

VALENTINE'S  EDITION

MANA



ASHER
TENSEI





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Second Edition

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Dedicated to my mother, for giving me the courage to publish, and to my family for keeping my faith high against the odds. Lastly, to the readers: this story would just be a thought without you.

I thank you all sincerely.

1. Old Friends, New Strengths

A gentle wind wound its way through the brisk morning. Sunlight glistened, turning the leaves into brilliant emeralds and casting an immense shadow that overtook most of the ground. Playing in the middle of the street were children. Their laughter filled the air, echoing as if traveling alongside the breeze. It was a pure scene. No cars were present and the busted open hydrants created a rainbow that seemed to stretch over the entirety of the concrete. With a faint crack of thunder, a light drizzle began to pour down from the heavens. As darkened clouds began to swirl and mask the sun, the rain began to fall at an increasing, almost violent pace.

Suddenly, the peaceful children scattered in all directions, holding their faces in terror as the rain turned a horrifying crimson. A hissing sound echoed from the ground as the red rain collected in puddles, clouds delivering a fiery maelstrom. Almost instantly, a dark haze of smog filled the air, arising from the mix of burning puddles and singed bodies. Bells rang, a monotonous clanging, as the fire droplets seared the ground. The storm grew fiercer and the sound louder as the agonized children gradually burned into nothingness, leaving behind only the throbbing melody of ringing.

“Eurich!” a strange voice called. “Eurich Aurion...”

The voice was swallowed out by the increasing, almost unbearable, sound of the bells in a matter of seconds.

Gasp!

Eurich’s eyes shot open and he looked around his room. Sitting up perfectly erect, he glared at his old-fashioned alarm clock.

“Ugh...dammit, you ruined my dream.” He plopped on his back and smothered his head with his pillow, trying to drown out the alarm instead of just turning it off.

He sighed.

“Seriously?” With the alarm still obnoxiously ringing, he found it hard to continue sleeping. He slammed his arm into it, knocking the clock down to the ground and forcibly silencing it.

The bits of sunlight that shone through his blinds forced his eyes open. Groggy and awake, he put his hands over his face and exhaled as he bent over his bed to pick up his abused alarm clock. He was excited to start his first official day as a senior, but the look on his face said otherwise.

“Eurich, you up yet? Don’t want to be late on your first day of school,” his foster mother yelled from downstairs.

“I’m up!” he countered. He looked around his room, which was abnormally brightened by the sun. Still partially blinded, he walked to his dresser and picked up a photo encased in a sterling silver frame. Memories of his guardians flowed throughout his room. *Foster* was just a word. They *were* his parents.

“I forgot, today is our twelve year anniversary.” He smiled and set the photo down.

“Eurich!” His mother yelled again. “I don’t hear you moving up there!”

“I’m exiting my room as we speak,” he said sarcastically, then actually left. Somewhat prepared for the day ahead of him, he walked sluggishly down the hallway, still riddled with the normal wake up symptoms - bed head, crusty eyes, and slightly impaired speech.

Eurich walked down the hall and into the bathroom. After getting in and tuning the dial, steam hazed from the showerhead, frizzing his auburn hair. He had no interest in washing. He

only wanted enough to be woken up since he had taken a shower the previous night. The misty heat of the water reddened his skin with a slight stinging sensation, which was exactly what he wanted.

The dial squeaked as he turned the water off.

“Ah!” Cool air wafted against him as he exited the shower. Eurich wavered slightly after grabbing a towel off the rack to put around his waist as he walked back to his room. The vision impairing steam did not make a friendly combination with the overbearing radiance of his room. The brightness was almost enough to knock him out.

“Man, that’s bright.” Ready to accept the day now, he pulled back his curtains and opened his blinds fully.

He scrunched his eyes shut as hard as he could.

“Now that that’s over…” He fiddled with a bin that was on the ground, full of clean clothes.

“That works fine.” He pulled out an ironed blue shirt along with pressed jeans and slid right into them. After fixing his hair, he flung his backpack over his shoulder and rushed downstairs.

In the kitchen was an ordinary sight, accompanied by the aroma of eggs and bacon. Serra was slaving over the oven and Albert was in his old-fashioned rocking chair reading a newspaper in the den.

“Eurich!” Albert seemed very excited to greet him. “Any new plans for this year?” He asked, setting down his paper, hoping for an engaging conversation.

“Not really, just gotta hang in there until I graduate,” replied Eurich. “But I do feel pretty good about today. It’s been too long since I’ve last seen Raine and Jason.”

“Raine, huh?” Albert grinned obnoxiously.

“Yeah…Raine…that’s all.” He was unsure of what he really wanted to say. He wanted to talk about her, but the words would never come out right.

