

# Eren Tales

THE EIGHTH TALE

# Books

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*'I found him in the books,' said his grandfather, 'and now I'll pay the price. I shouldn't have gone looking.'*

Do we have to?’ said James. He crossed his arms and pulled a face.

‘Yes,’ said his mother. She didn’t even look at him. The argument was over.

‘But it’s *boring*. And he’s *weird*.’

‘James!’

She looked at him in the mirror, scowling. He bit his lip.

‘Sorry. But –’

‘No. No buts. No whining. No more complaining. It’s just a visit and you will do as you’re told.’

‘But –’

‘James,’ said his father, and he turned his head slightly. His voice was low and quiet and threatening. The car jerked a little. Someone behind them held down their horn.

‘Fine,’ said James. ‘Fine.’

For five more minutes they drove, and nobody spoke. The roads became narrower, the buildings sparser. Then, as they turned again, onto a road lined with willow trees, his mother turned to him.

‘Here we are,’ she said. ‘Right on time.’

‘A bit early,’ said his father, ‘but I don’t think that will be a problem.’

James squirmed in his seat and sighed. The car rolled to a stop and he stared out at the wooden sign that hung above the shop.

## GROVE LANE BOOKS

### Secondhand and Antiquarian Specialists.

The paint was peeling – the wood, rotting – and ivy clung to the edges as if that were all that held it up. James opened his mouth to say something, thought better, and closed it again.

‘Your granddad will be inside,’ said his mother. ‘We need to pop over and see Mrs Miller, check in with her. You can go in by yourself, can’t you?’

‘Yeah,’ said James.

‘Good. We won’t be too long.’

‘As long as she doesn’t try to feed us that cake again,’ said his father, and he laughed, taking his hands off the wheel.

‘Great,’ said James. ‘Okay.’ He opened the door and slid out of the car, surprised by how cold it was, how his cheeks stung in the breeze.

‘So tell him where we are, and that we’re parked here,’ said his mother.

‘Sure.’

‘Good. Catch you later, then!’

She smiled and turned away, saying something to his father. The sun shone through the trees, and from somewhere in the shop he heard music, scratchy and wobbly. He looked at the sign again, and the roughness of the wood, and the spots of mold. He sighed, and heard his mother still talking. He took a step forward and pushed open the door of the shop. A bell rang on a spring and, as he stepped in, the music grew louder.

‘Um. Hello?’ said James. He let the door shut behind him. He could smell the books. This place always smelled the same – not stale, but old, undisturbed, like a room that had been locked up and forgotten. The floor was dusty where it met the shelves, and even through the lights were on, the impression was one of blackness, of shadows and darkness and cold.

‘Grandpa?’ he called. A noise by his foot made him look down, and he smiled at the face looking up at him.

‘Arthur,’ he said, kneeling down to run his hands along the cat’s back. It purred, meowed, and arched itself, moving closer and rubbing against his knees.

‘Good boy,’ he said. The cat was soft, its fur black and white and shining in the thin light. ‘Where’s Grandpa? Where is he?’

He raised one finger and wagged it back and forth. ‘You haven’t eaten him, have you? You haven’t eaten the mad book man?’

The music stopped with a scratch. Somewhere further in there was a thud, and the sound of breaking glass. Arthur leapt backwards, moving silently, and then he was gone, hidden among the piles of books. James stood up again.

‘Hello? It’s me. It’s James. I’m here.’

Another muffled noise, and then the scratch of paper tearing, and a voice, rough and dry.

‘James? Young James?’

‘Grandpa?’

‘In here. Yes, in here.’

He moved forward through the shop, snaking his way around tables and shelves, past the register and into the back. The walls were lined with books, their spines dark, the titles shining in gold and silver and black. They rose to the ceiling, neat and tidy, packed together like bricks. For a second James wondered if they held the shop up, and if taking a single book from its place would bring the whole building crashing down. He shook his head and kept walking. There was a thin, blue curtain covered in dust, and he pulled it to one side, stepping through and wrinkling his nose at the smell. This was where the office was, and a den of

smaller rooms and cupboards and shelves that had always scared him as a child. He smelled smoke now – old tobacco – and wrinkled his nose. He didn't want to be here.

'Mum and Dad are here, too,' he said. 'They went to see Mrs Miller. Just quickly.'

He was at the office door now. It was open halfway, and books lay against it, open face down, spines bent, pages crumpled. James was surprised – his grandfather had always been so careful with his stock.

'Can I come in?' he said.

'James?' said the old man again, and there was a question in his voice, a note of confusion that made James nervous.

