

Mentor Lives

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The Final Chapter

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I never understood why knights wear full plate armor when charging at dragons. It just slows you down and adds a crunchy texture when you're caught in the dragon's jaws. Thankfully, Asa and I were smarter than that. Unfortunately, knights also usually fight with the help of a wizard or a magic sword. We were just lucky the string on my bow hadn't burned up yet.

With a shout drowned out by the roar of the beast, I released volley after volley at the monster. Most merely glanced off its scales, but a few tore through the beast's wings, sending boiling red blood flying around the mountain pass. I was safely perched thirty feet up on top of the pass, but down below, Asa was frantically dodging out of the way of the dragon's vicious teeth and claws. I had trained the lad's reflexes well. When the next arrow tore through its left wing's membrane, it turned to hiss up at me, and in that moment, Asa charged past its claws and sliced his blade along the beast's folded-in wing. It tried to swipe at him, but he kept running out from under the wing and past the beast's flank. The dragon bellowed in frustration at the confining walls of the pass before sweeping its tail at Asa. It knocked the lad off his feet, sending him rolling into a wall. Thankfully, Asa's leather brigandine held, so he was up in a flash and kept running till he was out of the tail's reach.

We had thought ourselves clever for baiting the dragon into fighting us in this narrow pass. Keep it confined and take out its wings so it can't fly off. Hopefully, Asa's last charge did the job. The bloodied wing lashed wildly around, strips of loose skin flapping in its wake. The plan had been working surprisingly well -but then I reached my hand back to find an empty quiver. Cursing, I dropped the bow and tore the quiver off my back. I waved it at Asa, hoping he'd get the message. He looked up at me from the hiding spot he found behind a rock and nodded. I started running along the pass wall, searching for a safe way down. We needed to regroup before the dragon turned itself around.

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The Call

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~Three days earlier - The Day of the Prophecy~

For the past two years since his parents' death, Asa had been taken in by one of the neighbor families, the Tanners. They were a kindly bunch and let me frequent their household in order to train the lad. And so, the morning of Asa's sixteenth birthday found me hiding outside the Tanner's barn.

When footsteps from inside the barn approached the doors, my weary, aged bones shifted into a fighting stance. As soon as Asa stepped out into the open air, I tossed a staff at him, shouted, "On your guard!", and charged. Without a moment's hesitation, he turned, caught the staff in his left arm, and met my overhead strike with a firm defensive guard and a smile. The edge of his staff slid down mine, trying to get in under my guard, but I pivoted, sending his attack off to my side. I countered with a pommel jab to his chest. He batted my strike away with his right-hand and leapt back for space. Cheers rang out from the house window as the Tanner children watched with eager eyes. He glanced away from me towards the window, giving me a moment to strike again, so I did. It was only a ruse. He dodged my strike with ease and countered. If not for his over eagerness sending his attack off-balance, he would've landed the first blow. A messy mistake, but at least he had good instincts. That'll be a lifesaver someday. Our fans cheered as I took a hasty step to avoid his blow and shifted back into a proper stance.

Our sparring went on like this for a while, and soon we were working up a terrible sweat. This summer was looking to be a hot one. Our battle slowly made its way closer to the house for the sake of the audience, which now included the parents of this little family. They laughed and clapped appreciatively along with their children. One of the youngest ran outside to get even closer to the action, watching eagerly as I exchanged faster and faster blows with Asa. I nearly clipped the child once. His father's stern voice rang out, urging him to back up, but he either didn't hear or didn't care. After

shoving Asa back for space, I swung my stave towards the kid. I purposefully aimed high and off to his side, just wanting to give a clear warning. But with a gasp, my staff finally hit flesh.

Asa stood there between me and the child. He hadn't been able to lift his sword in time, so he blocked the blow with his right forearm. Given the haste of our sparring, I had put a bit of my back into that swing. He was lucky I didn't break his arm. His mouth twitched with a grimace, but his eyes flared with indignation. I tossed my stave aside and said, "Let's have a look at that."