Albert looked at him and just nodded. Eurich did not give him the engaging conversation he had hoped for, but the tone in his voice explained much more than his words could. “If you don’t want to talk about it, I have never pressured you before.” He smiled and picked his newspaper up and began reading it once more.

“Thanks, dad.” He grabbed a chair at the table and sat down. He threw his backpack down to the ground and got comfortable. The chairs were of antique wood, but the seats were cushioned in carefully stitched satin, prepared by Serra.

“Just don’t get in too much trouble,” said Serra as she was serving breakfast.

“You know me,” Eurich said jokingly, about to pick up his fork. “It’s not like I’m gonna try to save the world or something.”

“I don’t know,” Albert stretched and adjusted his thick frames. “You take that vigilante stuff to heart.”

“Is that bad?”

“You have a good heart, but don’t let it get you in trouble. You can’t save everyone all the time.”

Eurich grimaced and looked at Serra.

“He’s right. I don’t want any phone calls,” she smiled and started walking back into the kitchen.

“Yeah, yeah.” Eurich said leaning back on the chairs hind legs. “Oh man!” he shrieked, suddenly looking at the clock. “I have to go!”

“Not before you finish breakfast!” Serra scolded.

“I don’t think I have time.”

Serra returned a glare and Albert chuckled silently into his paper.

Eurich sighed and quickly ravaged his meal, eager to catch the bus and finally see the friends who seemed to elude him all summer. He quickly gathered his things and bolted towards the front door, when Serra’s voice called out to him.

“Wait! Your stone, you almost forgot it.” She sighed. “Why do you always forget this?”

Eurich searched the inside of his pockets and looked around the floor where he sat.

“I have it,” Serra said, reaching into the kitchen drawer. “It slipped, so it’s my fault.”

“I don’t mean to keep forgetting it,” Eurich pleaded.

“I know. It’s just that this stone means a lot.” Serra approached Eurich and presented the stone to him. “I made it into a necklace for you. This way, you’ll never forget it!”

“Thanks mom,” Eurich’s cheeks reddened with slight embarrassment.

“Mhm,” Serra wrapped the necklace around his neck, smiling gingerly at his eager face. The stone was a brilliant onyx with amethyst smoke trapped in the midst. Though it was cut like pristine quartz, it was aged and jagged as if it had been through a war. In comparison, the necklace was more impressive. It was lustrous silver with dragon claws holding the stone. Not a bad piece altogether, but the age of the stone and the metal did not really match up.

“This stone has a legacy,” Serra started.

“I know…” Eurich had grown tiresome from hearing the same story from her.

“If you did, you wouldn’t be forgetting it. This stone has generations of war passing through it. It’s a force to be reckoned with.” Her rosy, lined cheeks flared as she put the jewel around his neck.

“I get it. It’s a good luck charm. Can I go now?”

“Yes,” Serra said cheerfully.

“Be careful,” Albert added.

“Wait!” Eurich turned around as he was headed to the front door. “I almost forgot,” he said, glancing over to see Albert with his eyes wandering the table like he was expecting something. “Twelve years, was it?”

Eurich instantly saw the glow return to both of their faces. Albert smirked and well, Serra could not do much to hold back some tears. He was glad to see them like that because it reminded him of how they looked when was just six years old.

“Happy anniversary you guys! An orphan like me couldn’t ask for much, but you two gave and continue to give me everything. So thank you.”

“Oh, Eurich.” Serra was shocked that he remembered such a thing. Her knees shook, so she knelt to the floor to catch balance.

Eurich smiled, feeling accomplished that he just made his parents’ day. He opened the door, then waved to Albert in appreciation. Kneeling now, Eurich faced Serra and embraced her in a warming hug.

“I would never forget all you have done for me.” He grabbed her face and kissed her on the cheek. “Now, I don’t wanna miss my bus.”

“Have a good day, Eurich,” she said while holding her cheek.

“Will try,” Eurich sprang out the door, leaving for the bus stop as quickly as possible.

The air outside was calm with a breeze that gently moved through his hair and tickled his face. He flew to his destination with his speed only rivaled by his anticipation to start the day. He turned the corner and fell harshly to the ground when a stiff blockade halted his passage.

“My apologies.”

Eurich looked up to see a strange man staring down at him, hand extended.

“Nah, it was my fault for going too fast...I didn’t see you.” Eurich wondered where the man came from. He was wearing a cloak with a black hood, of all things—and it wasn’t as though people wore those every day. He took the offered hand and rose to his feet. Rather than releasing him, the man held on firmly.

“Your grip is a little tight.” Eurich’s face twisted and the joints in his fingers popped.

