

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

THE TALE
OF
ARAGORIA

BOOK # 1

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THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

~ CONTENTS ~

~ CHAPTERS ~

PRO.	ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE	1
1	THE BOY AT THE FUNERAL	5
2	A FIRESIDE CHAT	11
3	THE FAMILY BUSINESS	15
4	THE END OF A FAIRY-TALE	23
5	HILLSIDE ACADEMY	31
6	ORIENTATION	39
7	THE BACK-TO-SCHOOL DANCE	46
8	LIGHTS IN THE WOODS	55
9	THE NETHERWORLD	63
10	REUNION	70

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



BECOME A PATRON

~ PROLOGUE ~ ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE

Steven crashed against the tree trunk as he stumbled to a stop. He breathed heavily, gulping down deep breaths to try and get his wind back. His wife, MaryAnn fell to her hands and knees behind him, also panting heavily.

“I don’t know how much longer we can outrun them,” she said between gasps.

Steven looked down at his wife. Her slender but athletic frame looked weak from exhaustion. Her normally silk-golden hair hung ragged and disheveled. They had been running . . . sprinting mostly . . . for most of the morning and still their pursuers were always right on their heels.

Steven slowly turned around and leaned back against the tree. He suddenly became aware of the soreness of his body. His own appearance wasn’t any better. Most of his shirt had been torn to shreds. He felt the mud in his dark brown, shaggy hair begin to cake and harden.

Their pursuers would be on them again. Goblins and trolls were known for their keen sense of smell. They’ll pick out Steven’s and MaryAnn’s scent in no time.

Just so long as I don’t have to face that goblin-troll again, he thought.

He had never seen anything like it . . . a cross between a troll and a goblin. He didn’t even think it possible. This creature—he called himself Sollix—had the build and cunningness of a goblin, but the size of a troll. He must have been at least eight feet tall. And that sword he wielded. . . .

It had taken every ounce of strength and iota of concentration he could muster to fight off the monster. All while MaryAnn desperately held off nearly a dozen goblin foot-soldiers.

I wish I had Brenindur, Steven lamented.

The ancient sword, which was his by right of being the Guardian, would have made an immense difference in the fight. But ever since Joan stepped down from being queen and Tina had taken her place, things had been . . . different. Different to the point

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

where he didn't trust the use of the sword outside of "official Guardian" business. Not that he didn't trust the sword. He just didn't trust the outcome of anything anymore, and he didn't want the sword to end up in the wrong hands. It had already been stolen once, he wasn't going to let it be lost again. Ever since Dagget had begun noticing strange things and going off on covert investigations, Steven had used the sword less and less.

This particular investigation had gone horribly wrong. . . . And also horribly right. He regretted discovering the truth. More accurately, he regretted that the truth was what it was. Ragor, the Aragorian's ancient enemy, had returned. But how? And how had he established such a stronghold so close to the fairy city without the fairy-folk realizing it?

Steven and MaryAnn had convinced Dagget that they should be the ones to investigate the strange lead that brought them to this discovery. Now, they were fleeing for their very lives, with a horde of goblins, led by that gruesome goblin-troll.

He pulled himself up on his feet, wincing in pain as he did so. Slowly he knelt beside his wife and gently caressed her shoulder.

"We'll be fine," he said encouragingly.

She looked up at him and smiled at his words, but the smile did not touch her eyes. She knew, as well as he did, that their chances of escaping were slim to none.

We don't have to escape, he thought with resignation. We just need to make sure that Dagget gets our information.

He was prepared to die. Death did not frighten him. In fact, he had always dreamt of dying heroically in battle. Well, this might be heroic . . . but would anyone know? Would James know?

Young James, named after Steven's grandfather and great grandfather, had just barely turned eleven. Steven was always proud of his son . . . but he regretted not showing it more. He *wished* he could let James know that he loved him.

"I'm a fool," he berated himself.

He did not regret many things . . . now that he was honest with himself in that he might die soon. But the one thing he did regret the most, was not loving his son enough. He scolded himself internally as he reflected on all of the times he barked at or even yelled at his son.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

Why did I ever do that? Now he'll never know that I truly loved him and am sorry for all of the times I treated him badly.

A single tear ran down his cheek. In the distance, he heard the roar of Sollix . . . they found their scent.

If I get out of this alive, he thought, James will know exactly how much I love him. He'll never have to question it.

"We need to go . . . now," Steven urged as he helped MaryAnn to her feet.

Thankfully, she had always been athletic and therefore able to recover quickly . . . though she wasn't fully recovered now. Still, necessity drove them on.

"How much farther till we get to the truck?" she asked.

"Probably a mile," Steven answered as they began racing down the trail again. "Definitely no more than two."

"We can make it," she said hopefully.

Steven actually wondered if they could. Just then, they heard a loud crashing sound just a bit up the trail from them. Sollix was closing fast.

We won't make it, he realized.

He glanced at his wife as they ran. Despite her previous words, they both knew they wouldn't reach their truck in time. She nodded to him and they both slowed to a stop. Better to catch their breath and fight than to spend needless energy trying to outrun an opponent who was stronger and faster. Steven preferred taking his chances with the monster anyway and face him head-on.

They turned and drew their swords . . . waiting.

In that moment, Steven wished that he hadn't given in to MaryAnn's pleadings to train with the royal guards those many years ago. She certainly wouldn't be here if she hadn't. She would have enjoyed the other activities the fairy-folk enjoy like his mother Ruth did. Then she would have lived to a ripe old age and passed away peacefully . . . just like his mother. Now she would be lucky if she escaped out of this alive.

Steven's jaw tightened. *He* would die here . . . he was fine with that . . . other than regretting his son not knowing how he felt. But he did not want MaryAnn to die.

Suddenly, as he stared steadily up the trail, waiting for his enemy to arrive, he felt the comforting hand of MaryAnn grabbing his. He looked at her loving resignation. She looked at him with tears in her eyes . . . but resolute and firm.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“It’s okay,” she said, squeezing his hand. “I wouldn’t want to die any other way.”

The words penetrated his heart. He felt a surge of energy that was backed by love and devotion. He smiled weakly, then turned and gripped his sword, ringing the hilt in his hands. If they were going to die, they would make their enemy work harder than ever for it.

Just at that moment, the goblin-troll, Sollix, burst through the bushes and trees up the trail. He paused as he locked eyes with the two humans. His eyes burned with blood-lust, and he panted heavily with loud snorts. Instantly dozens of goblins—smaller in height, but broad-shouldered and muscular—loped into view. They, too, snarled, hissed, and cackled at Steven and MaryAnn.

“For Aragoria,” Steven whispered for MaryAnn’s ears only.

“For James,” she added.

Sollix bellowed a loud roar while raising his sword. The goblins howled with delight as they charged forward.

Steven and MaryAnn stood firm. They would not give their enemy the pleasure of seeing their fear. They waited as the goblin’s charged. It lasted mere seconds, but everything suddenly seemed to slow down as Steven let go of everything and allowed his instincts and training to take over.

He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. “Joe . . . take care of James,” he whispered the prayerful words.

Rage erupted within him. His eyes shot open. The goblins were twenty yards away and still charging. He roared . . . MaryAnn joined him. Prepared to take as many of the goblins with them as they could, the couple charged forward.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



BECOME A PATRON

~ CHAPTER 1 ~ THE BOY AT THE FUNERAL

James shifted uncomfortably as he stood at his designated spot. The mortician had given him strict instructions to stay put so that people could pay him their respects and sympathy . . . but that was extremely difficult for any eleven-year-old.

He hated everything about this day. Mostly he hated having to get dressed up in the stiff, tight, and extremely hot suit. And on top of it, having to comb his sandy-colored hair. He usually kept it shaggy and loose. Having it slicked to the side made it feel super awkward and uncomfortable—like a mold of plaster was pasted to his head.

James remembered once attending a wedding for one of his mother’s cousins. He remembered watching the wedding planner coordinate everything with militaristic precision.

“Everything needs to be perfect for the bride’s special day,” the wedding planner would often shout to the workers if they lagged in their duties.

James got the eerie sense that the mortician was behaving the same way. It made him sort of irritated. Almost as if the mortician was taking advantage of the emotions of everyone attending the funeral . . . making everything perfect for this “sad” day . . . so that he could get a paycheck.

“He doesn’t care about me . . . or my family,” he muttered under his breath.