After making sure Asa would be fine, Mr. Tanner went with some of the kids to tend to their crops, while Mrs. Tanner took the rest and got back to work on the preparations for the evening's celebration. The whole village gets involved when a child marked by Fate comes of age. This was a big day for Asa.

I sat at a table in the main room of the house with Asa and Sarah, eldest daughter of the family, who was still glaring at me silently for the incident. Her father was a perceptive man, and he agreed that I had posed no real harm to the child, though I still apologized for the stunt. Asa shared the same view after some consideration. Even so, nothing stopped Sarah's judgment. From one of my pouches, I pulled out a salve made from canira flowers. The monks that raised me discovered it was good for bruises, and I verified that during my time with the Knights' Order. I offered it to Sarah, and she snatched it away. If I'm not mistaken though, her eyes did soften. Asa started to relax too as she tenderly applied the salve to his arm. Ah, young love.

"That was stupid of me. I should've seen you meant to miss." said Asa. I nodded and tried to reply, but the lass cut me off, "You thought my brother was in trouble, and so you tried to save him. Don't you dare regret that."

"If that were a real battle, I would've cost us both our lives. There's no way I could protect him with my arm cut off," said Asa.

Sarah shook her head. "If that were a real battle, you would've had armor and a shield."

“Calm yourselves,” I intervened. “You’re both right. Asa, yes, you should’ve been more aware of the situation. If you timed it right, you could’ve finished me off while I was distracted. However, there’s also no promise that I would’ve missed. What if I slipped, or the boy jumped into the arc of my attack? I’ve seen both happen before. Nothing is certain in combat. So, the lass has a point too. I’ve seen soldiers unable to act in time to save someone, or worse, a cruel leader who’d sacrifice a common soldier for the sake of killing his target.” I parted the bangs on the side of my forehead, revealing a small birthmark right under my hairline. The back of Asa’s right hand bore the exact same mark of a shepherd’s staff with a star. After I made sure it caught both their attention, I continued,

“Fate selected you for your heart, lad. Don’t be ashamed that your first instinct is to protect. I wish you could pass that onto half the army. Now, I don’t want you fretting about it anymore. You’re bruised enough as it is.”

Asa opened his mouth to make a retort, to argue why he should be allowed to debase himself, but with a look from Sarah, he relented and admitted honorable defeat.

I smiled as I stood up. “That’s better. Sarah, I entrust you to make sure he’s ready to visit the Oracle. I’ll go take his place in the fields.”

After lunch, Asa and I started our trip to the Oracle’s hut. The village was settled along a small river at the edge of the Wayward Woods. The Oracle lived apart from the rest of the village, in a small forest clearing down past the blacksmith’s forge. Thankfully, I remembered to grab my sparring stave to use as a walking stick.

On our way, we passed by the farm of Asa’s parents. He gazed at it with a twisted smile but didn’t say anything. Two years ago, during the flooding season, I found his parents’ bodies on the river side. I was just a traveler then but felt moved to bring them back to town. After seeing the boy they had left behind, I decided to stay for the funeral. After seeing the Fate-mark on his hand, I decided to stay permanently. Fate-marked kids need a guide during their early days. Heaven knows I could’ve used that.

After a while, I decided to break the silence. "Are you ready to officially own the family farm after tonight?" I asked.

Asa shrugged, "I mean, it won't be any different. You and I already watch the fields."

"True, but once you're a man, it's completely your responsibility. I can leave you to it without burdening my conscience."

Asa looked up at me, alarmed. "You're leaving?"

I laughed and responded, "I don't intend to leave the village. Don't worry lad, I'll help you out as long as I can."

Asa still wasn't comforted. "What do you mean, as long as you can?"

It was my turn to shrug. "You know how these stories go. Once you're ready to be the hero, it'll be my time to step out of the story."

"You mean my becoming a man is gonna kill you?" The lad stopped in his tracks.