“Hmm...” The man did not let up. His grip became tighter as he pushed himself into Eurich, grabbing his arm—examining it.

“I’m in a hurry.” Eurich yanked his arm back suddenly, surprising the cloaked man and escaping his taut grip.

“My apologies again.” The man’s voice was creepy and carried with cracks in a strange, rigid form of speech. “If I may?” He sounded as if he did not know he was doing anything wrong. He hunched over, in another attempt to grab Eurich’s arm more gently this time. After pulling in closer to Eurich, he analyzed the scrape on his elbow, then slowly changed his gaze to the onyx around Eurich’s neck.

“Listen!” Eurich’s irritation increased and it was clearly heard in his voice. “I really have to go.”

“That’s a nice hex...you’ve got there.”

Eurich backed away and tried to move around him slowly. “Hex?” He echoed, trying to throw the attention off his movement. “This was a gift from my mom—just an old stone.” Eurich held his elbow and continued to move slowly around the man. The stone around his neck warmed, creating a tingling sensation around his wound.

“Hmm...” The man shrugged. “May I-may I touch your *stone*.” He narrowed his focus on the gem, giving off a crazed demeanor. “*Did the stone really just heal him?*” He thought to himself.

“Huh? ...Never mind,” Eurich’s gut was telling him that he needed to leave soon. Staying there any longer would have meant missing his bus and facing his parents. “Listen, I gotta go. I advise that you don’t come here again.”

The man just laughed and took one more look at Eurich’s elbow. “Fate sealed this day...” without any indication of movement, the man sprinted off, harshly nudging Eurich’s shoulder and disappearing into a nearby alley.

“Damn...people in this town are crazy,” he said to himself. “2012 doesn’t seem like the year...” He dusted himself off and glided to his stop to make up for lost time. He was relieved that a few students congregated there. It calmed him from the encounter a little.

“Hey, Eurich!” A soft declaration came from the small crowd of students. A girl with light mahogany hair pushed her way through the minute gathering. She skipped through the crowd with her hazel eyes fixated on him.

“Patricia!” Eurich shouted excitedly. He ran over to her and picked her up, twirling her in a hug.

“No touching...don’t think you wanna do that,” she allowed.

“Why not?” He set her down and took a step back.

“I’m sick.” She frowned, then covered her nose. “You think I would be wearing this to school?”

“I can’t tell,” Eurich reassured her. “But now that you mention it, those shorts are a little too short for dress code.”

“My mom thinks it’s bad, I have to go home...and I really don’t know how long I’ll be out.”

“Why’d you come here then?”

“Cause,” she blushed. “Maybe I wanted to see you.”

“You coulda texted me,” he laughed.

“Well, you *coulda* told me you had a phone,” she chuckled sparingly. “I would hug you, but...ya know.”

He smiled. “You know I don’t get sick that often. But I hope you get better soon! Need me to walk you home?”

“Nope, I’m good. Just wanted to catch you before you left...” She turned and saw the bus turning the corner. “Well, the bus is here, better get on.” She coughed, and then waved to Eurich. “I won’t die, promise. I’ll send Raine a text, and I’ll leave Jason in the dark. I think he should worry every once in a while.”

“Don’t I know it? Hopefully, I’ll see you soon?”

“Maybe.” She turned and walked off into the brush.

“That girl, I swear,” he smirked, watching her walk away before he boarded the bus.

Patricia was instantly pushed out of his mind as he sat in the bus. He could not stop thinking about the mysterious man. The other students instantly became invisible as he vanished into his own thoughts.

Suddenly, he gasped and reached into his pocket.

“Damn, the note! I must have left it at home...” He sighed with gratitude. “Maybe it is a good thing that Raine won’t see it.”

The thought of Raine instantly cleared up the negative feeling from his earlier encounter. She was his muse.

He arrived at Winbrook High School with about twenty-three minutes left until the tardy bell rang, and headed towards his usual lounging spot, the courtyard. Eurich turned the corner with a big smile on his face. There, he found Jason and Raine sitting at a rounded table. He could no longer hold his excitement.

“Jay, Raine!” Eurich shouted enthusiastically, running through crowds of others.

Jason turned around first and saw Eurich jogging towards him. He took the preemptive, getting up to intercept Eurich before he reached the table.

“Still too slow,” Jason allowed, catching him in a headlock.

“Hey, bully, let him go!” Raine chuckled.

“Thank you.” Eurich regained posture and combed through his hair with his fingers. “I’m upset that you two avoided me all summer,” Eurich said sarcastically, grinning because he knew he was humoring Raine.