He glowered at the mortician as he observed the crowd like a secret service agent. How could he care? How could anyone in this small town care?

A small part of him *was* grateful that practically everyone in the town showed up for the funeral. But everything still seemed so . . . detached. . . . And he noticed this detached-ness from the very beginning.

He remembered when it all began. He had been dropped off at his grandpa’s cabin for the weekend while his parents were to go on a weekend getaway. The very next day, Grandpa Joe received the phone call. James’s parents had been killed in an accident.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

Now, a week later, James stood awkwardly in front of his parents' caskets as the crowd filed through to give him their condolences.

The strangest thing about all of it was that James was not sad. Again, he just felt detached from it all. He just had no emotion to go with it. He certainly felt a . . . a sense of depression. But it wasn't for the fact that he was now an orphan.

I'll bet I'm just picking up on what everyone else is feeling.

He caught a few disapproving glances from some of the townsfolk as they came through and noticed his blank, emotionless stare.

What are they expecting? he thought to himself. *Are they wanting me to be teary-eyed but standing tall and brave?*

If there was any crying to be done James had already done it. But as he reflected on the days following the news of his parents' death he realized something. Something that bothered him a little bit, but something he could easily hide. He *was* sad about losing his parents . . . especially his mother, MaryAnn. But when it came to his father, Steven, he felt more of a sadness for the fact that he *wasn't* sad.

There had always been something missing between him and his father. Something that was always . . . gone. He didn't know what it was, but he just never felt any strong bond between him and his dad. Maybe it was because he was frequently gone on his business trips.

Let them stare, he thought. *I don't care what they think.*

He just wanted this day to be over so that he could move on. He looked up at the clock. Still, twenty minutes to go. Had it *really* only been just over an hour and a half? It felt way longer than that to him. He was sure he would be able to hold out for another twenty minutes. But then again, that was just for the viewing. There was still the actual funeral services later.

James sighed deeply. This was going to be a very long day.

The Porter family had just expressed their sympathies and followed the line to view James's dead parents. James pursed his lips as he watched them. He didn't know if his parents had any interaction with the Porters . . . let alone anyone else in town. He couldn't understand why so many people from the town would show up. His parents always seemed to keep to themselves. Especially his dad who was always gone on

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“business trips.” In fact, James’s only connection with the Porters was their daughter, Bailey.

The strange tomboy girl always hung around him and his friends whenever they played games at the park. James always saw her standing off to the side with her weathered baseball cap worn backward, braided blonde pigtails, and an old baseball mitt. He was sure she inherited all of it from her much older brother Mitch.

Despite his confusion at the family’s attendance, James was in some small way glad they were there. It certainly took him a bit by surprise to see Bailey all dolled-up instead of in her dirty tomboy apparel. She even looked . . . cute wasn’t the right word . . . adorable?

James looked around the room and exhaled long and exasperated. His only entertainment was to do quick assessments of each family as he had just done with the Porters.

“James?” he heard a voice to the side.

James turned and smiled broadly. *This* was the group he was hoping to see. Of everyone in their small town, his small gang of friends were the ones who meant the most to him. Tony, Elliot, Ben, and Slade stood there, shifting awkwardly. They all looked so different in their suits that seemed too big for their eleven-year-old bodies.

James laughed when he saw them. “Hey,” he said as they all approached—one united group.

No one said anything. They just circled all together and formed their usual huddle, arms overlapping and interlocking as they rested them on each other’s shoulders and waists.

“Thanks for coming guys,” James said.

He choked a bit. *Now* the tears started coming. Not because he lost his parents, but because he knew he had true friends.

“We’re always here for you,” Slade responded.

Everyone in the huddle echoed Slade’s words.

James wanted nothing more than to just go and play a good game of baseball with his buds. He squeezed the shoulders of Tony and Ben who were on either side of him.

“What are you going to do now?” Tony asked.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

Elliot shot him a reproving glare. It was quick, and no one probably noticed it, but James did.

That was a huge question . . . what *was* he going to do now? He was technically an orphan.

“I’m not sure,” James answered. “I guess I’ll stay with Grandpa Joe.”

The boys all nodded and James could sense a mixture of emotions. Some obviously thought it awesome the idea of living in the cabin up the canyon. Others, he could tell, didn’t like the idea of their friend being so far away.

“Hey,” he said reassuringly. “Don’t worry. I’ll still make it to our games.”

He didn’t know how he would. But he was determined that *nothing* was going to change with his friends.

They all smiled and again repeated words of comfort. They all squeezed the huddle in a big group hug then broke the circle. James couldn’t help but smile warmly. Especially as they each took individual turns to give him one more bro-hug in support.

It was good to have close friends.

James felt his spirits lift. He noticed the mortician slightly glaring at him. Obviously, the man didn’t approve of the line stalling due to their little huddle. James didn’t care. He even smirked at the guy.

Just as the last recognizable townsfolk came through, James saw Grandpa Joe enter. *Where has he been? And why hasn’t he stood in line with me?*

The elderly Nielsen—and now James’s only living relative—came and stood beside him just as the last family came up. Typical greetings and well-wishes were exchanged. Then it was James and Grandpa Joe all to themselves. The mortician quickly took over and ushered the crowd out of the viewing area.

“The Nielsen’s will have a moment to themselves before the services begin,” he announced.

Everyone shuffled quickly out of the room. James wondered how many would stay for the remaining services.

Just as the mortician finished herding everyone out and shut the door behind him, another side door opened. Four men and a lady entered the room. Grandpa Joe smiled warmly as the strange group approached. They appeared like normal people attending a funeral. They wore nice suits and the lady donned a fancy Sunday style

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

dress. But something about them made them look . . . different. As if they were uncomfortable in the clothes—like a little kid wearing a suit for the first time. They all had sharp, beautiful features, with piercing blue and green eyes. And their skin wasn't pale, but fair. The only thing James could think of to describe them was beautiful.

"Hello, Joseph," said the oldest looking one.

Oldest? They all looked the same age. But James's instincts said this one was the oldest because . . . well, he didn't really know. The guy just looked—wiser. Which he figured made him older.

"Andel," Grandpa Joe answered—Andel? What kind of a name was Andel? "I'm glad you guys could make it."

"Your family means more to us than some trivial meetings," said the second oldest—wisest—looking man.

Grandpa Joe smiled. "I take it that's where Tina is?"

The others nodded.

James tried to make heads-or-tails of what they were saying but wasn't understanding any of it.

After a few brief exchanges that James couldn't follow, the group turned to him. He somewhat shrunk under their gaze, though he felt a very clear and distinct impression that they felt nothing but sadness and sympathy for him.

"You are James?" the one named Andel asked.

"Yes, sir."

All of them smiled warmly at him and James didn't feel so intimidated anymore.

"Your father was a great man," Andel said as he extended his hand. "All the men in your family were."

James wondered what he meant by that as he shook Andel's hand. The stranger couldn't have been older than his dad. He certainly didn't look old enough to be the same age as Grandpa Joe. How could he know anyone else?

Grandpa Joe cleared his throat loudly.

"Sorry," Andel said with a wink. "*Are . . . They are still great men.*"

"Thank you," Grandpa Joe returned the wink.

What is going on here? James wondered.

"We look forward to working with you as well," Andel continued.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

Now James was really confused. He cocked a quizzical eyebrow at the curious group. For a brief moment, he thought of his superhero comic books. Was his dad some rich tycoon who left him his fortune and these people were his board of directors? Wouldn't that be something? But he was certain that wasn't the case.

Each of the strangers took turns shaking his hand and offering their sympathies. For the first time—and despite their unusualness—James felt the sincerity of their words and even fought back a few tears. Andel, Rosden, Dagget, Alden, and Theya—they all named themselves to him and said they looked forward to seeing him again.

Just as quickly and mysteriously as they appeared, they left through the side door.

No sooner had they left then the mortician opened the main door and poked his head in. “Are we ready to begin?” It sounded more like a command than a question.

“We're ready,” said Grandpa Joe as he rested his hand on James's shoulder.

James nodded in agreement, and together they followed the pallbearers to the chapel.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



BECOME A PATRON

~ CHAPTER 2 ~ A FIRESIDE CHAT

James slumped in the garden chair next to the fire pit as the sun dipped behind the mountain. The flames of the fire danced as it ate up the logs in the pit. Just like James liked it.

Finally, the day was over.