"No. Well, it's more of a coincidence. There are many ways a story can unfold. Just... Well, when you receive your prophecy, you'll know what you must do to save us from whatever disaster awaits. That has to be you. And if I must take the fall for your sake, then it'll be worth it." I knew he was going to retort, so I held my hand up to cut him off. "Sarah and I told you not to feel bad for getting hurt in order to save her brother; you must give me the same courtesy if I choose to do the same for you. Now come along, the Oracle is waiting for us." I started down the path again.

A moment later, I heard Asa's footsteps as he rushed to catch up to me. But then, he grabbed my arm and halted again, declaring, "Then I'm not gonna get my prophecy! I'm not gonna let you use it as an excuse to kill yourself for me!"

I pulled my arm free of him and slammed my walking stick into the ground. "You think Fate cares if you listen to it? Whether or not you cup your ears, you'll still walk the road it sets for you. As shall I. You should be thankful you'll have a prophecy to guide you!"

Confusion and curiosity replaced the irritation in his eyes, but I didn't give an explanation. I turned and continued down the path.

"What do you mean?" he called from behind me. I didn't respond. He called out again, "What do you mean!" I silently waved a hand to beckon him down the road. He repeated himself a third time, and I just repeated my wave. Eventually, he got the message and chased after me. Once he caught up, he asked a fourth time, this time in a more respectful tone, "Sir Isaac, what did you mean by that?"

Now that he was walking alongside me, I took a moment to prepare my words carefully, and then said, "I never received a prophecy. My village didn't have an oracle. I had to figure things out on my own. When the Bandits of the Blood-Red Moon started raiding my village, a lot of people died before I figured out how to defeat them. The Father of my monastery died, not because of some tragic self-sacrifice, but because he was standing in the middle of the road when they started their fourth raid! I had a plan for the next attack, but by then, we had lost so much that more people starved through winter. I could've saved a lot of lives if I had a little more guidance. So please, don't be a fool and spurn the help offered to you."

Asa's response came in a quiet voice, "...Yes, of course. I'm sorry, I didn't realize how much it cost you."

"It's alright, lad, I know. I should've explained that sooner. Nobody likes to bring up their own failures."

"But it wasn't your fault! You did the best you could, and you saved so many lives. You can't blame yourself for that."

"Say that to the other monastery orphans left fatherless a second time, or to the girls carried off into the woods. You're right, it's not my fault. But every life you can't save still haunts you nonetheless."

He didn't have anything to say to that, so we walked along in silence the rest of the sweltering way to the Oracle.

The Oracle's meadow was a curious place. We made it there at midday, but the surrounding trees were so tall and thick, that it may as well have been dusk. A few fireflies even floated around the aged wooden walls. Vines crept up and around the hut on all sides, and the ground was brimming with strange plant life. A faint haze surrounded the area as well, sometimes thickening into a thin fog, sometimes shimmering with silver light. This was a place of the arcane.

I was practically up to the door before Asa was willing to brave the clearing. I made him knock on the weathered door, smiling quietly as he avoided touching any of the runes burned into the wood.

It took a minute after the third knock before the door cracked open and the face of an elderly woman appeared.

"Come in, young ones. I have been expecting you," she whispered with a rasp. Asa gave me a worried look, but I laughed and said, "Thank you, oh wise one, but are you alright? We expected you'd open the door before we knocked."

She laughed, opened the door all the way, and said in a voice devoid of mysterious overtones, "Oh, alright, you caught me. I was busy reading. Well, come in, come in." She smiled at Asa as he shuffled inside, looking him over and pinching his cheek like an eager grandmother.

"What a strapping young man! Fate knows how to pick them, eh, Isaac?" She winked at me, and I responded with a smirk and an eye roll. She laughed once again before continuing, "Most people come to visit once they come of age, but it's not every day I get to glimpse the future of a Fate-marked! Now, have a seat, I'll be ready in just a moment. Oh, would you like some tea?"

As she bustled around her cabinets, Asa sat down on an old stool and whispered to me, "If you never got a prophecy, how come you seem to know her so well?"

