



TALES FROM THE AEONVERSE



Tales from the AeonVerse

By Taylor Caley

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Fire Reign

I struggled to peek open my eyes in the darkness. Uncountable eons seemed to pass, but the veil of oblivion was beginning to lift at last like one awakens from an endless, dark dream. The heat was pulsing in my head as it spread throughout the rest of my being--the same fire that consumed my soul during my last minutes alive. My spirit burned but I paid it no mind. The fire coursed through my brand new veins like blood. It was an untamable force of the universe, like me.

“Oh my God!”

“What is that?”

As I narrowed my eyes into a glare at the sound of the commotion, I realized I was standing in a dark chamber, surrounded by a dozen soldiers pointing their weapons at me. My appearance seemed nothing more to them than a black shadow in the dimming lights of the cavern. I locked my hands into clenched fists and a great, roaring ring of fire shot up from the ground. The flames reflected the fear on the soldiers' faces and sweat poured down from their hair--or perhaps it was tears--I would vaporize them nonetheless.

“OPEN FIRE!”

Triggers were pulled as ballistic energy bolts were fired at me from all directions. The flames leapt up and evaporated each bolt long before they could reach me. I out-stretched my

arms and the fire lashed out at my enemies, snatching them up in a scorching grip and incinerating every last piece of their beings.

The fire was glowing so bright that I could make out my own reflection in the chest pieces of my enemies' armor. The first thing I saw was the flawless shade of my ruby eyes and my flowing, dark hair given to me by the mother who abandoned her only daughter after birth. I had been told once that my smile was like that of the father I never knew. There was a new smile now, full of pleasure for what I was doing.

"It's so hot!" My maniacal laughter ensued. "Oh how I've missed it!" Taking the deep inhale of a fresh breath, I threw my fists into the ground and unleashed a deafening wave of roaring fire, incinerating the last of my attackers.

I closed my eyes and took in the silence, and just like that, the memories swarmed my mind. I saw myself the moment I gave in--standing before the ancient altar and taking that accursed pendant for myself, the pendant that granted me control over the element of fire. I remember the rush of power I felt as I slaughtered the entire clan I called my family. Worst of all, I remember the cold look on his face when the power became too much for me to control, as I fell to my knees and was burned away by my own fire. He just watched and said nothing.

I opened my eyes and returned my attention to the scorched underground chamber. A single tear fell loose from my eye. I reached up and touched my index and middle fingers to my eyes as if to wipe away any tears of my past, I dragged my fingers down my face, carving into my flesh as they left behind fiery-orange streaks. Looking down, I realized I was cloaked in my own flames, but there was no pain. I took a deep breath and willed the fire to vanish, leaving me clad in a skin-tight, charred-looking armor. It suited me well.

“What’s happening, soldier?” I heard a familiar voice echo from the intercoms wired throughout the caverns as I walked throughout the underground corridor, nearing a great, vault-like door.

“Unknown! Half my team is dead! There are reports coming in that Ember Rayne is alive!”

“That’s impossible!” The voice was filled with a terrified apprehension.

“I am the impossible!” I shouted as I generated as much power as my palm could muster, launching a searing sphere of fire at the vault door.

“Stay back!” I heard a frightened voice cry out.

I reached out and caught each bolt of energy as they were fired through the smoke before returning them in a shockwave of fire. The soldier gave a shrill scream which I drowned out with the comfort of death.

I emerged from the smoke, face to face with a holographic field. A young man stood rendered in the holograph. Realizing my body was still shrouded by the flames through which I had passed, I willed them to fade away as they left behind for me a charred-looking, skin tight armored outfit. I looked up at the holographic face that I had once loved as a brother. The man stared back at me with no sense or expression to read.

Scanning around at my armor, I said, “I like it. I think it suits me.” I returned my attention to the man I now loathed with every fiber of my being. “Hello, Lan.”

“How are you alive, Ember?” Lan growled. I could still smell his fear from here. “What have you done? I watched you die! Every part of you, body and soul, was incinerated into oblivion-”

“I know what happened, Lan!” I screamed, spewing sparks from my mouth in fury. “You drove me to this! You’ve lied to me ever since I was a child!”

“This isn’t who you are,” Lan said. “You were everything to me. You were compassionate once, and as beautiful as the fire you stole, but you’ve become a monster!”

