

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

~ CHAPTER 9 ~ THE NETHERWORLD

James's vision swirled around him as he tried to focus. His ears rang loudly inside his head. His temples pulsed with an aching pain every time he tried to focus. He had only been knocked out once before during a sparring match with Dagget. His head had throbbed for the rest of the day and Dagget even said that he didn't hit him *that* hard. Now, his head felt like it was building up to explode.

How long have I been out? he wondered.

It took him a moment to then realize that he wasn't alone. As far as he could tell he was still in the same wood, but something was . . . different. Something was very, very wrong. The moonlight lit the clearing, but not its usual silvery brilliance. It felt sickly, pale, and sallow. Strange shadows seemed to dance around him. As the ringing in his ear subsided he heard them . . . hackling in delight.

"A feast! A fine, fine feast!"

"When can we eat?"

"I must have flesh!"

The voices hissed and grated on his ears like someone dying of thirst but trying to scream at the same time.

"No!" ordered a more commanding, deeper voice. "Not yet."

James, seeing that his apparent execution was being stayed, slowly sat up and blinked to clear his vision. He found himself surrounded by the strangest, and most frightening creatures he could have imagined. Ghoulish forms prowled around him in a circle. Their leathery skin hung off of their strangely visible skeletons, while also seeming to be pulled tight in other areas. All of them had eyes that looked glazed or milked over but glowed with the sickly, pale light of the moon. Torn and tattered clothes meagerly covered their bodies. They looked as if they had been starved for centuries. Their famished smiles revealed pristine, razor-like teeth. James suddenly felt sick.

"Your plan seemed to work, Drake," said the deep voice.

James looked to where the voice came from. Just at the edge of the clearing stood three shapes, just far enough back that he couldn't make out any other features except

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

their silhouettes. All three were tall and even looked muscular, but the one in the middle seemed to have an etherealness to him.

Flanking the three figures on either side stood half a dozen goblins. James could *clearly* see them and their short stocky but muscular forms. He was surprised to see the goblins standing at complete rest, leaning against their large scimitars or long-handled axes.

It was the ghouls who presented the most immediate threat.

“Where am I?” James tried not to have his voice squeak.

A light chuckle ran through the ghoulish horde.

James found himself grateful that the light was paler than usual. He didn’t want anyone to see him blushing. All of his life he trained to fight the enemies of the fairy-folk, and now, his first encounter with them, he couldn’t help but feel paralyzed with fear.

“You’re in the Netherworld . . . Mr. Nielsen,” said the deep voice again.

James thought it came more from the ghost-like shadow in the middle of the three tall figures. He was sure it was the middle figure who was in command, but it was the slightly taller form to his side caught his attention. The figure stood perfectly still and silent, but James could feel an icy hatred emanating from him. He also felt a tense energy, like it was taking everything to hold the shadowy man back . . . if it even was a man.

“How do you know my name?” James demanded.

“I know all about you,” the voice answered with a chuckle. “I know your family, your friends, and your supposed loved ones. Little James Nielsen, the future Guardian of Aragoria.”

Laughter erupted all around him. The ghouls continued their circling dance, their eagerness to feast on him increasing. Some even clawed at him with bony talons.

“You’re wrong,” James shouted. “I’m no longer next in line to be the Guardian.”

His attention shifted to the other shadow that flanked the speaker. Also tall, but more broad-shouldered than the other. James felt a sense of indifference from him—as

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

if he were a casual observer enjoying the show . . . but also an apprentice learning from his master.

“Ah, that may be true,” said the lead shadow. “But still, I prefer to have no loose ends.”

“Who are you?” James shouted.

The shadow paused. “A friend of your great-great grandfather’s,” he said scornfully. “And even though I didn’t get my revenge on him, revenge on his family is just as sweet.”

James’s heart began racing. He knew the man was done talking. Why did he hold the ghouls off for such a pointless conversation?

“And now that you are fully awake,” the man continued as if he read James’s thoughts. “I will watch you die. I will watch your life be painfully torn out of you. Besides, the ghouls tell me the taste is far more savory when the victim is alive.”