"Because she stops by the tavern once a week to cheat at cards," I replied.

She scowled at me and added, "A girl has to make a living somehow. Here you go!" She handed us both little cups of her latest brew. I took a healthy gulp to show Asa that it was safe, but it took a

moment for him to get comfortable with the idea. As we drank, the Oracle pulled on a rope to open a hatch in the center of her roof. Light poured in from above, resting on a circular fireplace. The Oracle then pulled out an assortment of herbs and strange powders from her pantry and dumped them in the fireplace before lighting it with a snap of her fingers.

Asa jumped back in shock splashing tea across his front.

"Oh relax, dearie! How'd you think I warmed your tea? As the oracle spoke, I beckoned Asa to sit down.

"I'm sorry," he said as he returned to his seat, "I've just never seen real magic before."

The Oracle leaned over the fire, waving her hand in some odd pattern. The tea stain on Asa's shirt floated up into the air, twirled, and dropped back into his cup.

"It's nothing to be alarmed about. Just relax while I get the fire ready." She got up to add a few more powders to the fire, as well as a couple roots that burned with green smoke. "Blast, they've gone too moldy for use." She extinguished the roots with another snap of her fingers and tossed them aside. "I'll have to go pull out some fresh replacements from the garden. In the meantime, you can chop these up and toss them in, alright?" She handed Asa a knife and a few more roots that looked like carrots with the texture of leather. Before he could respond, she was already out the door.

I spoke up, "Come on, lad. It's traditional to help with your own oracle flame." Asa gritted his teeth and started chopping away with nervous yet practiced motions. "Sorry," he said. "This is just a lot to take in." I grunted in recognition and helped toss in some of the pieces he chopped up. The fire took on a tint of purple as we fed it. By the time we finished, we could hear the Oracle walking back to the front door.

"Ah, what a nice hue! This'll do the trick," she said, admiring the fire. She tossed in whatever it was she pulled from the garden and sat down in a chair opposite us. "Ready?" she asked. Asa nodded.

“Very well.” The Oracle tossed in one last pinch of some orange powder, clapped her hands together, and cried out in some strange tongue. The fire cracked and spluttered, and then symbols started to rise out of the depths, shimmering wisps of condensed smoke that spiraled in the air. Above the flames, they each hovered for a brief second before fading up and out of the smoke hatch. The oracle’s eyes glazed over as she watched each symbol in turn, and then she started to chant,

Great sorrows lie behind you, discard them as a husk

Your road is long and full of pain, your day begins at dusk

Bereft of loving family, Death has taken quite a toll

But for you to walk your journey, release what you still hold

A trial lies before you, depart within three days

Or by the time your horse returns, your home shall be ablaze

For on the mountain lies the beast, of fury, fear, and flame,

Of golden scales and bloodied claws, you already know its name.

So, bear your arms, ascend the mount, and bring the final breath

Of beast and of your brother, and once again greet Death.

Then in the dusk of your first day, as you contemplate The End

Give heed to every echoed word, and live renewed again.

For a while after the Oracle finished, nobody spoke. The fire died down and returned to a normal crackling red. Asa didn’t look too happy about it, but personally, I think he got off rather well. The first verse made it pretty clear he was going to live past this ordeal. That’s greater comfort than most

prophecies I've read. After a while, he finally raised his head, looked at the Oracle, and said, "Thank you for reading the prophecy, but I think it's time for me to leave now." The Oracle uttered a quiet, "Of course, dearie", and a moment later, the lad and I were walking out through the garden. He didn't say a word all the way back to his home, and I didn't press him. T'was best to let him stew over it all for a while first. I stayed at the house long enough to write down a copy of the prophecy for him, and then I left for the tavern. Had to start getting my things in order. I'd see him that evening for the celebration. We could talk then.

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I sliced my palm on one of my handholds but was able to scale the wall down to Asa's hiding place. He was holding a hand to his side and gritting his teeth.

"Definitely took a beating from that last run."