He had practically torn the suit off once he got to his room at his grandpa's cabin. Everything he owned was now moved in. His friends were right—living in a cabin in the canyon would be pretty fun. Aside from the estate sale in a few days, which Grandpa Joe would handle, everything about his parents passing away was done and over with.

“You okay?” Grandpa Joe asked as he placed the tray of food on the picnic table.

“Yeah . . . I'm fine,” James answered as he went over to help.

Grandpa Joe began unwrapping the hotdogs they'd be roasting over the fire. James loved those. They were never the cheap one-dozen-for-less-than-a-dollar kind of hotdogs but real, gourmet sausages; roasted over a fire with a lightly toasted bun and Dijon mustard . . . few things were better.

“A long day,” said Grandpa Joe.

“Yep.”

“You don't seem to be yourself.”

“I'm fine.”

Grandpa Joe raised an eyebrow at him.

“Really,” James affirmed.

“It's just that . . .” Grandpa Joe paused. “You haven't been acting very normal lately.”

I'm an orphan now. What'd you expect, he wanted to say but contented himself with just thinking it.

James stuck his sausage to his roasting stick and sat back down in his chair. He held out the sausage over the fire and stared at the flames.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“James,” Grandpa Joe prodded.

“I’m fine, Grandpa.”

Grandpa Joe shrugged his shoulders and finished getting his own sausage ready. James focused on his sausage but watched in his peripheral as Grandpa Joe finished laying everything out on the table, grabbed his roasting stick, and sat down just a little off to his side.

“How should I be acting?” James asked.

He wasn’t going to say anything else. It almost bugged him how Grandpa Joe had this way of leaving a conversation hanging that made you want to finish it.

“Well, you just buried your parents. . . .”

“And you just buried your son,” James countered.

“Touché.”

James took a deep breath. He appreciated that Grandpa Joe never pressured him to spout out his feelings . . . despite his innate ability to make one want to. He would just wait patiently until James was ready to talk.

“I guess I don’t know what to think . . . or feel,” James finally said. “I mean—I’m definitely sad that they’re gone. But I think I’m just glad it’s all over and I’m ready to move on.”

Grandpa Joe nodded in agreement. “I feel the same way.”

“Are we weird?” asked James.

Grandpa Joe looked at him perplexed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean . . . we just got done with the funeral of my parents and your son, but here we are, roasting hotdogs and acting like . . . well . . . not what I’d imagine someone in our situation would act.”

Grandpa Joe didn’t say anything. He just stared at the fire like he was weighing his words carefully.

“I suppose you’re right,” he finally said. “But then again, we’re not like other people—are we?”

James shrugged. *What did he mean by that?*

“Your father and I . . .” Grandpa Joe suddenly began after a long pause. “He and I never really saw eye to eye.”

“What do you mean?”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“We never really got along very well.”

James was surprised. He knew *he* didn’t get along very well with his father, but it was the same for Grandpa Joe?

“Actually . . . now that I think about it . . . I felt the same way with *my* father,” Grandpa Joe added.

“Wait, you didn’t get along with your father either?”

Now James was really surprised. There were only two male family members in his life—his dad and Grandpa Joe. And it was Grandpa Joe who was the one who seemed more the father-figure of the two. In fact, the only times in which he felt that he was “bonding” with his dad was when he spoke of Grandpa James and how great of a grandfather *he* was. That was at least something he and his dad had in common . . . they both seemed to like their grandfathers more than their fathers.

I’m seeing a pattern here, James thought to himself.

Why was it that the father-son relationships in his family weren’t the best?

“But I’m glad that you’re ready to move on,” Grandpa Joe interrupted his train of thought.

James hadn’t even noticed that Grandpa Joe was at the table dressing his sausage. He hadn’t even noticed that his own sausage was a burning inferno. He quickly pulled it away from the fire, blew out the flames that engulfed it, and joined Grandpa Joe at the table.

“What do you mean by that?” asked James as he dressed his sausage.

“I mean,” Grandpa Joe said with a mouth full of sausage and a bun, “that we have a lot that needs to be done now that it’s just us two.”

James stopped with his sausage halfway to his opened mouth. He looked at his grandfather with utter confusion. What else needed to be done? It was in the middle of summer. School wouldn’t start for another five weeks. Grandpa Joe was retired and just living up here in the canyon. What was he talking about?

Suddenly, James remembered the strange visitors at the viewing. “Does this have anything to do with that group that showed up today?”

“Yes indeed,” Grandpa Joe said with a slight twinkle in his smile. “I am officially coming out of retirement to continue the . . . family business . . . until you’re ready.”

“Until I’m ready?”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

Up to this point in his life, James had no desire for any business. All he wanted to do was what all of the other eleven-year-olds wanted—to play in the major leagues.

“I don’t want to do what my dad did,” James protested.

“Oh, I think you’ll like this,” Grandpa Joe answered, his smile shifting to a more playful curl. “Your father thought the same thing when I introduced him to it. But once he learned about it, it was all he ever wanted to do—every single day.”

Now James was really confused. *What on Earth was he talking about?*

“Hurry up and finish your dog,” Grandpa Joe ordered.

“You’re not going to tell me what it is?”

“I find it best to just show you rather than telling you. Besides . . . you wouldn’t believe me if I did tell you what it was.”

And with that, Grandpa Joe winked at James and hurried off to the cabin. James stood dazed at the picnic table, a half-eaten sausage in his hand, his mind racing with all sorts of confusion. What is this family business? Why hadn’t he heard about it before? And what about it made Grandpa Joe seem so giddy?

The only thing he could do was follow. He quickly stuffed the rest of his sausage in his mouth when he heard Grandpa Joe’s truck rev. He bolted around the cabin to see Grandpa Joe backing out of the carport in his old pickup, an eager expression on his face.

James—still majorly confused about the sudden change and eagerness of his grandpa—shrugged his shoulders and chuckled to himself as he jumped into the truck.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



BECOME A PATRON

~ CHAPTER 3 ~ THE FAMILY BUSINESS

James had lost track of where they were. For a brief moment, he thought they were headed back to town. But just before they would have exited out the canyon Grandpa Joe made an abrupt turn off of the road. It looked like they were on an old dirt driveway leading to a cabin or a camping ground further up a deep ravine in the canyon wall. But surprisingly, the small but well-maintained path just continued up and up.

At one point, James struggled to keep his focus on the road and wanted nothing more than to just go back and roast more hotdogs. But then suddenly he was acutely aware of the road, the foliage along the path, and even where they were.

“Why are we heading up the backside of the mountain?” he asked.

Grandpa Joe smiled. “You’ll see.”

James thought Grandpa Joe’s driving speed was just a bit too reckless.

Any semblance of sunlight had now left the canyon, and the dark night sky made everything impossible to follow. All James could do was sit tight and watch as the trees and bushes of the forest blurred into view of the headlights then streak past into the darkness.

Nearly an hour had gone by and James’s head began to bob with drowsiness.

“We’re here,” Grandpa Joe exclaimed as he practically slammed on the breaks.

James felt his stomach lurch to his throat as the truck halted to a stop. He waited for just a few seconds while his heart quieted down before he tried anything. When the dust settled he looked out of the windshield and saw . . . nothing.

“Um . . . Grandpa? I thought you said you were going to show me the family business.”

“I am,” Grandpa Joe said as he eagerly jumped out of the car. “Follow me.”

When he said “follow me,” James initially thought he meant just a little further. He didn’t realize they would be hiking another two miles. He was certain this wasn’t safe, hiking up a strange trail in the middle of the night with just two plastic flashlights.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

But then again, it was only strange to him. Grandpa Joe, on the other hand, moved along the trail with as much ease as if he were walking through his own home; and pretty lively for his age too.

James did his absolute best to keep up with the old man as they moved through thick groves of trees, switchbacks, and even a few mountain streams. Suddenly, Grandpa Joe stopped just as they crested a small ridge while emerging from a tree line. James had to bend over to catch his breath momentarily. He thought he was in great shape whenever he played sports with his friends, but hiking with Grandpa Joe left him exhausted beyond anything he'd ever experienced.

"You okay?" Grandpa Joe asked with a chuckle and a slap on the back.

"I'm fine," James answered between deep breaths.

"Good. Because we're almost there."

"What?" James gasped. "You mean we're not there yet?"

Grandpa Joe again chuckled. "We've got to get all the way up there."