'I can wait outside,' he said.

'No! No. Please.'

More noise, of paper and glass being stepped on, and the door was pulled open. James' grandfather stood, his eyes wide, filling the space. His cheeks were covered in bristles, dark shadows under his eyes, his hair wild and greasy. James stepped back. He could smell sweat.

'Are you -?' He began, but his grandfather reached out and took his arm, holding him firmly.

'Can't talk here,' he said. 'Not here. Not with them. They *hear*, you know. Oh, yes.'

'What?'

'They – ah! Cursed things! Sneaking in, eh? Crawling and sprawling, eh? Bah!'

He kicked out at the books on the floor, pushing at them with the tip of his shoe, tearing the pages.

'Now, quick, while we can shut the door – while it's not blocked by the dratted rats!'

He tugged, pulling James into the office, and slammed the door behind him. His breathing was quick, his eyes wild. Then, 'Okay,' he said. He closed his eyes and took a deeper breath. 'Okay. Safe again. Should be good, hm?'

James backed away, staring. 'Grandpa, it's me, it's James. What are you doing?'

'I know it's you, boy. Don't be silly. It was them I didn't want in here.'

'Who?'

'The books!'

'But ... this is a bookshop.'

'*Exactly!*' said the old man. 'And that's why – that's how – I found him!'

James stared at his grandfather, frowning. His eyes darted to the door. He felt his phone in his pocket.

‘Who?’ he said.

His grandfather moved forward, crouched down, whispered.

‘No name,’ he said. ‘No name. Or many. Doesn’t matter. He’s there, if you look. Mentions. Whispers. Fragments that go back as far as civilization itself. Dreams. Legends. Gods. Devils. They’re all connected. They’re all him!’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ said James.

‘I read them! I read the books and I saw – like a web, like a single strand of a web that you pull on and follow and unravel, and then you see – it’s all there. It’s the same, one big tale, one big lie, and you can *see* that it’s there. Look! Look at this!’

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper.

‘This,’ he said, shoving it towards James, ‘was in a history of Babylon. Victorian book – lovely binding – had it for years. Do you see? Where it says the locals had a legend, of the dream-bird. And that matches – it all matches! – when you look at... at this –’

He moved over to his desk, rummaging madly, pencils and mugs falling to the floor. He held up a book, half torn and shredded, its pages singed and stained. ‘This is from a Peruvian expedition,’ he said. ‘Early twentieth century. And there, if you read it, it talks about the creature, the Shadow That Sees, they call it. And now older, if you look back at the Greeks, at their prophets –’

‘Grandpa!’ said James. ‘Stop. Please. Mum and Dad, they’re just outside. I want to go –’

‘I lived with the books and I saw,’ said the man. He fell to his knees, his hands shaking. ‘It was ... it’s like drowning, like the noise and the whispers, like they’re always there. I couldn’t help it. And then I couldn’t stop. He’s in all of them, hidden, staring out, but it’s so obvious when you see. Through all of history, through every legend, every record...’

Their eyes met. The old man shuddered and looked away.

‘He’ll come for me,’ he said.

‘I want to go,’ said James. ‘I want to leave.’

‘He’ll come for me. I know it. Too much attention. Too much focus. Maybe he set snares. Maybe they’re the threads of his web, but I did it now, I sprung the trap, and he’ll feel it, the vibrations, and he’ll come, through the words and the ink and the dust.’

There was a noise outside – a bell ringing out, and James heard his parents’ voices, happy and light, his mother laughing at something. He looked down at his grandfather.

‘We’ll get help,’ he said. ‘We will. Okay?’

‘No help,’ said the man. ‘No help. No hiding place.’

‘There’s nothing wrong,’ said James, though he didn’t believe it. A lot was wrong.

'I found him in the books,' said his grandfather, 'and now I'll pay the price. I shouldn't have gone looking. I should have ignored that little voice, those little connections it wanted to make...'

He trailed off, tears in his eyes.

'Books are more than pages,' he said. James stood up, ran to the door, pulling it open and called for his parents.

'More than ink,' said his grandfather. James' mother was in the doorway now, her expression frozen in shock, one hand raised to her mouth.

'More than just words,' said the man on the floor. 'Maps and trails and traps and games. I'm lost, you know. I'm lost.'

He looked up at them, at the pages of the books beneath their feet, and he smiled and closed his eyes.

'Lost, lost, lost,' he said.

'Granddad,' said James.

'It doesn't matter now,' he said.

'Dad, what's *wrong*?' said James' mother. She rushed forward, kneeling down.