"Can you still move?" I asked, he looked up at me, eyes full of determination.

"Of course," he answered. "What's the plan?" Before I could respond, the dragon roared loud enough to shake loose rocks from the walls. I peered over our cover and saw the dragon bearing down on us, its teeth glowing red.

"Shields!" I yelled. Asa whipped the shield on his right-arm around to his side and ducked his head down. I didn't have time to get my shield off my back, so I just squatted down and hoped for the best. Fire roared all around us, frying anything it touched. I could feel blisters forming along my back, but the leather wrappings we placed over our metal shields did their job. The air was full of the acrid scent of brimstone and burnt leather. I reached for Asa's arm, signaling him to hold still. He nodded. We remained silent until the flames finally died out. Asa's arm tensed as the dragon's approaching footfalls shook the ground. A low rumbling growl emanated from just on the other side of our rocky cover. Out of

the corner of my eye, I saw the golden scales of the beast's head sweep over Asa's position. I let go of his arm.

Instantly, Asa leaped into the air, swinging. He caught the corner of the monster's mouth, a lucky swipe that got under its scales and left a long bloody gash. As Asa landed, I grabbed his arm and started to run down the path, desperate to gain distance. There was a shift in the breeze, and I instinctively ducked just before its claws could remove my head. Then the other paw caught Asa's side, knocking us both tumbling to the ground. A chorus of bruises sang out in agony around my body as I came to a stop. Stars burst across my vision, but I shook them off and staggered to my feet. Asa lay dazed some fifteen feet away, directly in the dragon's path. The beast approached slowly, furious pleasure in its eyes as it looked down on us as a two-course meal.

"Come on, lad, get up. There's no time for you to be dying!" I yelled. He shook his head, spat blood out of his mouth, and propped himself up on one elbow. The dragon stepped closer, sending tremors through the area. It was enough for Asa's elbow to slip, sending him back to the ground.

Well, my time had finally come. I drew my sword and charged. The dragon took another step forward, and I could see it pull back an arm for a death blow. Asa looked up at me, eyes wide as he realized what was happening. My life would only give him a few seconds, but I knew it would be enough. The prophecy said so. Sorry lad.

Asa shouted, "No!" But I was well past the point of no return. As the claws came swooping in, I closed my eyes and thought of my friends, the ones I'd leave behind, and the ones I'd soon meet. Sorry Reis, I did what I had to. When a heavy impact crashed into me, knocking my body aside, I smiled.

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The Threshold

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~The Night of the Prophecy~

Friends of the family started to make their way to the Tavern around twilight. By that time, I had everything I needed packed up and ready for travel. I kept running through my checklist as I greeted people at the door, exchanging pleasantries about the muggy heat in the evening air and receiving gifts for Asa. I remembered I'd need to get more pack food as I shook hands with another of the farmers. Wait, did Asa even have a pack he could use? And what of some basic armor? It would take a pretty penny to get him properly equipped. Ah, no matter. I had enough saved up to pay for him, and it wasn't like I'd be around to use the coin for much longer.

When Asa and Sarah's family came in, there was a round of cheers for the young lad. He smiled bashfully and raised a hand in acknowledgement, but I could still see the worry in the way his lip twitched. Didn't pressure him about it though, just smiled, clapped a hand on his back, and waved towards a table reserved for them. The table was quickly thronged by congratulators and well-wishers, and Sarah's father, Liam, had his work cut out making sure they didn't swarm too fast. Sarah and her mother left for the kitchens to help bring out the food they had prepared earlier in the day. I would've gone to help them, but just then, I heard a loud shout from the door, "Isaac! Brother, it's been years! How are you?" I turned around to see a man about my age with a portly belly but much stronger arms waving at me.

I broke into a smile and gave my old friend a hug. "Bartholomew, I'm glad you could make it! Roads weren't too rough on you?"