James looked to where he was pointing. If he wasn't so tired, he'd be able to appreciate what he was seeing. They stood at the bottom of a small mountain valley . . . small—but still big enough for several football fields. He hoped that it was just the moonlight that distorted his depth perception. Knee-high wild grass stretched across the entire valley floor. A few hundred yards up the slopes on all sides of the valley stood more groves of trees that climbed up and up the mountainside. The peak of the mountain did just that . . . *peek* over the tops of the trees. And that was where Grandpa Joe was pointing.

"You've got to be kidding me," James protested.

"Come on," said Grandpa Joe. "I promise . . . you'll thank me later."

"I'm too tired," James complained—and not in the usual eleven-year-old complaining tone. He genuinely felt that he couldn't go on any further.

"Here . . . eat this," said Grandpa Joe. He handed James a small biscuit-like cookie.

What's this going to do? James thought. *Dry my mouth up and kill me faster—that's what.*

He bit into the flakey biscuit. Suddenly, everything seemed energized and vibrant. He felt a rush through his entire body like blood rushing into sleeping limbs.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

His eyes widened as he seemed to see more colors than before. They weren't really new colors, but all of the colors of the mountain began to reflect the brilliant moonlight. He suddenly realized that he no longer felt fatigued. In fact, running to the top of the mountain seemed like a good activity right then.

Why didn't he give this to me before?

"Race ya," said Grandpa Joe with a smirk as if he read James's thoughts.

James grinned. "Bring it . . . old man."

He bolted across the mountain valley laughing out loud. Within seconds he heard a rustling beside him. His jaw dropped in total surprise to see Grandpa Joe overtaking him.

"Old man, eh?" said Grandpa Joe sarcastically.

Before James could even finish registering what was happening, Grandpa Joe bolted ahead, leaving him in the dust. James kicked it into gear chasing after the old—but surprisingly spry—man.

They raced through the grass, up the far slopes, and through the woods. It must have been hundreds of yards, but James felt that it was only a short distance. Before he knew it, he caught up to Grandpa Joe who was standing as still as a statue.

"Caught you," he cried out as he tumbled into his grandpa.

Grandpa Joe didn't answer. He hardly moved from James running into him.

"Okay . . . so we're here?" James asked. "What's this family business?"

Grandpa Joe didn't look down, he continued to stare forward with a warm and reverent smile. "It's right there," he nodded forward.

James looked up to where Grandpa Joe was looking. Thirty feet in front of them stood a large, gaping cave. The wide mouth could easily allow a dozen or more men to walk through shoulder to shoulder. Off to either side of the cave stood tall braziers with brilliant fires that lit the entire clearing. James wondered how he missed it in all of his excitement. But the thing that caught him the most off guard was that the flames of the braziers were blue.

"Grandpa . . . ?" he asked. "What is this?"

Grandpa Joe didn't answer. Instead, he moved forward towards the cave. James's initial gut reaction was to pull him back and ask if he was crazy, but instead, he found himself following. Suddenly, five figures emerged from the mouth of the cave. Dressed

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

in silvery robes and tunics that glowed in the light of the braziers and moon and with long silver and golden hair, James first thought of aliens.

They're gonna eat my brains, he thought, recalling all of the alien-zombie-ghost stories he and his buddies told each other on campouts.

As the five figures neared, James suddenly had an overwhelming feeling of peace and calm rush over him. These weren't weird aliens. If anything they were angels. They were . . .

"Wait a second," James nearly shouted, causing everyone to jump. "You're the guy who came to my parents' funeral. You all were there."

The figure in the lead smiled and James instantly remembered. Andel! His name was Andel. And he *did* say he was eager to work with James. Was this it?

"It took you long enough to get here," said one of the five who stood off to the side.

"We came as quickly as we could, Rosden," said Grandpa Joe as he slapped James on the back. "Someone is not quite yet conditioned to run in the mountains."

The others gave a light chuckle.

Was he meaning me? James wondered

He felt his cheeks flush with both embarrassment and a slight twinge of anger at the comment.

"No matter," said Andel. "We're just excited that you've come back."

"Come back?" asked James. "Would someone please tell me what's going on?"

"Father—may I?" said the only lady with them as she stepped forward.

Andel nodded. James remembered her as well. What was her name again?

"James," she began. "Your family, for the last four generations have worked with our people in a position known as our Guardian."

"Your people?"

"We are not like humans," she continued.

No kidding.

"We are fairies. And we have lived here under this mountain for nearly two-hundred years."

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

James didn't know what to think. His mind raced a million miles a minute trying to process what he just heard. The lady—he now remembered her name to be Theya—smiled warmly at him, then gently closed his hanging jaw.

“I think it'll be better if we just show him,” said Grandpa Joe.

James, still lost in Theya's words, felt his grandfather's arm around his shoulders giving him that reassuring squeeze that everything would be okay.

“I agree,” said Rosden.

“Alright then,” Andel concurred. “To the city.”

James looked up at Grandpa Joe as the others turned and made their way back into the cave. “The city?”

Grandpa Joe winked at him. “Don't worry . . . it'll all make sense. I felt the same way when my father showed it to me.”

James and Grandpa Joe caught up to the five as they began to descend in the wide tunnel. It sloped downward at a steady decline, but never like any of the caves James had ever been in before. The path was smooth but not slippery. Torches placed in sconces every ten yards lit the passage with the same blue flame of the braziers. This was definitely not a normal cave.

“Our ancestors carved this place out of the mountains centuries ago,” said one of the other fairies; Alden, James remembered, was his name.

“Your ancestors?” Andel corrected.

Alden shrugged his shoulders. “You are pretty ancient, father.”

“You were alive when this place was made?” asked James in astonishment.

“We do not age like you humans do. We're not immortal either—if that's what you're thinking.”

“So . . . how old are you?” asked James.

Grandpa Joe coughed in embarrassment.

“It's fine, Joe,” said Andel. “We use several different measurements of time. But to keep it simple for now . . . I was born—according to your calendars—in the year 1002.”

It wasn't that hard for James to do some quick math. “You're over a thousand years old?”

The others all laughed.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“Told you,” Alden joked. “He’s ancient.”

They continued laughing and joking as they descended further and further down the corridor. James was a torrent of questions and they all, in turn, answered his questions patiently.

No—fairies are not the little tiny creatures in modern stories. Those are pixies . . . very real and related to the fairy-folk but not the original fairies.

Yes—they can do magic . . . it is a real thing.

Yes—they have pointy ears, but to those who don’t believe in magic or the fairy-world, they’re easily dismissed so fairy-folk could easily interact with humans.

No—they don’t have wings of any sort. That’s simply a Victorian England creation. Although there were rumors of the fairy-folk having wings anciently, but only as a gift from their mother goddess, Danu.

Yes—there are hundreds of other kinds of magical or mythical creatures throughout the world. They often can hide in plain sight. But more commonly, they simply live their lives in other worlds or realms that humans don’t know about nor can they access unless through special means.

“So, are you the king?” James asked Andel.

“No,” answered Andel. “I am the chief of the clan and lord of the city, but we do not have a king in the sense that you’re probably thinking. We have a mortal queen.”

“She’s a human?”

“Yes. You see . . . when the Danann, the ancient fairy-folk, were driven underground by the humans, the humans came very close to infiltrating the magical world. That would have caused world-wide chaos and destruction for both races. Since our forefather’s kingdom was initially destroyed, we were given the chance to return to our ancient home. But our ancestors had come to love this world so much that they asked to stay. So we became the Guardians between the human and magical worlds.”

“Okay,” James interjected, putting on a show of understanding though it wasn’t making much sense.

“They need to be able to be in both places,” Grandpa Joe chimed in. “Magical and mortal.”

“Exactly,” Andel confirmed.

“Which means . . . ?”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“They discovered early on with each clan that if they have a mortal queen and a mortal Guardian, the combination of the two worlds added strength and power to their role as Guardians of the two worlds,” Grandpa Joe explained. “And that’s where we come in.”

“We?” asked James.

“Many years ago,” said the fairy named Rosden, “your great-great-grandfather, the first James of our family, discovered the fairy-folk living here. He became their Guardian and the job has been passed down from father to son ever since.”

“Wait, you’re saying my dad was the Guardian of this fairy-city?” James couldn’t believe the words that were coming out of his mouth.

“Exactly,” said Grandpa Joe. “I was the Guardian from the time I was sixteen until I passed it on to him when he turned sixteen.”