“Is that what you think?” I stood up straight. “I’m not a monster! From my ancestors to my parents, my power has come to me. I am Ember Rayne, descendent of the two greatest gods our world has ever birthed! I am the product of Humanity’s greatest mistake--the mistake of resisting the peak of our evolution! But I heard the voice of a deity inside my head. Ouranos has shown the path to true power, and I have taken it! I am the gleaming symbol of the true nature of Humanity, the most powerful race across all planes of existence!”

“The Uranion god is a deceiver, Ember, don’t you see that? This power killed you! I watched your soul burn in your eyes!”

“I was weak then--too weak to embrace my destiny, like you--but I have transcended the limits of my power! You betrayed me, so I will take your precious city and raze it to the ground, and every being that remains will bow to the one who restored my life,” I stepped closer until I was standing right on the edge of the holographic field, “and to me.”

“Ember,” he said under his breath, “I used to believe that there was hope to save you--that there was still good in your heart, but I can see now that it’s all gone.”

I was almost surprised to hear Lan say something like that. “What are you saying?”

Lan hesitated for a moment before stammering a response. “I’m saying if we have to meet again as you say, then so be it. If I have to, I’ll save your spirit the only way I can--if you come back to the city, then I will kill you myself.”

My burning heart suddenly went cold. Such words I never thought he could possibly utter. I clenched my fists, and in a burst of raw anger I could not control, I let out a scream of rage and destroyed the holograph projector in fire.

“Fine,” I stuttered and hissed, unable to resist the tears on which I choked. My closest friend--my brother--turned against me for good. For the first time since I awakened from my oblivion, I began to question everything. Was this power worth it? Was this burning salvation worth losing the last thing in this world that I truly loved?

“No,” I said with a growl, refusing to allow Lan or anyone else to make me question my birthright any longer. I was out with a newfound will to bring judgment to those who betrayed my trust. I felt no pain, no fear, and no regret for my past. I have become the future. I am the reign of fire.

The Lilith Paradox

The day was imprinted in his mind like an etching burned into wood. Will sat on the North Carolina beach, which seemed less populated than the last time he was in this exact moment. The three-year-old girl approached him, smiling as she mouthed words he couldn't hear. All he heard was the sound of the waves like water trapped in his ears, but he remembered what was said. He nodded and the girl ran off toward the ocean.

Lily was a great swimmer for her age. She'll be fine, Will's voice echoed in his mind. He glanced down at the object in his hand--a peculiar-looking vial shaped like a cross topped with a crescent moon, and inside was a thick, dark liquid. Like the jolt that wakes one from sleep, he remembered now.

Will leaped up in a panic and sprinted toward the water. His cries were muted and his heart pounded as he caught up with the girl, snatching her away by the arm. Not this time.

#

Will sat up in his bed, shaking and drenched in sweat. He looked over at his bedside table and the strange vial of liquid that sat on it. He had no idea what that creepy Native American antique purveyor put into it, but it only took a few drops to make him relive his worst

nightmare--the day he lost her forever. His head throbbed as he put his hands over his face and cried out in pain and frustration.

“Daddy? Are you okay?”

Will’s blood froze as he looked up to see a girl in the doorway. She looked so much like his daughter, but older--around five years older, the time that had passed since that day at the beach.

“Oh my God,” Will muttered. “Lily?”

“Yeah?” she said, sounding confused.

Will jumped from his bed and ran to the girl, pulling her into a tight embrace. “I can’t believe it!” he sobbed. “You’re alive! It’s not possible!”

“Are you feeling alright, Daddy?”

Will glanced back at the vial on the bedside table. “I’m fine,” was all he could utter.

It took a moment to wrap his head around. He had been locked in depression ever since Lily drowned at the beach, pulled out by a rip current. It didn’t help when he ran into the old man in town who gave him the vial. He said he could sense Will’s anguish and inability to let go of what happened. That was when he showed him the charm, claiming that the liquid was imbued with ancient Seluitah magic. That tribe sounded as made up as the smoke he tried to blow up Will’s ass. Still, he put a few drops into a glass of water out of pressure. That was when he had the dream. He relived the moment of his daughter’s death, but in the dream, he knew what would happen and he stopped it.

This, however, he knew was not a dream. He was awake, and the girl’s hair through which he ran his hand was just as real as he remembered as he held her close. Will didn’t understand any of this. None of it made sense but he refused to question it. It was like waking up

from a horrific nightmare that endured for five long years. He didn't believe in miracles, nor did he believe in coincidence. Perhaps now he understood what the old man meant when he gave him the vial. He was given a second chance to undo the torment of losing his only daughter.