'Lost, lost, lost,' said the old man. He kept his eyes shut.

'James, come here,' said his father. 'Step away. What happened?'

'I don't know!'

'Did he fall?'

'I don't – he didn't say. There's something in the books. That's all I heard. Something to do with the books.'

He looked around, at the shelves of the hallway, at the pages and the spines that covered the floor, and something in his stomach felt cold and wrong.

'What's that?' said his dad.

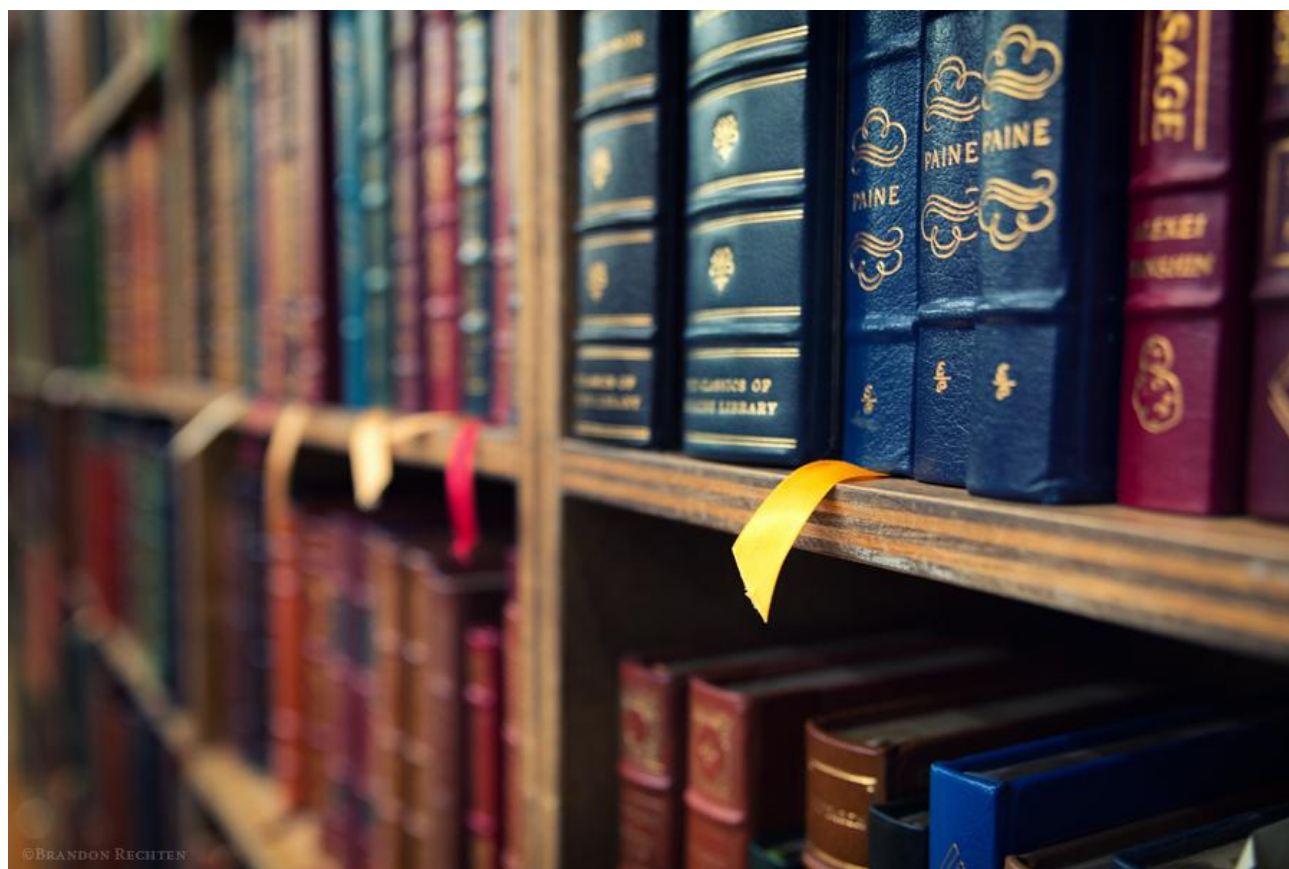
'I don't know,' said James. He felt the shelves watching him, felt the ink leering.

'Why didn't you call?'

'Please,' said James, 'Not here. Not here.'

'What?'

But he was gone, running as fast as he could, crashing into tables, ripping the door open, throwing himself into the street. Behind him, he felt the book watching, and something stirring, and moving slowly through the words.



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