just like life, I guess,” he muttered to himself. “Everything seems so close, and yet, in reality, it's farther than you know.”

For the first time, everything James had ever wanted seemed to be completely out of reach while yet still in view. He'd never get to be the Guardian. He'd never get to spend the rest of his life with the fairy-folk. And now, it looks like he'd never get to be with the girl of his dreams.

“You're crazy,” James chided himself. “You only saw her once. You only danced with her once. You're an idiot, James, if you're falling head-over-heels after one brief dance.”

But no matter what his “logical” mind told him, he just couldn't shake the feeling he got when he looked at Bailey, when he held her in his arms, and when she smiled at him. It made his heart jump to even recall the memory.

“But, she's with Tony,” he reminded himself. “I suppose I could wait until they break-up.”

But memories of when he was younger, watching older couples and hearing their stories about being high school sweethearts kept flashing through his mind. It's just what happens in small towns. Even for one that was as popular as Hillside.

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“Who am I kidding? They’re practically made for each other.” James took a deep breath. “Oh, what I wouldn’t give for good sparring right now. I’d even *let* Dagget pummel me.”

Just then, something caught his eye.

Looking up at the hills, James saw a glow coming from behind a distant hill. It grew and faded—bouncing like the glow of a bonfire. But this glow seemed different. It gave him a curious and even ominous feeling in his gut, especially when he saw it change from deep red to blue, then green, then violet, and back to red again.

“That’s not natural,” he said curiously.

Even for the fairy-folk that would be unusual. James watched the glow intently. He tried to figure out what it could be. Then he realized . . .

“Goblins. It’s the only explanation.”

Just as he said it, he noticed half a dozen bright blue lights from various directions streaking through the hills, all converging towards the strange glow. The lights sped through the forests, breaking off into more and more lights until nearly a hundred different lights surrounded the eerie bonfire. In an instant, the streaking lights simultaneously met, and the entire hill erupted into a large forest fire.

“That,” James said with an eager grin, “Has to be Dagget.”

It had to be him. Dagget’s colors were blue, and he had upped his patrols in the area before James had left Aragoria.

James learned early on how often battles between goblins and fairies were quite visible to anyone—even to humans—but they were commonly seen as forest fires. And although he lived with the fairy-folk for some years now, there was always something about that fact that he never fully understood. He could never quite grasp how it all worked. But it was always enough for him to trust in the laws of the magical world. That’s just how they worked.

Watching the fire burn intensely, James knew he had to be there. All of his life he dreamt of fighting off goblins . . . defending Aragoria. Now, for the first time ever, he could actually do something. No one was going to order him to stand down.

“And no one will notice me being gone,” he said as he threw on a dark hoodie.

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It almost felt as if he were trying to convince himself that it was okay to leave. Mr. McCannon was very clear on the rules—no leaving the grounds after 10:00 o'clock at night. Plus there was Mr. Heinz. James paused for just a brief moment at the thought of his assigned mentor as the one who would dish out the discipline.

“You know what?” he said defiantly. “I don't care. Besides . . . no one's going to know I'm even gone.”

If the Aragorians were out there fighting off goblins, he wanted to be there. He never got a chance before, now he would . . . he would actually be a part of it.

He darted down the hall. Poking his head out of the main exit, he scanned the quad to see if anyone was out. No one could be seen. They must all still be in the dance.

James quietly slipped to the side of the building and out of the light. He moved as stealthily as possible. He kept checking back just to make sure no one saw him. When he was certain that no one was there, he sprinted as fast as he could towards the edge of the grounds. The tall, expertly crafted fence seemed to loom over everything near it. James only chuckled to himself. One thing that he especially excelled at with his training was obstacle courses. In a few short leaps, he expertly and lithely leaped over the fence and landed softly on the other side. Now nothing stood between him and the skirmish that still raged in the hills above him.

“Just like the training,” he whispered as he sped through the nearby forest and into the hills. It was the one thing that he thought was a plus about the school . . . it was right on the edge of town with a forest that extended up into the foothills that led to the mountains.

Memories of running through the woods came back in a rush. The skills and techniques he learned with those long training runs ignited within him and he felt free to fly through the trees. It was the most liberated he had ever felt.

