

Aurius

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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.

His breath caught in his throat as he gazed out at the eyes staring back at him. The guard behind him gave him a quick shove and Jacob walked slowly down the red carpet leading to the altar. His hands shook and he fiddled uneasily with his gloves as he passed by row after row of people, seemingly getting no closer to the waiting archbishop and priestess. His eyes rose to an enormous, round stained glass window over the dais, depicting an ancient hero that looked surprisingly like the way Jacob had made himself look now, standing at the top of a hill and holding up a sword triumphantly. Jacob gazed at it in wonder. So many times he had looked upon that window in the game, but the colors and light pouring through it had never been so rich, so filling, so warm, so very present.

He felt more unnerved and worried with each step he took. He knew exactly what he was supposed to do here, but how could he do it, when he shouldn't be here at all? He desperately wanted to believe he somehow had truly been transported into the game, but it was too far-fetched to be true.

Finally, he passed the rows of pews and arrived at the back of the church. Swallowing hard, he climbed the half flight of stairs up to the priestess, who gazed at him with piercing, yet kind eyes. Arms pressed flat against the sides of his body, Jacob bowed, consciously and uncomfortably aware of the dozens of eyes boring in to his back. The priestess nodded at him as he

straightened, then her voice rang out through the church.

“Kneel, Garrett.” Jacob knelt, bowing his head before the priestess. “You have come to us out of legend with the Hero’s pendant, your spirit brightening the town as you passed by.” *Have they mistaken me for someone else?* he wondered suddenly. *Is there a real Garrett that should be here instead of me?* The remarkable and selfless deeds the real Garrett had done in the town before the game began were hinted at after the ceremony, but never gone into detail.

“You have passed the hero’s test and been chosen by the Divine Light,” the priestess continued. “You are the one the legends speak of, the outsider come to save the world.” The church behind him was deathly silent. Jacob’s knees trembled harder with each passing moment from the discomfort of being the center of attention for so many people. He hoped he wouldn’t fall right there.

Then, the priestess laid her hand on his shoulder, and it seemed to radiate a feeling of cool calmness into him.

“Garrett. Do you accept your destiny and the blessing of the light? Do you pledge your life and vow to stop the evil threatening our world? Do you swear to bring about the new era and return peace and light to our great land?”

“I do,” Jacob answered, but he felt silly saying it and the words came out uncertain.

“Do you?” she asked him in a quieter tone, less formal, yet somehow more meaningful. Jacob’s heart raced. *What am I doing here?* The impact of the questions suddenly hit him and his mouth felt dry. He didn’t even know why he was reenacting the opening of *Legend of Aurius*. Was this actually real? What was he about to agree to? And yet, standing here in a church crowded with people hoping for salvation through him, what choice did he have?

“Yes,” he stated, forcing confidence into his voice.

“Then go forth with our blessing, hero.” Formality solidified the priestess’s voice again. “Your fate is ours, and with your success shall we thrive.” Jacob raised his head as the church erupted into cheers and saw a pall of sadness fall over the priestess’s eyes.

“Save Aurius,” she uttered to him.

He nodded, rising, and immediately the dais swarmed with people racing from the pews to meet him. Jacob’s eyes darted between the hands reaching up to him, everyone clamoring at once to greet him personally.

They think I’m a hero, he thought as he began shaking hands and offering generic blessings. *They think I’m going to save them.* Realizing it meant little to him, as he still didn’t know what to make of what had happened. He glanced over his shoulder at the priestess as the crowd writhed before him, each person trying to touch him. The priestess had stepped back a few paces, quietly waiting out of the light of the stained glass window.

It took over an hour for Jacob to shake hands with everyone who had come. The sunlight streaming in the windows had grown long and golden and Jacob's legs ached from standing so long. *Are Emily and the others worrying about me?* he wondered. *I've got to get home.* And yet, even as he thought it, he found himself relishing the escape.

"Bless you, Garrett," spoke a small, portly housewife as she shook his hand, her young daughter waiting silently beside her. They were the last people left in the church. "You've given hope to our dear town. May your journey be safe." Jacob could only nod back at her, his voice hoarse from all the talking he had done already.

As the woman began walking toward the entrance of the church, the girl flashed him a broad smile, then turned and skipped after her mother. Jacob blinked, stunned by the events that had transpired that afternoon.

Whispers of footsteps drew near, and he turned to find the priestess approaching.

"Are you ready for your journey?"

Abandoning character, Jacob stated, "I'm still pretty confused..."

The priestess reached up and patted his shoulder. "I know. It will all become clear soon. Is your sword prepared for battle?"

Jacob blinked, startled by the thought of marching into battle. Taking in her serious expression, he unsheathed the prop blade. "It's... not even sharp."

The priestess took the sword gently. "That won't do at all." She turned to the archbishop. "Have Marod sharpen it." The archbishop nodded as he took the blade and shuffled softly off toward the back door of the church. Jacob watched his exit until the priestess stated, "He will put his life's blood into shaping your sword. Don't worry, he should have it back to you tonight."