“Well,” Raine began. “You were on a trip to Washington, for the Young Student Ambassadors of America. So don’t blame us,” she said giggling. “Not all of us want to be smart all time--actually, come to think of it, we were all busy. You were on your trip, Jason went to visit his dad’s oil rig, and I was busy mapping out my dream wedding.”

“Dream wedding?” The grin on Eurich’s face slowly began to fade into a disgruntled look of uncertainty and rejection.

“Yes, don’t you remember? Before school ended I was hypothetically engaged to Patricia, we had big plans.”

“Oh...that.” Eurich was relieved. Raine would always joke around like that, but the word marriage threw him for a loop.

“Don’t take things so hard, yo,” Jason’s sheepish smirk began to emerge.

“I’m not...I’m just really excited that this is the last year of school!”

Jason laughed. “You’d think you’d change your fashion.”

“What do you mean? I’m dressed fine, not much different than you.”

“That stone,” Jason pointed to it and the sheepish grin was back. “No matter how you wear it, a piece of junk will always be a piece of junk,”

“It never stops with you does it?” Raine intervened. “I think the new addition to that stone looks very nice.” She leaned over and punched Jason on the arm. “He’s just being a jerk, don’t listen to him.”

“Don’t worry, I never do,” said Eurich. “Let me give you two my cell phone number. I finally got one.” He smirked. After he gave out his number, he started walking inside. “I think I might wanna head to class a bit early. Good seats are always hard to find.”

“Wait, hold on a second,” Jason called out as Eurich was walking away. “You just gonna ignore the semi-annual tradition like that?”

“Tradition?” He looked over to Jason and noticed he was rolling up the sleeve on his right arm. “Ha ha...you just want to make me look bad in front of the girls out here.”

“Let’s see how the summer has treated you.” Jason raised his arm and placed his elbow on the table, waiting for Eurich to take a seat across from him.

Eurich took off his bag and sat down across from Jason. He wore a short-sleeved shirt, so he was already set up. With utmost confidence, he raised his arm and placed his elbow on the table.

Raine walked over and rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe you two still do this. I personally think it’s unfair. Jason is an ox compared to you.”

“Thanks for the confidence, Raine.” His sarcasm spiked. “You may not understand, but this is like a rite of passage.”

“Hey ladies, if you two would stop talking we would get out of here a lot faster.” Jason was religious about this event and it was clearly seen in his face.

“Fine, fine.” Raine leaned over the table to line up their arms so that no one would have an unfair advantage. Students who were outside joined around as if it was a school fight.

Eurich’s deep ocean eyes became locked into Jason’s auburn gems, staring him down as if he had stolen something. He was serious at this point.

Tension rose. Students around them were already making bets on who would win, and of course, the bets were on Jason.

“I’ll bet for you,” Raine whispered in Eurich’s ear. His face became blood red, overcome with a blush. He knew that Raine was just telling him that to make him feel better. He and everyone else knew that Jason would pulverize him.

They locked their hands together. It was a familiar feeling to Eurich, having his hand completely covered by Jason’s with Raine’s on the top, holding them steady. For years, they had arm-wrestled and the result had always been the same: Jason parading victorious with a smug look on his face.

“Are you two ready?” Raine asked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Eurich replied. The embarrassment of being beaten by Jason was overcome long ago. He was in it for the thrill and unusually enough it was a bonding experience for him and Jason.

“GO!” Raine lifted her hand and the trial of might between friends began.

Eurich’s face was stressed and twisted. Just to move Jason’s hand a centimeter was

impossible, given the difference in stature. The veins in his arm stood out in high relief as he breathed unevenly.

"I have to try my best," Eurich thought to himself. He knew he would not win, but impressing Raine meant lifting the Earth itself. He would go to any length.

The crowd around them began to cheer on Eurich. They were complimenting him on his attempt to do the impossible.

The focus then turned to Jason. Usually, he could just sit there and poke fun at Eurich, but this time was slightly different. His face was just as red and his veins were stretched to the same extent.

Their arms remained stationary. Neither was able to make the other budge. A few seconds later the first movement was made, and to everyone's surprise, Jason's arm shifted backward.

Eurich persevered. His blush from earlier had deepened into a stressed crimson, but he was still determined to best his friend. Muscles that he did not know he possessed tightened as he continued to move Jason's hand closer to the table.

Jason was surprised, but his face made it hard to tell. Playing it cool was not something that he could do. He was preempted by Eurich's fortitude. He opened his mouth and gasped for fresh air, exhaling in equal intervals. With his left hand, he grabbed the table to get a better grip and to release strain on the hand that was being dominated by Eurich. He pushed on the table, giving him an unfair advantage and enough room to reclaim the match. The table skidded slightly, knocking Eurich off balance and giving Jason the perfect chance to slam Eurich's hand down.