“And you’re passing it on to me now that he’s . . . dead?”

“Not yet.”

“Your grandfather has agreed to . . . how do you humans say it? Come out of retirement . . . while you train to become the next Guardian,” Andel explained.

Just as he finished they rounded a bend in the tunnel and James’s eyes widened with shock. Exiting the tunnel, he saw a vast cavern larger than he could have ever imagined. He had seen on television some of those sports domes and arenas . . . this made them seem like backyard playing fields in comparison. Large buildings of sparkling white granite spread throughout the cavern, each unique and beautifully decorated with elegant carvings, motifs, statues, and mosaics depicting strange fairy-folk. Massive pillars lined major corridors to provide support, but even the pillars looked to be gigantic towers built to be dwellings for the bustling population.

Overlooking the city, James could see the streets crowded with people all dressed like his five fairy companions. Bright robes, dresses, and tunics of silver, blue, and green looked to be the common fashion. He almost thought that he had stepped into a strange medieval world.

At the far end of the cavern rose a single structure that dwarfed all others. James instinctively knew it to be the palace. It stood grander and more elegant than all of the others, with towers and high walls and bright banners that hung in a colorful array.

“Welcome, James,” said Andel. “To Aragoria. Home to the fairy-clan Aragor.”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

Excitement welled up inside of him, and James began to smile from ear to ear at what he was seeing and hearing.

“This is our home, James,” said Grandpa Joe. “This is the ‘family business’ we mentioned earlier.”

“Are you serious?” asked James.

Grandpa Joe smiled and placed a loving hand on his shoulder. “Are you ready to begin your training to be the next Guardian?”

James looked at his grandfather and smiled.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



BECOME A PATRON

~ 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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

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."

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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

“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 the shadows and gave chase it had slipped through their fingers. James had been the

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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. 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

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

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?"

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

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?”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“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.”

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

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

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.”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“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 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!

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?

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.”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

“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?”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“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.¹

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.”

“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.”

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

تبقى عديطلو و بت فكر انه هيدصل كده

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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?”

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.”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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 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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“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.

“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

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

"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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“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.”

“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.”

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.

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

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“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.*

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

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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 . . ."

"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."

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“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.

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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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."

"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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



BECOME A PATRON

~ CHAPTER 7 ~ THE BACK-TO-SCHOOL DANCE

James took his time changing out of his clothes and into a fresh t-shirt and jeans. He much rather preferred to stay in his dorm that night than go to the dance. But perhaps with the McCannons and Ms. Smith it wouldn't be so bad.

He might as well make a fresh appearance.

Truth be told he had already hung up his calendar and counted down the days until he turned eighteen and could leave this place. When he could be his own man with no adults, teachers, or grandpa's who would tell him what he could or couldn't do.

What would I do? he wondered.

He liked the idea of setting out on his own. He especially liked it more and more since the whole, "we're stepping down as Guardians," fiasco. But he knew deep down that no matter where he went, it would never measure up to what *could* have been.

"How could he say that that wasn't my decision to make? Or that I didn't get a say in the matter?" James mumbled as he tossed his dirty clothes in the hamper.

Every time he had replayed it in his mind his blood boiled. But tonight had been so unexpected with the McCannon's and their brief talk about his father . . . he didn't want to spoil the mood. He banished the thought for another time and committed to at least trying to have a good time for the night.

The night was cool and clear as he made his way across the campus to the main gym—just the way James enjoyed it. However, he felt a small twinge of sadness when he looked up but could only see a few dozen stars. He had been with the fairy-folk for so long and they didn't use lights at night. He had always loved going out on the mountain slopes late at night with Alden and Theya to just stare at the stars and listen to their legends. Stories of their ancestors and their ancient homeland in the stars.

A low and penetrating thrumming interrupted James's thoughts. He looked around, unsure of where the noise was coming from. At first, he thought it sounded like the drums before a battle. He hadn't ever fought in one, but the tales that Alden and

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

Andel told of battles long ago had been so vivid that he could almost see, smell, and hear the different elements to the story. Plus, a little fairy magic goes a long way when used to tell stories.

At the far end of what James heard everyone call the quad, stood a large, square building. He remembered his tour from earlier and knew that it was the main gym. Despite it being a large structure and even filled with the latest fitness equipment, he thought the outside looked pretty bland compared to the rest of the campus.

He could see lights flash and pulse from inside the windows that lined the building. He took a deep breath as he paused outside of the gym and watched as a few groups of students darted into the building laughing and shouting as they went.

“This is not going to end well?” he said to himself.

Slowly, he let out his breath and plunged into the dance.

The overload of lights, sounds, and the stuffy air made James hesitate for a brief moment. He had been trained to fight in battles against goblins, trolls, and other various magical creatures, but nothing had prepared him for this.

At the far end of the gym stood the DJ booth with all sorts of flashing lights and loudspeakers attached to it. The DJ danced in the booth, large earphones bouncing around his neck and another pair on his head as he bobbed his head to the beat.

“So, this is a high school dance,” said James, surprised that he could hardly even hear his own voice. “This is nuts!”

One large group of kids danced—more of jumped up and down, flailing their arms in the air—in the center of the gym. Other small groups no bigger than half a dozen kids were scattered throughout the gym swaying and bobbing to the beat, but not really dancing. If you could even call what any of them did “dancing”.

For a brief moment, James seriously considered leaving and going back to his dorm. Maybe staying there . . . even just lying on his bed absent-mindedly . . . would be better than this.

The only thing he could think of was, *these kids are weird*.

More students came rushing into the gym, pushing past him and causing him to stumble to the side. One young man nearly knocked him over in his haste to join the jumping crowd.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“I’m sorry,” the kid shouted over the din of the music as he grabbed James’s shoulders to keep them both from falling over.

Before James could answer that he was alright, the young man had already darted away and rejoined his group of friends.

James shook his head. Irritation flared up within him, but he couldn’t be too mad at the kid. He didn’t mean to bump him . . . and he did apologize. He shook it off and made his way to the side of the gym. He noticed a long table with various refreshments.

“At least there’re treats,” he said.

James paused at the table as he realized that it had been years since he had regular human treats. He could hardly remember what a cookie or brownie tasted like. Small cups with colorful liquid were clustered at the end of the table. What type of juice was that?

Training to be Guardian required a strict diet of foods that were good for your strength and endurance. If the food didn’t meet those requirements then he wasn’t allowed to eat them . . . unless it was a special occasion. Now he had the freedom to eat practically whatever unhealthy human food he wanted.

James reached for a small plate that had a brownie on it. He hesitated, almost afraid to eat it for fear of Dagget or his grandpa reprimanding him for eating something so unhealthy.

A smile crept across his face. “I’m no longer preparing to be the Guardian. And . . . they’re not here to stop me.”

Relishing the idea that the old rules which he lived by were no longer applicable to him, he stuffed the entire brownie in his mouth. The rush of rich, chocolate flavor erupted in his mouth. His eyes bulged as the overly-satisfying morsel melted in creamy goodness. Without thinking, James grabbed another brownie and stuffed it in his mouth. Quickly he grabbed two more, one for each hand. He couldn’t seem to get enough.

“Hey, you’re the new kid, right?”

James turned to see a cute girl standing at the end of the table picking up a small cup of juice. She had a small round face with a cute button nose and blonde hair that looked to be unnaturally bright from either it being dyed or the light of the DJ . . . or maybe both. She smiled cheerfully at him as she skipped over to him. He wanted to

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

answer but his mouth was too full with brownies. He gulped as best he could, but quickly nodded in response when he couldn't swallow the now sticky cakes fast enough.

"I'm Bethany," she said, still smiling and placing a hand on his arm. "Save a dance for me?"

Not sure of what she meant—nor did he have the ability to think straight at that moment as a rush of emotions surged through him as she gently touches his arm—James just nodded again.

Bethany's smile widened and she darted off, disappearing into the crowd.

"That was weird," James finally said as he swallowed the last bits of brownie.

Was she expecting him to find her? When would he know to dance with her? Was it dancing with her or for her?

I am definitely not dancing for anyone! he thought resolutely.

James stood there, baffled and even more confused about this whole "dance" situation. Fairies were not like this. Whenever there was a celebration that involved dancing there was more often than not a traditional dance that groups would follow. Dances that they had learned from childhood. And fairy dancing was nothing like this. It was fluid, smooth, and graceful—movement that would put any ballerina to shame.