Will couldn't contain his excitement. He had to tell someone what had happened. After sending Lily off to get dressed for the morning, he grabbed his cellphone to call Nat. She would be so thrilled for him once he explained himself. He met her some time after Lily had drowned, at a bar in town where he would drink away his misery, and after saving her from nearly overdosing in the bathroom, she had become his closest friend. In the years since then, she had gotten married and had a daughter of her own, whom she named Rose as a gesture of reverence to her best friend.

He called her number several times, but it only came back with a message that it was out of service. That didn't seem right. There must have been a problem with the service, he figured. After making breakfast for the two of them, the best he had in five years, he told Lily they were going out to see a close friend of his. Perhaps it would be best to see Nat in person, explain everything that happened, and introduce her to his long lost daughter.

Will's excitement was pouring out of him the entire ride as he told Lily stories about his friend, Nat. From the back seat, Lily was quiet. Her face was blank as though she had no idea what he was talking about.

As they pulled up to Nat's apartment building, Will took Lily up to her door. He noticed that Nat's car was not in the lot, but he figured her husband had taken it. Once on the second floor, Will knocked on Nat's door, but there was no answer. He knocked several times. No response. That was strange. Nat was a stay-at-home mom and her husband needed her vehicle for work.

“I think you’re in the wrong place. Ain’t nobody lived there for years.”

Will whipped around to see an older man coming from the stairwell, who he guessed was another tenant. “What do you mean?” Will asked.

“Well, a nice young lady used to live there, but she had an overdose or something a while back. It was real sad. They had her buried up at Gravel Hill cemetery.”

Will’s heart stopped. That couldn’t be possible. He had just seen Nat the day before! Without thinking, he took Lily’s hand and rushed back to the car. He didn’t know what he was doing, but he supposed he had to see for himself if it was true as he drove up to the cemetery.

He stopped several times along paths that wound throughout the cemetery, searching each gravestone with haste and a heart that was beating harder than he could handle, until at last, there it was. It was nothing more than a plaque half buried in the grass that read, “Natalie Phillips”. The death was dated four years ago, around the time they had met--one year after he lost Lily. Nothing made sense anymore, but only one truth was going through his mind: if he had the opportunity to save his daughter, then that meant he would lose everyone else he gained along with the way.

Will dropped to his knees before the grave of his best friend, which also embodied the grave of her daughter, Rose. Sure he saved his own, but at what cost? He felt Lily’s hand rest upon his shoulder, and he was about to take it in his own until she leaned toward his ear and whispered the question of madness that would finish consuming him.

“What did you do?”

Will’s senses broke all at once. He looked up at his daughter’s face, which displayed nothing but an expression of disappointment. He felt no strength in his legs, yet he managed to stand up and lumber back to his car.

Lily stared at Nat's grave for a long moment before returning to the vehicle herself. Everything had gone quiet as death. The driver's side door hung open and Will just sat still in the seat. Lily reached in to take her father's hand and gently took the vial he was holding--the vial that caused all of this to happen. As she cradled it, it dampened her hands with blood from the sharp-pointed crescent shape. Lily said nothing as she turned away from the young man sitting lifeless in the driver's seat and, allowing the blood's cold touch to soak into her palms, she stared back at Nat's grave. A dark shadow swept over her eyes, and she manifested a grim smile.

“Thank you, Father.”

In the Presence of a God

Mason fiddled around with the fire, trying to keep it alive for a little while longer. The Tennessee countryside was dark and surprisingly cold at night, but it didn't seem to bother the woman standing against his truck away from the fire. Perhaps it was because she wasn't a woman at all, Mason thought.

Athena. Today, nobody would have done a double take at a young, dark-haired woman named Athena, but before yesterday, Mason would have laughed if someone tried to tell him that this was *the* Athena; the one the people of the ancient world called the goddess of wisdom. When not in her true form, she looked as unassuming as anyone, but Mason could tell that she was hurting.

"Are you okay?" Mason said calmly. Athena only glanced at him quietly before looking back out into the darkness. Mason let out a sigh. "He's gonna be alright."