"Looks like it's my victory again," Jason smirked.

As expected, Jason won, but no one had fathomed that Eurich would put up such a fight. The crowd around them was silent, but within seconds they were brushing Eurich's shoulder, giving him praise.

"Eurich?" Jason whispered to himself, contemplating the fact that he cheated. He scowled and in seconds, it turned into a smile. "Impressive stuff, Eurich. Still got a long way to go, though."

Eurich held his bruised wrist. "Yeah...if you say so. It was fun and all, but I really need to get going."

"Wait..." Raine grabbed his hand as he made an attempt to get up. "You're hot, are you ok?"

"Yeah, nothing that won't heal in a couple days." He halfheartedly smiled.

"Well..." She blushed and began twiddling her fingers. "You did well. I'm proud of you, Eurich Aurion."

"Thanks...no hug?"

"Nope, off to class for you. I think I'm going to stay here a bit."

"Did I really get that close to beating Jason?" Eurich asked himself. He picked up his things and left with the dispersing crowd to their first period classes.

"Take your seats," the teacher, Mr. Andrews said firmly with a welcoming smile. "Now, I know this is the first day, but can anyone that was in my class remember where we left off before summer?"

"Fables and fantasy," said a classmate, obviously wanting to be the first to answer. He leaned back in his chair while annoyingly chewing a piece of gum.

"Dragons and wizards," Eurich cut in fervently. He had recognized some faces from previous years and knew they would expect him to be the smart ass.

"Hmm?" shrugged the teacher, holding a book open with one hand. He walked up and down the columns of desks, staring down each student, trying to intimidate each student to learn.

"Dragons and wizards," Eurich said again. "Magic and purity...that's where we left off before summer." This time more loudly, with utmost confidence in his voice.

"Great job. Remembrance is the key, students." Mr. Andrews quickly slammed his book shut to wake those who were nodding off. "We have a long class ahead of us, sleeping will just put you behind."

Eurich laughed to himself and looked around the room. He did not see his teacher return to his desk, let alone have the time to pass out books.

"This is a class set, so remember to return them after class," Mr. Andrews took his seat again at his desk. "Class set, Richie, you understand?"

"Yeah yeah," he replied, slipping the book into his bag.

Mr. Andrews sighed and nodded. "Eurich, would you mind coming over here for a second?"

"Sure." Scratching his elbow, he made his way over to the teacher's desk.

"Everything okay?" asked the teacher.

"It's nothing...I fell earlier and thought I had a scratch."

"Really?" The teacher seemed oddly intrigued. "And it's gone just like that?"

"I never really looked...anyway, what's up?"

"I'm glad you're okay," assured the teacher. "I've been wanting to talk to you about your interest in fantasy."

"That all? I thought I was in trouble," Eurich let out a sigh of relief.

"It's still just the first day," he joked, then bent over to reach into his messenger bag. "I want to give you something."

"Last year, it was a detention," Eurich grimaced.

"Nothing like that, I promise." Out of his bag, he set down a thin, almost archaic book and set it on the desk. At first glance, Eurich actually thought it was a spell book.

"What is it?" Eurich asked in a whisper, not really understanding why the teacher gave it to him of all people.

"Between you and me." The teacher paced his index finger back and forth and leaned over his desk. "It's a book." He smiled and then sat back down.

"Thanks?" Eurich was not sure what to say.

"I'll quiz you later," said the teacher.

Chatter began to rise as Eurich was walking back to his desk. Everyone looked at Eurich's newly acquired book, wondering why he was the only one to receive it.

"Unless the rest of you want to take the quiz too, I suggest you stop staring and focus on your own textbooks." Almost immediately after the teacher said that, their noses were buried.

Eurich was intrigued, but he did not want to open the book just yet. Still, he had plans on reading it later in the day, so he slipped it in his bag. He looked up, just seconds later, and was shocked to see that the teacher was standing over him.

He placed his right hand on Eurich's desk and kneeled. "I really need you to study this book, understand?"

“Why me?” he questioned back.

The teacher focused heavily on the stone. “You seem to understand the most.”

“Well...okay.” Eurich did not know what else to ask...maybe one more thing. “What exactly is in there?”

“Surprise, dear boy.” He had a serious look about his face as he stood up once more to walk to his desk. “Free time until the end of class. Just not too loud.”

Everyone rejoiced and immediately started moving around the class—except Eurich, he just sat there, glancing at his bag until class ended.