Jacob shook his head, uncertainty clouding his mind. "I..." He couldn't think of what he wanted to say. The priestess laid her hand on his shoulder again.

"Rest and enjoy yourself, Garrett. Take this last chance for peace before you set out. Have dinner in the Great Hall." Jacob glanced at her, wanting to say something else, to ask questions he knew were stupid.

"Go," she stated with a sad smile. He could only manage a nod before walking down the aisle and out of the church.

The warm glow of oil lamps hanging beside the doors of buildings cast a friendly light as the town began falling into the purple shadows of dusk. Laughing children chased each other through the streets and townspeople running errands greeted each other as they passed. Jacob was no sooner out the front doors of the church before people waved and greeted him as well. His eyes passed across the clean, quaint cobbled streets, neighborly, warm and inviting. It was a pleasant place to be, but Jacob felt very much out of place. He felt strangely voyeuristic, as if he was intruding on something to which he had no right being a part. Maybe he was supposed to be Garrett

here, wherever “here” was. He thought that perhaps he should embrace this role, but a part of him still was afraid to accept it as truth, in case it somehow was a joke, or a dream.

Deciding to play along for the time being, he stepped down from the church and began walking through the streets toward the Great Hall. At least, he thought, it was easy to keep up appearances when he had played the game enough times not to need any guidance through the town. The empty scabbard thumped awkwardly against his leg as he walked and he fiddled with the sword belt as he tried to steady it. When he caught the gaze of a shop owner watching him trying to adjust the belt, he dropped his hands and shot the man an attempt at a casual smile.

Light streamed out from the high windows of the Great Hall as Jacob approached. The entrance was crowded with people filing in for a feast which Jacob could smell from half a block away. The strong herbs used to flavor the meat perfumed the air, leaving the building with a heady scent. He followed groups of people into the hall, which was filled with loud music and pounding dancers and a huge table covered in all manner of food. It was all real food, hand-cooked from scratch with fresh ingredients, dishes unlike anything he had eaten since his last family dinner on Easter. A smile spread uncontrollably onto his face at the sight of the food and festivities. However, with it came a pang of uneasiness. *They wouldn't be celebrating if they knew what happened next like I do.* The thought made him feel so uncomfortable that he nearly turned around and left at that moment, but then, the rest of the crowd filling the large hall noticed him.

With a chorus of cheers ringing throughout the hall, he was ushered deep into the throng, and before he knew what had happened, a wooden mug of ale had been pushed into one hand and a large turkey drumstick, dripping with juices, into the other. He glanced into the mug, white foam flowing over the edges. Though he knew most of his classmates had already had at least some sort of alcoholic drink in their lives, and many boasted of breaking into their parents' liquor cabinet weekly or even nightly, he had never indulged himself before and wasn't certain he wanted to start amongst all these strangers. His decision was made for him as someone grabbed his wrist and thrust the drink up and against his mouth. Half choking as he tried to swallow the pungently bitter drink, he managed to pull his hand away and wiped foam off his upper lip with his sleeve. Cheers and laughter swelled around him at the sight. Suddenly aware of the rumbling in his stomach and eager to get his mind off the already drunken townspeople around him, he bit into the drumstick. He glanced up curiously as the crowd urged him on and found even the smallest of women were tearing much larger mouthfuls of meat off the bones they held than he did. With a nervous smile, he bit a larger chunk off the drumstick, trying to emulate the people around him.

Before the sky outside had even drained of the remnants of daylight, Jacob found himself laughing uproariously and dancing among the villagers,

his head spinning and stomach churning but never feeling so welcome, so at home, and he hoped that night would never end.

He had no idea what time it was when he left the hall, but a sky rich with stars hung huge and dark above and many oil lamps in front of houses had been extinguished. Most of the journey to the inn was a haze as he stumbled along and leaned on the innkeeper. His stomach roiled and frothed inside him, its contents constantly threatening to escape his body, but when he fell back on the bed in his room at the inn, it was so soft and his body so tired that he fell asleep almost instantly. All his worries disappeared and he forgot entirely about the events yet to pass that night.

Until a crash in the common room of the inn downstairs woke him.



The moon had risen high in the sky when a loud noise clattered downstairs, startling Jacob awake. He threw himself up into a sitting position, but immediately regretted it. His head spun and pounded with the movement, and with a groan, he leaned back onto his elbow. Panting heavily while his stomach settled, he tried to assess the situation. In the darkness permeating the room, he could see that his sword had been returned. It hung across the room in its scabbard, his sword belt draped over the door knob. A soft orange glow illuminated the thick curtains hanging over the window and distant sounds of scuffling passed across his ears. Memories of the game came back to him.

The town was under attack.

Moving quickly but carefully to his feet, he strode over to the window, pulled the curtains aside and gazed out. The creatures outside were barely visible, no more than shadows against the light of the fires consuming buildings. People ran from the creatures in the streets, screaming, but they were quickly pursued by their attackers. As Jacob watched, a mother carrying her child was overtaken by one of the monsters, and with a quick swipe of a clawed limb, the woman collapsed beside another body already lying in the street, the child thrown from her arms. The child cried out and scrambled backwards on hands and feet, but the creature paced forward relentlessly.