James frantically looked for something to defend himself. Where was the club he had before? There was nothing nearby. He could possibly break through the circle and find something in the woods. But would the prolonged fight only play to the shadow’s amusement? Or would it only delay his death and make it more painful in the end?

“Let the feast begin?” the shadow said.

The glee and excitement in the ghouls’ eyes brightened. Their hungry, laughing snarls increased as they realized they could now pounce on their prey.

“I may not have much of a chance,” James resolved to himself. “But I won’t go down like a coward.”

He crouched in a familiar fighting stance, waiting for the first ghoul to attack.

Suddenly, just as the lead ghoul flung itself towards James, a loud roar pierced the hollowness of the forest and a large creature smashed down on top of the monster. James jumped back into the arms of the ghouls behind him, all of them too astonished to react. The creature was a large lion the size of a horse, with a small mane that made it seem more female than male, large golden wings spread wide from behind its shoulders, and a serpentine tail that snapped like a whip. The large feline paused only for a brief moment for a figure that looked to be riding it to jump off.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“*Lux lietha halthen la ilaw!*” the man shouted as he leaped into the ring of ghouls.

He wore a long cloak that was cut in a way to allow him to move unhindered. He also wore a deep hood that drooped low over his face.

A brilliant white light exploded from the man’s hands and James saw that it was a sword that the man held. He had heard of magical swords before. *Brenindur* was known to shine bright blue when in battle.

The hooded man rushed through the monsters, cutting them down with relative ease. The lion roared again and turned in the opposite direction, beating, clawing and biting the ghouls and also swiping at them with its snake-like tail.

James ducked right as the tail lashed out in his direction, decapitating the ghouls that surrounded him.

“Get them!” shouted the middle figure.

There was a sense of urgency but also a casualness to the order. At least James thought it slightly casual as the three figures calmly turned and disappeared into the forest—melting into the shadows. The six goblins that had stood back all hefted their heavy weapons, some rolled their beefy shoulders and smiled with eager anticipation for a good fight.

Finishing off the last of the ghouls, the hooded man and lion turned to face them, the sword still glowing. James almost thought that the sword’s light grew even more as they faced off with the goblins . . . as if it were alive itself and eager for goblin blood.

In an instant, the man leaped high into the air—higher than any man should have been able to leap—and came crashing down on the two lead goblins. The lion roared and stood on its hindquarters and beat its wings, violently knocking down three other goblins from the force of its wings. Spinning and slicing, the man quickly hamstringed the two goblins and, in the same spinning motion, took both of their heads off. The lion already had pounced on the three fallen goblins and was beating them savagely with its paws.

The final goblin wisely jumped back when the attack began and now crept up behind the man.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“Look out!” James shouted, but it was hardly any help.

Like it had eyes in the back of its head, the lion, while still beating and biting the three fallen goblins, snapped its tail, delivering a killing blow to the final goblin.

A deathly silence followed. All James could hear was his own panting and the low-steady growling of the lion. The light from the man’s sword faded. Even without the glowing it still looked brilliant. James instantly recognized that it was fairy-made.

“Thank you,” James finally said.

He wasn’t quite sure what to expect. He hoped that they were there to rescue him, but for all he knew from the stories he had heard of the Netherworld, they were simply stronger residents of this place and wanted him for themselves.

The man and the lion turned to face him. James shifted uneasily. The lion’s eyes glowed in the sallow moonlight, and the man’s hood still covered his face. All James could see was his chin.

“You shouldn’t be here,” said the man.

“It wasn’t my fault . . .” James found himself speaking defensively.

“It *is* your fault,” the man interrupted as he strode forward. He stopped just a few feet away from James, his face still unclear.

James tried not to cower under his gaze.

“For one who knows that there is more out there than the mortal world, you were very unwise to leave your school and come here.”

“I just wanted to help fight the goblins.”

“Goblins? What goblins?”

“The large fire. I remember learning that when mortals see forest fires it’s actually a battle between fairies and goblins.”

“That may be true,” said the man. “But there were no battles going on tonight.”

Then what was it that I saw? James wondered.

“Ryan,” the lion spoke.

James’s jaw dropped. *The lion spoke!* But that shouldn’t be a surprise. He knew that magical creatures could speak. He had just never seen it before.

