

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA: BOOK 1

~ 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 hung in torn 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 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,

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and he didn't want the sword to end up in the wrong hands. It had already been stolen once, he was not 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.

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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 hadn'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.

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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.

“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.

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

Michael