Unwilling to watch any more, Jacob let the curtain fall back into place and quickly retrieved his sword belt. He struggled to strap it around his waist in the darkness. He could barely see the outlines of his own feet against the floor in the dark room and couldn't manage to buckle the belt. His heart raced and he grew frantic. He didn't even know where the lamps in the room were, let alone how to light them, but he couldn't see. A strangled scream emanated from below, and then heavy steps began moving toward the stairs leading up to his room. Fear chilled him and his hands trembled as he wrestled with the belt. Alien, heavy footfalls rang up the stairs, each second

bringing something closer to him. He had a terrifying suspicion what it was that approached and it suddenly became horrifyingly clear to him that he was not a warrior.

The footsteps came to the top of the stairs. The loose end of the belt slipped out of his hand and the sword in scabbard thumped against the floor. The steps hesitated. Jacob snatched up the loose end of the belt and wrapped it around his waist again. The creature moved down the hall, ignoring the other doors on the second floor and approaching his room directly.

Just as the footsteps stopped outside his door, the buckle caught the hole. Jacob paused for a heartbeat in relief, just long enough for the door to be thrown open. He yelled, trying to move back from the door and draw his sword at the same time, but neither came easily. The sword blade seemed to be longer than he expected and his arm swung upward as he tried to pull it out. The scabbard snagged his heel as he did and he went tumbling backwards, sword out, just as the shadowy creature that stank of rotting meat pounced.

He screamed instinctively, though the attack never came. He only felt a sharp jab like a fist digging into his stomach as a heavy weight fell on the sword. Scrambling out to the side, he tilted the sword and let the weight fall to the floor beside him. Before he realized what had happened, he found himself standing next to the dead monster, pressed against the wall with his sword hanging awkwardly from his hand. The creature had fallen on his outstretched sword as it leaped onto him and impaled itself. He gazed at the sword, stained with darkness and now ridged in the middle, the edges sharp and the end tapering to a needle-sharp point.

Not willing to let his eyes adjust to the darkness and see the creature he had inadvertently just killed, Jacob shuffled along the wall and out the door quickly. His heart pounded against his ribcage, fear causing his whole body to tremble as he stumbled down the stairs to the common room. The pungent odor of fresh blood assaulted his senses and he felt himself growing sick again. Abandoning the innkeeper, he threw open the door and escaped the inn.

Screams, inhuman howls and the roar of fires all around rang through the air. Jacob's eyes darted all around the street outside the inn. A monster ran across a rooftop across the street from him and another chased a man down the block. Too afraid for his own life to worry about others, Jacob turned away from them both and raced toward the edge of the town. Before long, his stomach churned worse than ever and a stitch gnawed at his side, slowing his pace. He groaned, cursing himself for not staying in shape.

He tried to force himself to keep jogging at least, but his body protested with each step and by the time the edge of the town was in sight, he could only stagger along, head spinning.

Then, another monster appeared before him, bared fangs glinting in the moonlight. Gasping, he grasped his sword in both hands and raised it, fear

filling him. He held the sword before him like a baseball bat, completely ignorant of how to use it. He could only watch as the creature stalked forward hungrily, breathing in short gasps as if he was trying to inhale a lifetime of air in one terrifying moment.

All of a sudden, something whizzed past him and the monster snarled in pain, collapsing lifelessly to the street with something long and thin protruding from its head. Glancing over his shoulder, he found the archbishop from the church, bow in hand and quiver of arrows slung over his back, gesturing at him.

“Go!” he called out as he turned and ran deeper into the town after another shadowy monster that chased a family trying to flee the destruction. Jacob leaned forward and opened his mouth as if to call back, but his fear was like an invisible wall, preventing him from moving forward. Panting, he turned and began stumbling out to the forest surrounding the town, sheathing his sword as he went.

He didn’t know how much time passed as he moved onward, his whole body sore, tired and uncomfortable. All he knew was that he had to escape, and he hoped he could get far enough away that the monsters attacking the town couldn’t find him. The town grew distant behind him and the light of the fires faded into pale moonlight streaming through the barren, twisted trees surrounding him. His pace slowed, his feet barely able to carry him any further, until finally, he couldn’t move forward any longer.

Coughing, his stomach lurched and he emptied its contents onto the forest floor. He leaned against a tree, knees trembling, and soon collapsed to the ground beside the mess he had made. Raising his head faintly, he glanced through the trees back at the town, the fires engulfing it lighting up the night. He tried to rise and escape farther from the town, but he could only crawl forward a few paces before collapsing again, panting heavily. He was too sick and weary to be afraid, but he had never felt so alive, so mortal, as he did then.

At that moment, lying on the ground of a foreign forest, unable to move, a trail of death and fire behind him, he realized it had truly happened.

I’m really in the game.

It was the last thing he thought before everything faded to darkness.

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