James had heard of stories where fairy couples would dance together. Perhaps what the girl was asking was similar. But stories that he had heard were far different than what he was seeing here. Stories told that when a fairy couple met for the first time, if they were right for each other, their hearts would sing and the couple would dance together to the harmony of their hearts . . . even when no music was playing.

James always liked that notion. He even met one fairy who claimed that that's how her parents met centuries ago. But nothing like that had ever happened in a long time.

Suddenly, something caught James's eye.

Through the crowd, James could see someone dancing that looked very different from all of the others.

Right in the middle of the crowd, danced a girl. Her white shirt and golden hair glowed from the lighting of the DJ booth which only made her stand out even more. James suddenly found himself mesmerized. This girl did not dance like the others. Her

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

motions were far too fluid. She moved with the grace of one who danced to her own rhythm.

James had always noted that the fairy-folk were some of the most beautiful with their lean and graceful figures, but in that moment, this young lady seemed to put all of them to shame with her beauty and perfect form.

As soon as James noticed the girl, the DJ suddenly changed the entire atmosphere of the dance. The music softened. The lights changed from flashing to a gentle spin. Kids quickly started pairing off and while holding each other in their arms, they swayed back and forth.

“This is what Bethany meant,” James muttered to himself while slapping his palm to his forehead.

He suddenly had a rush of memories of watching his parents dance together in the kitchen when he was a little kid. How could he forget what dancing was to humans? He had always enjoyed watching his parents dance when they thought he was asleep. They always looked so happy.

Suddenly, all he could think about was dancing with that girl and making her smile like his father made his mother smile. He was surprised to see that with all of the couples that paired off, no one was asking her to dance.

“Hey you,” James heard Bethany to the side. “You promised me a dance.”

“Um . . . excuse me,” James said as politely as possible.

He didn’t catch the gaping expression of Bethany as he left her standing there. All he wanted to do was dance with that girl.

Not wanting to waste any time or even appear sheepish—or especially miss the chance before someone else got to her first—James quickly, but not hastily, approached the girl. She swayed back and forth to the music. Her eyes closed as if not even expecting someone to ask her to dance, and a smile that only melted James heart even more.

James suddenly realized he didn’t know what he was going to say when he reached her. So he said the only thing that came to his mind.

“May I dance with you?”

The girl opened her eyes with a small hint of surprise. She looked at James’s outstretched hand, then slowly she looked up and met his eyes.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

James felt his knees suddenly go limp, but he forced himself to not shake. He tried to smile with confidence, but the urge to run in embarrassment churned inside of him.

Her deep, dark eyes studied him for just a brief moment. Then she smiled.

“I would love to.”

Gently, she accepted his hand and James felt his stomach flip. For the first time in his life, he felt something amazing. All he could think about was that he just wanted to spend every day with this angel.

He pulled her back a few steps away from the crowd and found that he didn't know what to do next.

Do I hug her like everyone else is doing? Should I make the first move or wait for her to do something?

“Um . . .” James stammered.

To his relief, the girl smiled patiently. But to his dismay, she stood obviously waiting for him to do . . . something.

James quickly recalled, again, watching his parents when they danced. Slowly, he reached for her right hand with his left, and while holding it out, placed his other hand at her waist.

He smiled . . . and even a boyish giggle escaped his throat. He snapped his mouth shut, his cheeks suddenly feeling warm. Despite his embarrassment, it felt so good to dance like that.

The girl also smiled with a touch of surprise. As if she fully expected him to employ the hug method, but appreciated that he didn't. She easily slid her free hand up on his shoulder and they slowly started swaying to the music.

“So . . .” James started. “What's your name?”

The girl smiled. “I'm Bailey.”

“Bailey . . . ?” he had a faint memory of the name Bailey.

“You're James Nielsen . . . the new kid,” she said, interrupting his thoughts.

“Yeah. I guess word spreads pretty fast.”

“That's what usually happens here.”

“Don't you get more than just one new student every year?”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“Well,” Bailey shrugged her shoulders. “Usually we do. But surprisingly you’re the only new student this year. That’s probably why everyone’s acting . . . differently . . . with you.”

“Comforting,” James mused.

Bailey giggled. “You really don’t remember me?” she said after a short pause.

James scrunched his mouth. “I’m sorry. Your name sounds really familiar. But I can’t place where from.”

“I’m Bailey . . . Bailey Porter.”

She paused as if to see if that’d make any more sense. James still stared at her blankly.

“You used to let me hang out with you and your friends when we were younger.”

Memories flooded into James's mind of before his parents died and his gang of friends. How had he almost forgotten about them? He had spent more time with them than with his parents combined. Memories of bike-rides through town to the various playing fields, the ice-cream parlor, and the cheap-seats theater seemed to emerge almost out of nowhere. Accompanying many of those memories there was always Bailey—the skinny little tomboy who would always hang around the back of the group or off to the side, waiting for a chance to play any game with them.

“No?” James exclaimed as it all came together. “You’re . . . but you . . . when . . . ?”

Bailey smiled. It was more than her warm, friendly smile that she had shown so far this evening. It was that little girl smile that she had when James remembered her hanging around his group of friends. She always had that smile when she knew she got the upper hand on them—either by getting a chance to play with them because they needed an extra player or whenever she had pulled one of her crazy pranks to get back at them . . . which she did often.

“Wow . . . Bailey . . .” was all James could say.

“It’s been a while, James,” she said, still smiling.

“I didn’t think that I’d see any of my old friends here.”

“Why not?”

“Well . . .”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

James couldn't think of why. Honestly, when literally all you've been thinking about—dedicating your time and every ounce of energy—to a specific goal for the last five years, it's easy to forget many things.

"It's funny you should mention old friends," said Bailey. "Because, as a matter of fact, guess who else is here?"

James's brow furrowed as if to ask 'who?'. But before he could even say anything, Bailey flew into the air. Some crazy kid slightly bigger than James had wrapped his arms around her waist from behind and, lifting her high off of the ground, spun her around in several circles.

Bailey gripped his arms and squealed in delight. The boy placed her gently back on the ground, both of them laughing heartily. James stood there confused as he watched the odd pair. Then he felt his stomach tie itself in a large knot as the boy kissed Bailey full on the lips. She returned the gesture, smiling as they openly showed their affection for each other. James ground his teeth in frustration, embarrassment, and a slight twinge of jealousy.

"As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted," Bailey continued as she playfully elbowed the boy in the side. "James . . . you remember Tony, right?"

James's mouth gaped wide open. "Tony? You go here too?"

He couldn't believe it. His childhood best friend. . . . The one he had like and had always hung out with more than any of the other boys in their little sandlot gang. It was always James and Tony.

The guy had grown. He stood a good three inches taller than James. His dark brown hair was immaculately cut and cropped to near perfection. With his lean build, he looked like a lead singer to a boy band.

James didn't know what to think now. His long-time best friend stood there, smiling that dopey grin that he always had—despite his strong, square jaw. He wanted to be happy to see him. But for some reason, he only felt jealous that he and Bailey were obviously a couple and that she wasn't available.

"James Nielsen," said Tony as he quickly looked James up and down. He gave a boisterous laugh and immediately wrapped James in a bear hug, flinging him around just like he did Bailey.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

James grunted and couldn't help but smile. Despite his jealousy, Tony was first and foremost his friend.

"Oh, wow! It's so good to see you again," Tony as he stepped back.

"It's good to see you too."

"When I heard that we had a new student named James Nielsen I thought to myself . . . 'no, it couldn't that James, could it?' And look at us now. How crazy is this?"

"Very," James answered blandly.

Beyond 'very' crazy, he thought. This is insane.

But was that because his childhood best friend was there at the school too, or that he was in a relationship with the girl that James had completely fallen head-over-heels for in an instant?

He wanted to say more. He wanted to talk to his friends. But the realization and embarrassment that Bailey was in a relationship with Tony just made him feel befuddled. Watching Tony grab Bailey's hand certainly didn't make him feel any better.

"Well, I better . . . I guess . . . I promised Bethany a dance." For the first time, James was glad he promised that other girl he'd dance with her—he had a good excuse to get out.

"Okay," Tony said as he slapped James on the shoulder with his free hand. "We'll catch up later for sure. Man! It's so good to see you again, James."

James forced a smile. "You too . . . buddy."