The next few classes went by quickly, before he knew it, the bell rang to release him to lunch. He rushed to the cafeteria, eager to finally have a sit-in with Jason and Raine. As expected, they were there, sitting, with their lunches packed. The taste of cafeteria sickened them, and the thought of it had the same effect. Eurich opened the glass door and walked out into the courtyard. Jason was laughing with some buddies and Raine just closed a book.

Eurich walked up with a gradual speed, looking at Raine. Time seemed to have slowed down as he watched her golden hair sway in the breeze and her emerald green eyes shimmer in the sunlight.

“Raine, you are unrivaled in beauty, spontaneous and eccentric,” he thought to himself. Sadly his thoughts were to remain just thoughts.

“Hey, guys!” Eurich shouted eagerly. He drifted over to Raine and Jason, trying not to nudge anyone in his path. “Mr. Andrews gave me this book!” He had never been so excited about a book, but he could tell something was different about that one. Immediately, he reached into his back and tossed the book on the table. The book had no picture on the front cover. It looked as if vines had been cast in bronze and stuck to the book itself.

“What kind of book is it?” asked Raine.

“I don't know. I really did not get a chance to look at it. I wanted to open it with you guys,” replied Eurich. He took a minute, lost in personal thought, to stare into Raine's deep emerald eyes. He then focused his attention to the book that lay on top of Raine's grey mini-skirt. It was a vampire novel. Eurich thought it was a bit odd because he knew that she hated vampires. He just figured it was Raine's natural quirkiness, so he said nothing.

Jason smirked, still holding some of the animosity from the arm wrestling match. “You never do anything by yourself, scared the pages might bite you?”

Raine sighed and rolled her eyes. “I swear one of these days you'll get it.”

Eurich sneered. “Is there something wrong with wanting to share a gift with friends?”

“Not at all, I was just messing with you...well, open her up.”

For the first time, Jason felt bullied. “What are you waiting for, I think we all want to see what's inside,” he said impatiently. Eurich opened the book to the first page. It read:

The divine blood marks the mana of the two worlds.

“WOW!” exclaimed Raine. “I'm already in love with this book.”

“Just after reading the first page?” asked Jason, interested in the book at the same time.

They skimmed through the book's pages, stopping at pictures that caught the eye.

Eurich's face lit up like a child in a candy shop. Jason and Raine were not as into magic as he was, so the pictures in the book did not catch them by storm. It was just another book to them. The book held no title, but it did have extremely detailed drawings and descriptions of creatures and other mystical beings that seemed almost unfathomable. Eurich's eyes widened at

every turn, every flick of the page. He was amazed at all wonders the book seemed to hold for him.

"He should've given me this book before school ended last year," he thought to himself briefly.

While skimming through, Eurich found one page especially that interested him. He quickly snatched the book from the others.

Completely engrossed in the book, he almost did not hear the bell ring. He quickly tossed the book into his bag and left the courtyard, heading to his next class, completely disregarding the friends he left behind.

"Dumped by a book," Jason laughed.

"Speak for yourself," Raine chuckled, then followed Eurich inside. "C'mon, Jason, class is starting!"

The rest of the day until the final bell rang was silent. All he could hear was the prevalent sound of the clock ticking.

"Come on, just five more minutes until three o'clock."

Eurich anxiously counted down the time until he was able to catch the bus to go home.

He was to spend the time he had left daydreaming about the wonders inside the book. He eventually drifted into a sleep as he watched the clock.

2. Phantasm

The bus proceeded slowly to Pace Falls, Eurich's neighborhood.

"Why is it so hot in here?" he complained.

"Just a few minutes until we get to your stop, so just chill out." A fellow student answered his plea, voice trailing off before he added a final thought, "But it is a little hot in here."

"Look over there!" Another student seemed astonished while looking out the window.

"What?" Eurich moved up the bus to look out of the same window as the student was.

"No way..."

An intense orange glow was consuming what used to be Pace Falls. The only thing that could be seen over the horizon was waving lines of heat.

"STOP THE BUS!" Eurich screamed at the top of his lungs.

The bus came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the street, about a quarter of a mile away from his home.

"Everyone remain calm," instructed the driver.

Of course, no one heeded his instruction. The students began to move in a chaotic fashion.

"...Everyone stay in your seats, we will abide by safety regulations!" He spoke with more bass than that time. Everyone instantly sat down and awaited his next instruction.

Eurich's gaze was fixated on the burning buildings. He sat back in his seat with anxious, relentless eyes, unsure of whether he should follow the directions as driver instructed, or follow his instinct to go out alone and save anyone that was caught up in the blistering flame. Fear shook his body, but he knew standing there would do nothing. Memories came flowing back from his childhood in foster care. A fire is what separated Eurich from one of his other foster families, there was no way he was going to have a repeat of the same tragedy.

