

# Aurius

CATHERINE FITZSIMMONS



## Sample

BETWEEN THE PANELS, photo shoots and hours spent perusing the dealers' hall, it was 3:30 before Jacob could take a break. He inhaled deeply as he stepped out of the hall into the sunlight. The area just outside the convention center still bustled with people, but the air didn't feel so cramped. Pausing a moment to stretch sore muscles, he walked around to the side of the huge convention center. Most of the building was surrounded by city streets and traffic, but the eastern side of the hall faced a span of forest with paths winding through it. Following one path, he walked into the forest, trees around him stripped by an abnormally hot summer. He passed by a few groups of people from the convention having lunch in the sparse woods. A pair of joggers rushed past him in the opposite direction, staring peculiarly at him as they went.

Veering off the trail, he followed an almost invisible path to the edge of a hill leading about twenty feet down to a small ravine. Jacob smiled as he slid carefully down the leaf-strewn decline. A group of people had brought him here earlier that day to take pictures of him for a costuming website they ran. It was a perfect location. With the hill rising in a semicircle around the small ravine and a large, flat boulder positioned next to an old, leaning oak tree nestled in the center of the semicircle, it looked just like the opening scene of *Legend of Aurius*. He had been shocked when he first saw it. The likeness wasn't perfect, but the similarity was uncanny.

Now, it provided him a nice, quiet place to rest for a few minutes. As he reached the floor of the ravine, voices off to the side drew his attention. Glancing across the ravine that stretched away toward the highway before rising up to meet it, he found a group of people some paces away, dressed in all black Gothic outfits, riddled with chains, buckles and belts. Two of them glanced over at him briefly, but soon, they all ignored him. They were live-action role-players, people who dressed up and acted like their characters in

scenarios a designated game master would dictate, like a director of an unscripted, improvised movie. Turning away from them, Jacob settled in on the boulder, leaning back against the tree, and gazed up at the sky through the jagged branches cutting through the air. It was nice, he thought, being able to see nothing but nature in the middle of a city sometimes.

Closing his eyes, he let his body relax. He thought about the morning and early afternoon that had passed and a smile spread on his face. He had again met Melanie, the girl dressed up as Serina, and had posed for some more photographs for her.

He had already found various things he wanted to buy from the dealers' hall. He didn't have much money to spare, but he had seen some action figures he had been seeking for a while, which were on sale, and a new cloth wall scroll of *Legend of Aurius*. He was also hoping to stock up on some of his favorite Japanese snack treats and he wanted to get a new printed T-shirt. If he bought all of it, however, it wouldn't leave him much money for food for the rest of the weekend. The question was deciding which items he wanted most.

Suddenly, a voice called out from a distance, "Garrett!"

Jacob frowned, keeping his eyes closed. He had relished the attention he received from all the people admiring his costume, but he was tired and what he really wanted was a few minutes to rest quietly.

The voice persisted. "Garrett, come on! The priestess is waiting!"

Jacob opened his eyes curiously. It was, word for word, the opening line of *Legend of Aurius*. He glanced forward at the one speaking to him. His eyes widened and his heart skipped a beat. Standing before him with an impatient look on his face was a perfect rendition of a guard of Merakis, the first town in *Aurius*. In fact, the hairstyle and features exactly matched the soldier that roused Garrett at the beginning of the game. It was the most accurate character depiction he had ever seen, especially for such an insignificant character. Jacob blinked in confusion.

"Come on! We must get back to Merakis!" With that, the man who looked so much like a soldier of the town turned and began walking back the way he had come.

Jacob glanced at the forest around him, wondering briefly if he was hallucinating. He knew he couldn't be dreaming, as everything was far too vivid for that. He couldn't see any other people anywhere around. *Did I fall asleep?* he wondered. And why was everything suddenly so quiet? He could no longer hear the shuffling sounds and distant murmurs of the live-action role-players and even the traffic on the streets only a few hundred feet away seemed to have died down. The silence was oppressing and he was suddenly overcome with a desperate need to return to the convention.