With that, James made his way out of the crowd. He didn't even bother to find the girl, Bethany. He quickly left the gym and headed straight to his dorm room.

"You're such an idiot, James!" he chided himself. "Thinking of making a move on someone in a relationship."

He knew that he didn't really *do* anything wrong or embarrassing. But the constant replaying it over and over in his mind as he made his way back to his dorm only clouded his thoughts even more. He certainly would *not* be making an effort to reconnect with his old friends again any time soon.

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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

“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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

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.”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

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

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

“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.”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“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.”

“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.”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



BECOME A PATRON

~ 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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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 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.

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

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

“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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

"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

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

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.

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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“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.”

“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.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



BECOME A PATRON

~ CHAPTER 10 ~ REUNION

A sweet and savory aroma was the first thing that James noticed. He smiled as he slowly woke up, but still kept his eyes closed. He breathed in the familiar, warm air of his old home. Aragoria . . . the city of fairies.

“I know you’re awake,” he heard Theya’s voice.

He rolled over in the small but comfortable bed to see her sitting in the corner of the room just off to the side of the hearth. She held an old leather-bound book in her hand, her journal lay open in her lap as she periodically took notes. She was always studying something. Her famous “revitalizing stew” simmered in a small cauldron over the fire.

“How could you tell?” James asked as he sat up in the bed.

The room was not his old quarters, but one of the single rooms of the infirmary. Little to no decorations hung on these walls, though it seemed that everywhere else in the city there were bright, colorful tapestries that always seem to come alive hanging on every spare space that could be found.

James always found that ironic. *Why do they make these rooms where people are supposed to heal so dull?*

“Your breathing changed,” Theya answered.

“You could tell?” James asked incredulously.

Theya only shrugged.

James was certain she was making it up. He must have made a noise or something.

“Anyway,” she said as she set her books down and began dishing up some soup. “Your orders are to rest and eat.”

James had no objections to that. He had always loved Theya’s stews. There was just something about them that always seemed to boost his spirits.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

She glided over to his bed with that warrior-like grace. Not only was she a scholar but the captain of the Queen's Guard. James had always thought that she was beautiful—like an older sister. But something seemed . . . different . . . as he watched her approach.

“Thank you,” he said as he took the bowl from her.

Briefly, his fingers brushed over hers. Briefly, he thought that *her* breath caught for a split second. James noticed his own heart skip a beat.

What was that? he wondered. *That was very different.*

“You better eat all of it,” Theya ordered, her familiar self-important mannerism returning. “I had to cancel my appointment with the lore-master to make it for you.”

“You know you would have done it anyway,” James teased.

“And be grateful too!”

“Alright . . . I am grateful.”

He really was. He had only been gone for a few weeks and missed fairy-food terribly. Just as he expected, the soup warmed him to his toes. It was always perfect—he never had to blow on it to cool it down. New energy rushed through him and he felt like he could go through the training runs for a week.

“Oh, no,” Theya ordered as he began to stand. “You need to eat at least two bowls before you get out of bed.”

“What?” James protested.

“You just went through a grueling healing process to remove a ghoulish taint.”

“But, I feel fine.”

“You need to rest more. If you don't fully rest, the healing process can be just as damaging as the infection itself.”

James raised an eyebrow at her. “Really?”

“Okay, not *just* as bad,” Theya conceded. “But it really was a hard process to get the taint off of you. One of the healers who participated is in his own recovery room right now.”

“It's really that bad?”

Theya nodded. “James, rarely do we ever go into the Netherworld. There are dangers there that even we can't predict.”

“But it does have its advantages,” said a raucous voice from the door.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

James choked on his bite from the sudden burst of Alden. The fairy prince strode in confidently—like he always did. He smiled playfully at James, and his eyes always had that twinkle, as if he were always planning a prank of some sort.

“Don’t even go there,” said Theya.

“Why not?” asked Alden.

“Your ‘advantages’ are untested theories.”

“What do you mean?” asked James.

“Alden has this crazy theory that you can be in two places at once,” Theya answered with obvious contempt.

“It’s not a crazy theory,” Alden defended. “Look, we know there are many different worlds, or as the mortals call it, dimensions. James was just in the Netherworld himself.”

“Don’t remind me,” said James.

“Well, if there are multiple dimensions for our world, what if there were multiple dimensions of us?”

“Huh?” James had no idea what Alden was even saying.

“Think about it,” said Alden. “We have a body, we also have a soul . . . or a spirit. There’s a Mortal World, the Magic World, the Underworld, the Otherworld, the Netherworld, the Spirit World and the Shadow World. . . . What if, while our body stayed here our spirit or soul could be in another dimension?”

“Now I’m really confused,” said James as he shook his head.

“See what I mean?” said Theya.

“Well it’s no more confusing or weird than your whole dream magic research,” Alden countered.

“Dream magic?” asked James, his attention turning back to Theya.

Theya’s cheeks reddened. She shot a glare at her brother which only produced a smug expression from him. As if he were saying, *gotcha*.

“It’s nothing,” Theya attempted to brush it off.

“Well, let’s be honest now,” said Alden, the tone in his voice noticeably changing from bantering to sounding . . . proud . . . of Theya. “Even though I don’t fully understand it, it is pretty nifty.”

“Nifty?” Theya snorted.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

Alden shrugged.

“Dream magic,” Theya turned to James, “is an older magic that was lost to us centuries ago. *It’s a legitimate thing.*” She shot those last words at Alden who only shrugged again.

“So is it like . . . controlling dreams?” asked James.

“Kind of,” explained Theya. “There are several branches of dream magic. It ranges from controlling your dreams, giving dreams to others, even going into the Dream World.”

“A Dream World now?” he asked incredulously. “How many worlds are there?”

“Who knows for sure,” Theya answered. “For all we know there is an infinite number of different worlds.”

“But see what I mean?” proclaimed Alden. “It is fascinating . . . but *just as* weird as my theory. Dream World.” He said the last bit with a chuckle.

James shook his head. He couldn’t make heads or tails of what either of them were saying—but it was fun to watch the two siblings banter.

“I think I’m ready to get up now,” he said, defiantly throwing the soft but heavy blankets off.

“I said no. . . .” Theya protested.

But James only ignored her and quickly stood. His vision blurred just slightly as a rushing sound roared momentarily through his head. He staggered just a bit but quickly regained his footing.

“See what I mean,” Theya chided.

“Oh, come off it,” said Alden as they both reached out to help James steady himself.

“I’m fine,” James assured them. “It’s just a head rush.”

Alden smiled as if he knew it all along.

But he did move to help me just in case, James smiled to himself.

A few quick jumps to get the blood flowing and James felt completely renewed. As soon as he was sure that he was feeling better, the door opened and a messenger appeared.

“Lord James,” he stated. “Lord Andel and Queen Tina request your presence.”

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

He turned and left just as quickly as he appeared. He didn't even wait for a response.

"Wonder what this is about," said Alden.

"You don't know?" James asked.

Alden shook his head.

James felt a tightening of his stomach. He was always worried that he'd get in trouble somehow. His whole time at Aragoria he kept wondering if ever he was doing something wrong. It was a simple paranoia. He always did his best to follow the rules, but for some reason whenever he saw Lord Andel, Captain Rosden, Grandpa Joe, Queen Tina, or any combination of those four together, he instantly worried that he had done something wrong and was about to get a severe chastisement.

"I'm sure it's nothing," Theya tried to comfort him, placing a soft but strong hand on his shoulder.

James, again, felt his heart skip a beat at the feel of her touch . . . despite the twisting of his gut.

Why am I feeling that? he wondered.

"Yeah," Alden added, playfully slugging James in the shoulder. "They probably just want to know what happened."

"And then punish me somehow for some form of disobedience," said James.

"No." Alden attempted to brush off the notion.

They quickly made their way through the city to the Great Hall where Lord Andel and Queen Tina would be. Alden did his best to distract James by babbling on about old fairy-myths and legends. He dwelt a long time on the fabled Hand of Nuada. A magical, pure-silver hand of their ancient ancestor. The legend said that because he lost his hand in battle he was no longer perfect and lost the kingship. But when the new king abused his power, a magician made a new hand out of pure silver to replace the lost limb thus renewing his perfection and kingship.

Alden went on and on about where he believed the lost tomb of Nuada may be and where the powerful hand would be found.

"You know it's just a myth?" said Theya. "It doesn't exist."