"You can say that," Athena said in a grim tone, "but I know your kind better than you know them yourself. You Humans are cannibals; constantly warring with one another, an atrocity that disgusts even my people. In all the time we've been in this world, none of us have ever been captured by Humans. It pains me to imagine what Apollo's captors have in store for him."

"Why would you be worried? I thought Janus said you were immortal."

Athena stared at him with a look of annoyance, and Mason worried he might have offended her. "We're not immortal. We're ageless."

"What's the difference?" Mason asked.

Athena pushed off the truck and walked over to sit on the other side of the fire. Mason watched as she reached out and allowed the flames to lick at her fingertips, but this didn't bother her in the slightest.

"We're born," she began, "we mature, and we live our lives eternally so long as the sacred light of Empyrean burns in our hearts, but if that light is ripped away from us, yes, we can die."

"Wow," Mason muttered. "Do you think they could do that to Apollo?"

"I don't know," Athena replied shakily.

That all sounded quite morbid to him. Hoping to brighten the atmosphere a bit, Mason said, "I kind of wish I was ageless. It must be nice."

"No, you don't," Athena abruptly retorted.

"Why not? I know a lot of people who would be thrilled to live forever at least knowing there was still a ticket out. What could be so bad about it? I mean you're like, uh...how old are you anyway?"

Athena looked at him from across the fire. "It's impossible to put a number on my age that you would understand. The temporal constructs of your universe didn't exist when I was born. However, if I were to make my best educated guess, I would put my age around ten trillion Earth years."

Mason's jaw hit the ground at the sound of that. "Ten trillion??" he gasped. "Good God, that actually sounds unbearable."

"That's what you don't understand," Athena explained. "In my realm, ten trillion Earth years is like the age you would buy your first house. When Zeus told us that we were being sent to guard this world, none of us thought it a chore. Four billion years we've been on this planet - nothing more than a blink in the life I have lived. What we didn't realize is that in your universe we would be bound to your laws of nature. Spending four billion years in this world to me was exactly the same as it would be for you. The blink became the unbearable eternity."

There was a tense silence between them. Mason was trying to wrap his head around everything he just heard, and even then there was pain in the goddess' voice. "Well," he uttered, "I imagine it's still a damn sight better than our miserable lives, as you describe us." "I only say that to-" she trailed off suddenly. "-to deny."

Mason raised an eyebrow. "Deny what?"

Athena shook her head as if thinking of the right words to say. "An eternity changes us, or at least some of us. The entire time I've watched Humanity, I've seen endless conflict. You're the exact opposite of us; you wage war on those who are different than you while we serve our world with unquestionable loyalty. But along the way I saw something in you that was unknown to me in Empyrean. Something to this day I still don't fully understand."

"What's that?" Mason asked with interest.

"Love," Athena replied, giving him a serious look. "Love for the one who fights beside you. Love for those you call your brothers and sisters. I've seen it shine in your hearts throughout the gravest of Humanity's battles. No matter how the odds are stacked against you, no matter how many times we might say you cannot win, you fight and die for each other without hesitation. Such honor never existed to us. I have watched more of my fellow warriors fall than I

can count, and never once would I have considered shedding a tear if I was able to. Tell me, Mason, what is that fuels you with such love?"

Mason was at a total loss for what to say. "I don't know," he stammered. "Just something inside of us I guess, but you know, not all of us are like that."

Athena took a deep breath and lowered her head. She didn't even need to breathe, but Mason took it as a sign that she was trying to understand what it meant to feel.

"Humans," she muttered to herself. "I wish I was one of you."

That caught Mason off guard. "What? Why would you want that?"

"To feel the love that you do," she answered solemnly. "To know what it is that presses you onward."

"You don't wanna be one of us," Mason shook his head. "Like you said, we're just wretched cannibals, constantly at each other's throats. It's not false."

"But it's living proof of what you can be," Athena said, "of what you're meant to be. If you could only set aside your meaningless differences and love one another the way you love your brothers, then you would one day be worthy of the true power bestowed upon you. You could be that which the Primordials created you to be."

Mason was taking all of this in intently. "And what would that be?"

Athena leaned in closer until her head was almost over the fire, the light glinting off her brown eyes. "A people truly infinite."

Author Biography

Taylor Caley spent his time following the works of great authors and studying various cultures and religions while living and working in the Appalachian Mountains. He is currently working toward a degree in the creative arts. Taylor is a fanatical admirer of the fantasy genres, focusing his affinity for storytelling on his rapidly expanding fictional universe.

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