Several paces ahead now, the guard stopped and turned to look at him. "Hurry up!" The insistence in the guard's voice caused Jacob to scramble to his feet and run after the man, though his confusion only mounted.

He looked around in all directions as he walked hesitantly behind the guard. There were no signs of any other people anywhere in sight. The only noises to permeate the silence were their own footsteps across the leaf-strewn ground. Nothing looked any different than it had a moment earlier, but why did everything suddenly seem so foreign, so not right? Who was this man and why was he saying everything the guard from the opening of *Aurius* did? Was he dreaming, somehow? Was this a cruel joke being played on him?

The thought made him stop in his tracks.

A moment later, the guard stopped, glancing back at him. "Come on! You'll be late for the ceremony!" Jacob uneasily continued following the man. No, it couldn't be a trick. The people at school who enjoyed picking on him weren't smart enough to pull off something like this, and if they wanted to laugh at him wearing a costume of a video game character, they could have done that back at the boulder. Besides, the guard was clearly at least thirty years old.

For several minutes, Jacob walked behind the guard through the forest, the edges of the ravine eventually falling and flattening out beside him. *Just like in the game*, he thought. There was no sign of the highway anywhere around.

As they passed a bend in the forest, Jacob stopped, gasping. The town of Merakis lay before him. Even though the game had showed this scene from above, he clearly recognized the buildings ahead. Houses, shops, a pub, an inn, and rising above the thatched-roof buildings in the distance, the church where the game began. He could scarcely believe his own eyes.

*Are they making a movie of Legend of Aurius and did they mistake me for the star?* He knew the thought was absurd as soon as it crossed his mind. He didn't see any cameras or crew around, and when he had come in off the highway, he would have seen something. He couldn't dare to hope that what he desperately believed had happened was true.

"Come on!" the guard snapped, interrupting his thoughts, and grabbing his arm, he pulled Jacob at a quicker pace down the cobbled street.

Jacob's eyes roved around the town as the guard led him through it, still baffled at his surroundings. He could see no sign of modern life, no technology, no cars, no high rise buildings in the distance. And the air was so clean. He had never realized the constant smell of smog lingering faintly in the air until it was gone. The air he breathed in was so much richer and fresher, and everything was so clear, he thought that if he was high enough, he could see to the end of the world.

People dressed in clothes that belonged to the scenery peered out of the simple houses he passed, watching the guard lead him through town. His pendant thumped against his chest with his rapid pace.

Finally, they came around the corner of a two-story inn and upon the church. Jacob's eyes widened as he gazed up at the building. The

architecture was incredible, patterned with statues and details around a huge stained glass window, like the cathedrals he saw in pictures of Europe.

The guard's pace quickened as he climbed the wide stone stairs up to the huge oak and iron doors leading into the church. Pulling one open, he gestured fervently for Jacob to go inside. Jacob complied, too confused to think what else to do.

Once inside, he froze. He had played this part of the game more than a dozen times since it had come out a few years ago. The church where he now stood was exactly as it appeared in the game, with its carved pillars supporting the high arched ceiling, soft light from candles and sunlight streaming through the stained glass windows, and the priestess at the altar at the back of the church, dressed in fancy white and gold robes.

This church, however, was much bigger.

The limited video processing power of the game could not portray such immense size as he saw before him. Where in the game, only about three people fit to a pew for a total of fewer than twenty rendered townspeople at this ceremony, here there were twice as many rows with four times as many people filling them. Only a handful of the more than one hundred people lining the church turned to look at him as he stumbled in. Jacob couldn't concentrate on the words the archbishop spoke beside the grand priestess as he gazed around at the church.

Suddenly, the archbishop's droning words stopped, and in a powerful voice, he called across the church, "Our hero approaches."

As one, the members of the congregation turned to look at Jacob.

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