"Sister . . . our whole history is a myth," Alden argued. "Just because no one has found it doesn't mean that it isn't real."

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

Theya rolled her eyes.

James wanted to add to the conversation but he couldn't think straight. He kept worrying about what was to come. Sweat beaded on his forehead. His stomach churned and he wished that he had either eaten another bowl of stew or not eaten at all.

All three of them became silent as they entered the vast hallway. Everything looked different. Only the torches in their sconces on the pillars provided the light. The hearth sat cold and dark as if it hadn't been lit for days, neither were the candles on the silver chandeliers lit. James noticed that the sparkling white granite walls were decorated with new tapestries. Not the usual, lively and brightly colored tapestries, but a . . . less lively kind. The colors were dull and dark, and even seemed to absorb the light, making the hall seem far darker than it usually was.

"Strange," James muttered under his breath.

Even stranger was the fact that Tina was wearing an all-black dress. It was the usual design, fitting tightly to her body, shoulders, and arms, but flowing freely from the waist down and also long and loose at the forearm. A gold-studded belt fitted around her waist and she looked to be sitting a bit more stiffly than usual.

James had never really gotten along with her while he lived there. But something was definitely more 'off' about her than before.

I bit pretentious, he thought to himself as he observed her new dress. *We've only been gone for a few weeks and already things have changed so much.*

He bowed formally to Queen Tina and saluted Lord Andel and Captain Rosden who both wore their armor and stood off to the side of the throne.

"My lords," James said, trying to show as much confidence as he could. "My . . . queen."

Why did he stutter there?

"It's good to see you, James," Andel said with a smile.

James smiled back, but still felt uneasy about the summons.

"Oh, relax," Rosden added as he embraced James. "You're not in trouble."

"I'm not?" James asked in surprise.

A loud laughter came from the side of the hall behind a column. "I told you he would think he was in trouble."

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

Dagget emerged from behind the pillar and James felt an immediate rush of relief. The room even seemed to brighten a bit . . . or maybe just his mood. Everyone laughed as his tension lifted.

“No. The real reason we wanted you here was to not only hear what happened but just to see you again,” Andel confirmed. “We’ve missed you and your grandfather.”

James smiled and even swallowed a small budding lump. “I’ve missed you all as well.”

A loud clearing of the throat sounded behind Queen Tina. James looked up to see a strong-looking boy not much older than him and wearing the uniform of the Guardian. James felt his face flush and his fists momentarily tightened.

That should be my uniform, he thought resentfully.

Taking a deep breath, he let the anger go as best he could.

“James,” Tina said with her usual cold, monotone voice . . . the one she used when trying to be formal or seem more important—James always thought it pretentious. “This is Blake—my new Guardian.”

James smiled tightly. “Pleased to meet you,” he said with slightly clenched teeth.

“And you as well,” Blake said. “I’ve heard many great things about you and your family. I’ve got some large shoes to fill.”

The words were cordial, but James didn’t like his stare. There was something behind it. He felt uncomfortable looking at the boy.

“So?” Dagget prodded. “Tell us what happened.”

James recounted everything from seeing the bonfire that changed colors to the forest fire that erupted and the strange scene that he found.

“When I was surrounded by the ghouls in the Netherworld,” he continued—he noticed several shudders from those listening when he mentioned the ghouls and the Netherworld. “There were also some goblins . . . and three guys there. One was obviously in charge. He’s the one who spoke to me.”

“Can you describe them?” Rosden asked. He, out of all of them, listened most intently.

“No,” James admitted. “They stood too far back in the shadows. I could barely see them.”

Rosden showed only the slightest sign of disappointment.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“But just when they allowed the ghouls to take me I was rescued.”

“Who rescued you?” asked Dagget. “I saw you come out of that strange doorway, but I couldn’t see who it was who brought you.”

“I’m not sure about that either,” said James. “It was a man who wielded a bright sword named Ryan. . . . And he rode on a lion with wings.”

Everyone’s eyes shot up at him in rapt attention.

“*Ryan* rescued you?” Andel asked, his expression becoming very solemn.

“Yes. . . .”

James looked at the others. All of them suddenly became very serious. Tina and Blake even exchanged a tense look.

“Who’s Ryan?” he asked.

Suddenly, Rosden started laughing. Then Andel joined. Then Dagget, Theya, and Alden, all began laughing. Tina, Blake, and James also joined but theirs’ was shaky at best.

“Ryan,” Rosden started once the laughter subsided. “Is a very old friend.”

“I guessed that much since he—you know—rescued me,” said James.

“We have to find him and bring him back,” Andel said joyfully. “Why would he return and not let us know?”

“I’m not sure,” answered Rosden.

“My lords,” Tina interjected. “Perhaps reunions could be postponed for the time being. Just until we get the matter of James here resolved.”

Everyone gave Tina a quizzical look. What needed to be resolved?

“I suppose so. . . .” Andel conceded.

“I mean,” Tina continued. “It’s been a long night, and it’s nearly morning. The school will be wondering where he is if he doesn’t return soon.”

“Wait. You know about me being in the school?” James asked.

Tina blanched for a second. “Y-y-your grandfather felt it necessary to report to me about your arrangements now that you’re both . . . retired.”

James pursed his lips. He still felt angry about the abrupt ending of their tenure. Now, without telling him he was doing so, Grandpa Joe gave them a report on where he was.

“I don’t remember receiving that,” Andel said, raising an eyebrow at Tina.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“Sir,” Blake stepped in. “This report only came today, so Queen Tina hadn’t had the opportunity yet to update you all on the Nielsen’s.”

Andel and the others seemed to accept this, but something about Tina and Blake did not sit well with James. His gut feeling screamed to him that something was wrong.

“I suppose then we should return you to your school,” said Andel as he nodded in Dagget’s direction.

Dagget saluted and quickly motioned for James to follow him out.

“It’s good to see you again,” Andel said as he shook James’s hand.

“And you as well,” said James.

Andel leaned in close and whispered softly. “Tina may not approve . . . but do feel free to come back and visit whenever you can.”

He winked as James began to follow Dagget out of the great hall. James smiled and nodded in return.

As they exited the city James felt a deep sadness overcome him . . . as if he were leaving his home. Dagget led him through the rear tunnels and out of the backdoor which was closest to the town, Hillside. From the entrance high up on the hills, James looked out over the valley and could see the town just a few miles away.

“Aren’t you going to come with me,” he asked as Dagget halted at the entrance.

“I’m afraid not,” Dagget said. “I need to get back to my patrol.”

“Good thing you’re so vigilant. I would have been a goner.”

Dagget laughed that big-brotherly laugh as he placed a firm hand on James’s shoulder. James took a deep breath as he looked, again, over the valley. A part of him dreaded entering the forest again.

“Don’t worry,” Dagget began as if reading his mind. “We found that amulet on you when you arrived. That was the link that allowed the ghouls to take you. It’s been properly disposed of. Nothing from the Netherworld can harm anyone without a powerful link like it.”

“Thanks, Dagget.” The words were comforting and James felt bolstered just a bit. He stepped forward to go but turned back around. “But . . . I just have one question.”

Dagget leaned against the cave entrance, the way he always did when he wanted to show that he was listening.

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

“What happened out there in the forest? I was sure there was a skirmish going on. But Ryan said there wasn’t any.”

“He’s right,” Dagget answered. “If there were one, there definitely would have been evidence of it when you showed up.”

“So, what does it all mean?”

“I don’t know,” said Dagget. “But believe me, Lord Anandel and Rosden will figure out what happened. Now you best be on your way. The morning’s coming.”

James, now more than ever, didn’t want to return. How could he focus on school with all of this going on? Still, he knew it was where he needed to be. He reluctantly nodded and shook Dagget’s hand before quickly making off through the woods back to school. As he ran, he tried desperately to figure out what everything that happened tonight meant—the fire, the amulet, the ghouls attacking him, and the strange dialogue between him and that shadowy character.

Finally, as he cleared the forest and dashed across the clearing and back over the school wall he figured it out. “It was a trap . . . for me.”



THE TALE OF ARAGORIA

Hope you have enjoyed the first portion of *The Tale of Aragoria*. Thank you for supporting me on Patreon. I look forward to sharing James's adventure with you every 1st and 3rd Saturday; with specials for you, my patrons, every 5th Saturday.

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

~ [Michael](#) ~