Within a short time James came the area he was certain where the fighting was happening. As he burst into the clearing he was shocked to find nothing there. He noticed a few smoking tendrils from stumps of wood and burnt grass, but other than that, even with his training, it was difficult to tell if there even was a skirmish here. The bodies had already been removed . . . it looked like a simple clearing in the forest.

“Am I in the right place?” he wondered.

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He was sure he had gone in the right direction. He had always had a good sense of direction and finding things. He walked through the clearing, checking for any signs of fighting that he might have missed. Suddenly his foot clinked on something metal.

“Ah, ha,” he said as he stooped down to investigate. “I knew I was in the right place.”

He brushed away thick grass to find a small amulet tangled within the blades. Plucking it out of the grass, he held it up in the moonlight to see what it may be. It didn't feel like anything fairy-made. Perhaps it was something dropped by the goblins. The small amulet felt cold in his hands. The metal was black, and it seemed to both reflect the moonlight from its polish . . . and absorb it at the same time.

James felt an iciness to the amulet other than it being just cold metal. Strange markings crisscrossed themselves in an indiscernible way.

“Could that be writing?”

He now wished he paid more attention when Theya tried to teach him about the different types of languages within the magical world. Mostly the different dialects of the fairy-clans and goblin tribes. She wasn't even teaching him the actual languages, just how to recognize and discern the differences of some of the major ones.

None of the markings on the amulet looked familiar. Then again, James wondered if he'd recognize *any* of the ones she had tried to teach him.

“I suppose I could study this later,” he said as he tucked it in his pocket.

He took one last glance around the small field. He knew for certain that this was the place where the skirmish happened, though how it was finished and cleaned up so quickly he had absolutely no idea.

He kicked a large pine cone. “I guess I could ask Dagget about it if ever I get to go back.”

He started making his way back when he heard a strange sound. He stood perfectly still at the edge of the clearing, not moving a muscle, listening intently, and breathing softly. His heart started beating faster and faster.

A faint rustling came from the opposite end of the clearing.

“Who's there?” James called out as he turned to face whoever it was.

Nothing.

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“Perhaps it was just the wind rustling the branches.”

But there was no wind. The rustling sound continued as if someone or something was off in the distance. James had the strangest notion that something was watching him. Suddenly, he heard whispers. Faint sounds of strange voices whispering seemed to echo through the clearing.

“Hello?” James called out even louder.

The whisperings increased and James suddenly felt all of his muscles tense up.

“It’s a young boy.”

“We haven’t seen a boy in centuries.”

“How did it get here?”

“What does it matter?”

“Meat . . . fresh meat . . . sweet, sweet meat.”

“Blood . . . I need blood. My throat is too dry. It needs to drink.”

“Who are you?” James shouted. The whisperings grew louder and louder. James felt himself being closed in but couldn’t see anything. “Show yourself?” he demanded.

He found a stick on the ground that looked good for a club. He hefted it, ready to fight. But he just didn’t know what he would be fighting.

The whisperings were upon him—loud, almost like shouts, yet still raspy and grinding.

“He’s got a weapon,” one mocked.

“A little pup with a stick.”

“Maybe we could teach it to fetch . . . teach it to play.”

“No! Food! I must have meat!”

“Sweet, sweet flesh!”

“Warm, delicious blood!”

“Take him now!”

The voices closed in on him and James felt a bony hand on his shoulder from behind. He spun, swinging his club for all of his worth. But there was nothing there. He could only see the trees and the grass around him. But the voices grew louder and closer. Loud and menacing cackling split the air as he swung frantically around.

“It wants to play.”

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“Let’s have some sport with him.”

“Before we eat him.”

“NO! We must feast now!”

Suddenly, James was aware of a burning and icy sensation in his pocket. “The amulet?” he cried out.

“Ah, he learns quickly.”

“He found the link.”

“Take him now before he severs it.”

“I must have blood.”

“Take him . . . TAKE HIM!”

James dropped the club and frantically dug into his pocket to retrieve the icy, burning amulet. Suddenly, before he could throw it away, he felt strong hands grip his ankles. Painful chills raced up his legs and through his body. The hands yanked. He didn’t know how many times he flipped through the air. Everything spun . . . the ground, the sky, the trees and grass, and the voices screeching in triumph. And with a thud . . . everything went dark.

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

~ Michael ~