"I can't be here!" Eurich yelled loudly with tears in his eyes and a shaking voice.

"Eurich, you aren't responsible for their deaths," the driver said coldly.

"Huh?" Eurich wiped his eyes and looked strangely at the driver--it turns out he never spoke a word.

The possible fate of his current family ate him alive to the point that he could no longer bear staying on the bus. His hesitation was over...his mind was made up. It was better to risk everything in the loathsome flame than to sit around and watch his only tie to family die. With impulse surging through his veins, he grabbed his things and dashed toward the back emergency exit.

"Hey, stop!" The driver yelled.

Eurich pried the door open, getting out to face the harsh remains of what used to be his neighborhood. He ran for about five minutes through the blaze and ash until he found his home in the ruin.

"No..." He fell to his knees and tears ran uncontrollably down his face. "What happened?"

"Eurich, be strong," a female voice arose from in the scattered and singed ruins.

"Mom, Dad!" Eurich shouted, smiling because the voice sounded a little like Serra's. He walked around in the area where his living room was once vivid and bright. The little things were still perfect, such as pictures. Even the gargoyle that rested on the table was as pristine as he

remembered. The upstairs was completely blown out. The fires raged indignantly, almost as though they were mimicking his exact emotion. It was impossible for Eurich to even think about going up there. The remaining foundation of his home started to come down and it was no longer safe to be in there.

He covered his head, dodging the pieces of the chandelier and crumbling ceiling. The fires evicted him from what he once called home. There was no hope of winning the battle against the flames that seemed to intensify as his emotions rocketed. Giving up seemed like a good idea, his spirit was being crushed, slowly. He turned sullenly and faced his home from the outside, wondering why such consequences were falling upon him...again.

Eurich's impulse and bravery had been short-lived. There was no sign of his parents in the house, so he decided to turn around and head back to the bus. That seemed like a better idea to him than being scorched and never heard from again.

Eurich was starting to distrust his senses. It had been the second time he heard what was not really said. He assumed his parents were safe because the car was not in the driveway. At least this time, he knew his foster parents had gotten away from the danger. Being too young to remember his former family, all that mattered to him was their safety—no one wants a repeat of a horrifying incident.

With no other options, he abandoned the notion that he could do it all on his own and walked back to where his bus was forcibly stopped. The path was literally a shadow of what was, the neighborhood was dimly grey. As the wind grew stronger, ash fell lightly from the burning trees, dropping in clusters that looked like rain. His surroundings were now as empty as he felt. There was no visible sun in the sky, but despite the monochromatic, menacing, tone of the environment, he was not deterred from finding salvation.

He finally reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone, though he had a feeling that it wasn't going to do him much good:

NO RECEPTION

"No reception, what in the hell is going on?" He murmured to himself, fatally throwing the phone to the ground. "Dammit!" He ran as fast as he could to the site, but as he approached it, he was perplexed by what he did not see.

The bus was gone and there was no evidence that it had ever been there. No driver, no students standing outside, not even any tire tracks. The burning desire to scream enflamed throughout his chest, but he resisted for his own good.

Eurich needed time to assess what was happening, so he sat down on what looked like a foundation piece to someone's home and laid out what he knew. The neighborhood was steadily crumbling down from the blistering flames and no one was around. The hissing blaze he was forced to listen to while sulking in eerie silence was the thing he could hear—his only company. Explosions triggered as the fires grew fiercer, but as the fires began to engulf everything, the flame traveled nowhere next to Eurich. The flames roared with angry sentiment, but bent around Eurich at every chance.

Eurich looked down to his feet and decided to take a gamble. "The fire can't touch me!" He smiled crookedly and closed his eyes, preparing himself to take a leap into the fiery path back home. He jumped into the static flame and laughed when the fire just opened a path for him to walk down.

He ran with invincibility back home, still careful not to push his luck with his theory.

“Mom, Dad!” He called once again as he got closer to his awfully dreadful abode. Though he did not expect an answer, even a small reply would have restored some hope.

He turned around to glance up at the sullenly dark sky, but something to the side of him caught his eye. In the debris in front of his home was a flickering purple light. Almost instinctively, Eurich reached for the stone around the chain on his neck and to his surprise that too, was gone. With nothing else to go on, he moved closer the debris that bled heavy amethyst light.

While cautiously looking at his surroundings, he carefully sifted the charred wood and blown-out glass.

“When did my stone get here?” he whispered to himself. He staggered a little as he reached for it, quickly pulling his hand back as if touching a hot stove. He fell back as he saw the necklace fade into silver light, then occupied his neck once more.

Swiftly, Eurich grabbed the warming stone and suddenly snapped it off, throwing it back to the very place it had been salvaged. He quickly stood up, backing away as he dusted himself off. The stone had other plans, dissipating again to appear around his neck.