Gosh! There’s so much I still don’t know, he realized.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“It doesn’t matter now,” the lion continued in a soothing feminine voice. “What’s done is done. We best get him back before the taint takes hold.”

“The taint?” James questioned.

“Being touched by ghouls is dangerous to humans,” the man named Ryan explained as he sheathed his sword and mounted the lion. “It’s a slow poison that corrupts them and eventually turns them into creatures of the shadow. You’ve been touched by the ghouls so the poison is working already in you.”

James felt his legs go numb. This was something completely new to him. He had never heard of *this* before.

“Don’t worry,” the lion said. “It is extremely slow. The Aragorians can heal you quickly before you return to your school.”

James perked up just a bit. “Is that where you’re taking me?” he asked.

The lion nodded. James nearly leaped for joy. It hadn’t been that long since he had left Aragoria, but he felt like it had been an eternity.

Suddenly, more groans, howls, and screeching cries came from the forest. Hundreds of ghouls slowly emerged like predators following a scent.

“What the . . .” James cried out.

“They can smell human flesh!” Ryan shouted. “Hurry, James!”

He extended his hand down. James clasped Ryan’s hand and jumped. Ryan swung him effortlessly onto the lion’s back and in one powerful bound, the massive cat launched into the sky just as the leading ghouls lurched for them.

They flew higher and higher. In the pale, ghostly moonlight, James could see the valley and mountains below. The landscape looked the exact same, but sickly darkness permeated and hung over everything. Even the air felt foul as they sped towards the mountains.

In mere minutes, the flight was over. As they landed, James suddenly felt like he would throw up. His head spun, and a ringing in his ears nearly drowned out everything. He recognized the landscape around him. They were at the backdoor to Aragoria. The large hill at the base of the mountain was clear of trees with large boulders strewn everywhere. But strangely, instead of the tall grass, it was sickly weeds everywhere.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

Ryan jumped to the ground, quickly unsheathing his sword. For a moment, James thought that he was going to open the backdoor. Would that be the same here in the Netherworld?

He listened as Ryan mumbled something under his breath. The sword began to glow again, its bright white light nearly hurting his eyes. Suddenly, James could see a shimmering in front of them shaped like a door. Ryan touched the shimmering outline and a burst of light with a gust of wind exploded, nearly knocking James off of the lion.

“Quickly!” Ryan ordered. He kept the sword partway through the bright outline as if he were holding the door open.

James realized that he was doing just that. The shimmering mirage had changed to a rectangular outline of a door, lined with a radiant white light, and through it, he saw the familiar slope of the grassy hill. Everything looked and felt warm and alive.

They herded James through the door and he felt a ripping sensation as he passed through—the sickly taint becoming more prevalent in the mortal world. He couldn’t hold it in any longer. He stumbled to his hands and knees and vomited. He saw a flash behind him and suddenly it was dark again. Only the moon lit the hillside.

“James?” said a voice from up the hill.

James smiled, despite being sick, when he recognized that voice. “Hey, Dagget.”

“What are you doing here . . . and how did you suddenly get here?”

James looked back to introduce his rescuers, but they were gone. *Did they stay in the Netherworld?*

Dagget had reached him quickly and knelt down to help him. “You don’t look so good.”

He reached out to help James stand but suddenly jumped back with a hiss as if he had been burned. “You’ve been touched by the Netherworld,” he said with horror.

“Some ghouls got to me,” James clarified.

“Ghouls?” the horror in Dagget’s voice grew.

James only nodded as he threw up again. “Either their taint is getting to me faster than the lion said . . . or I don’t do so well flying.”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“What are you talking about?” Dagget asked. “Never mind. We need to get you to the infirmary.”

Dagget winced noticeably as he picked James up. Was he being affected by the taint as well? James didn’t dwell on the thought. He was just glad to be back . . . even if he was about to turn into a ghoul.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Note: This is a work of fiction. All characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author’s imagination. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is entirely coincidental.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

Hope you have enjoyed this week's installment of The Tale of Aragoria. Join me and our hero's every Saturday as I release a chapter every week.

If you'd like to have more content and would also like to support me so I can bring more fun-filled adventures to you and your family, please click the icon below and support me on Patreon.

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

~ Michael ~