“The hell?” Eurich grabbed the stone again and looked at it strangely. In the midst of pulling it off again, he stopped, caught off guard by the sky. The moon was ready to come out. Though it was not much, the radiance in the sky faded quickly, easily turning the flames into the only light source.

He turned his head sharply, hearing a rustle in the ash-covered leaves that fell from the trees above.

“Hello, is anyone there?” He asked hesitantly, not knowing what to expect at this point. “I have Twinkies. C’mon, Twinkies!” Eurich chuckled, and then sighed.

It was just a cat messing around in the shrubs. Upon closer inspection, he saw it was a black cat with piercing golden eyes, carrying a piece of paper in its mouth.

The cat brushed up against his leg, dropped the paper, and bolted around the corner. Eurich leaned down to unfold the paper, which was tattered and singed:

I’ll see you soon. Just try not to die before you get here.

At the bottom of the paper, it was signed with an X that had hearts around it.

“What does that even mean?”

Disregarding the note, he continued to walk around aimlessly. His resolve was weak. He coughed a little. His throat was on fire, dry from the acrid atmosphere. After figuring there was nothing else he could do there, he thought to leave the neighborhood, on the off chance that people were watching from the outside.

“*I just can’t believe that no one is here...*” He thought, jogging to the entrance of the neighborhood.

He finally smiled after seeing the arch that read ‘*Pace Falls,*’ giddy that he would finally leave and solve his dilemma. “Whoa!” He made it to the arch, but quickly flinched back, falling and taking a second to catch his breath. He touched his face and chest, making sure he was not as cadaverous as he felt.

“What the hell is this?” He scurried back in a cold sweat. “This isn’t real, this isn’t real. No, no, no.”

He found the strength to stand, but did not find the vigor to stomach what was becoming of his neighborhood.

He placed his hand where the concrete should have been outside the arch.

There was nothing.

“C’mon, Eurich. You can do this.” He looked over the arch again, trying to open his eyes fully.

“No way...” His neighborhood was floating, separate from the rest of the Earth, hovering in a boundless anomaly.

“I got it!” Eurich exclaimed. “Maybe...if I try to jump off, I’ll wake up. This has to be a dream!” He was out of feasible options and was ready to call it, all or nothing. Before Eurich was able to carry out his idiotic decision, a voice called out to him, the same one from before.

“Samsera,” the female, childlike voice echoed. The voice was faint, but it was enough to grab Eurich’s attention and stop him from killing himself.

“Hello?” Eurich had a look of uncertainty on his face. He glanced around cautiously, but he saw no one on the ground, or in the sky for that matter.

“Okay, so I lied about the Twinkies...Patricia?” She could have been the only person that fit that voice profile, but still, he was unsure.

“Samsera,” the voice echoed again.

Eurich turned around and began to walk in the direction from which the voice carried. Teal specks of sparkling light dropped from the sky to buzz around Eurich’s face. He fanned away the colorful lighting and then looked above to see a translucent figure of a female child with a long flowing gown.

He gasped and just stared, shocked at the near invisible silhouette.

It was not Patricia or Serra. It was not anything or anyone that he had seen before.

She floated down from the sky and held out her arm as far as she could in an attempt to touch his onyx stone.

He winced away, stricken with a bellow aching fear.

“Be calm,” her voice was serene. The translucent child wrapped her hand around the onyx, pulled herself closer to Eurich’s face, and whispered to him. “Samsera is the key to avoid a future at fault.”

“Samsera...” Eurich echoed with a frightened gulp. “What of my parents—who are you?” He persistently, but carefully questioned.

“Your...parents...” She cringed a little, then went on to answer his questions. “I am Syrehnity. And your parents are safe for now. This is your time...fate has sealed this day.”

“Fate has sealed this day?” He questioned softly. Those words were bothering him since he met the hooded stranger.

“Samsera is the place where you must go to save them from the Chaos...and Chaos from them,” she sullenly replied. Her voice grew faint as she began to disappear.

Eurich clenched his fists and dropped to the ground, eyes red from sorrow and frustration, feeling confused and helpless. She was the only one that could help him, but she did not seem to care. Her message for him was as vague and mysterious as the note.

Eurich felt a little pressured by the dense air around her, so he held his tongue.

As he stood there trying to make a conscious decision to talk to her, she faded away slowly.

“Wait!” Eurich said assertively as Syrehnity’s image almost faded away completely.

“If I find Samsera...will everyone come back?”

Syrehnity’s voice gently carried through the wind. Appearing in front of him, she touched his face with her smoke-like hands.

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