He laughed, "No, no, they were fine. Well, my horse lost a shoe in the mud at one point, but that was just a spot of good fortune. Guess who caught up to me while I was cursing up a storm on the side of the road?" He stepped aside so two more people could walk in the door. Both wore cloaks of the Knight's Order with their hoods up. The first one removed their hood to reveal a wizened old man. His eyes were gaunt and tired, but ol' Jason gave me a soft smile. His right arm leaned on a walking stick, and his left arm hung limp at his side. "Didn't expect us all to come, did you, lad?" he asked with a rasp.

I shrugged, "I was trying to be cautiously optimistic. Even so, didn't think all three of you would show." I turned my attention to the last of the traveling party and said, "No need to be so dramatic, Raymond, get in here! How's the family? Your sister doing alright?" They took off their hood to reveal long braided silver-brown hair, a pair of piercing eyes, and an awkward smile. "I'm doing alright, thank you for asking. Glad to see you are well."

"Oh, Reis, what an unexpected surprise. Um, so..." I started to stammer, but luckily for me, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned around to see young Sarah.

"Master Isaac," she said, "Father says it's time to officially start things, but Asa's too nervous to read off the prophecy. Would you mind?"

"Of course, of course, lass. I understand." I turned back to my friends and said, "Sorry friends, we'll have to catch up in a moment; it's time for a speech. I think there's an open table over by that window. I'll be with you in a minute." They nodded and moved off to the table while I made my way to the front counter. Standing up on a chair, I turned to face the crowd and cleared my throat. Slowly, the noise around the tavern died out.

"Hey all! Thank you for coming. Now, you know why we're here, so I'll make this quick. We're not just celebrating the newest man in our quaint town, but the beginnings of a new hero! These are troubled times, as always seems to be the case, but having seen my fair share of action over the years, it warms my soul to see that I'll be able to entrust the future to brave young people like our Asa. He has accepted the call of Fate given at his birth, and today he visited the Oracle to learn his destiny. I've been asked to share that with you. So without further ado, here is the prelude in the story of your newest hero!"

As I recited the poem, I did my best to read it like some grand epic. I emphasized how he would endure and survive the trials in his *long* life and turned the references to death into a bold stand-off. At the end, there was a moment of silence, and I worried I had ruined the last lines, but then Bartholomew

stood up and shouted, “Three cheers for Asa, dragon-slayer!” The crowd roared in response, and the sound of applause cascaded through the tavern. Finally, a smile crept up on Asa’s face. I relaxed and returned to my friends’ table.

The evening passed merrily. The food was warm, the drink was good, and there was much to speak about with my friends. When he had a break from the thronging crowd, I invited Asa to join us. I know he wanted to spend the evening with Sarah, but it was important for him to meet other adventurers. He laughed along as Reis explained how she was once cursed to have everything she ate taste like tree bark for a week after she accidentally drank from elvish spring. Bartholomew told a daring story of how he had helped a knight rescue some unfortunate damsel, only to have the damsel make eyes at him rather than her young hero. Jason joked about how Bart would never settle down, but Bart shrugged and said, “Funny you should mention that. Actually, Isaac, it’s good that you invited us all together. There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

Reis’s jaw dropped, “You’re getting married?”

Bart laughed at her shock and said, “Heavens, no. I’ve decided to retire to the coast. I’ve decided I’m done with this adventuring life, and I’ve always wanted to gaze on the sea. May as well make my home there. So...” he coughed uncomfortably, “This is goodbye I suppose. I mean, you’re all quite welcome to visit, but the journey would take up most of a month. And you have your own lives to worry about...”

I reached over and put a hand on his shoulder. “Bart, don’t worry. You’ve earned your peace and quiet. I’d be glad to visit, but...” I glanced at Asa, who was watching me intently, “I must help our friend here kill a dragon, so I better just worry about that for now.” There was a moment of silence as we all contemplated that line in the prophecy about a brother’s death. Asa had no real brothers, so we all knew who that had to mean.

Jason eventually broke the silence, saying, "About that. I think I may know where you need to go." With an effort, he flopped his limp left arm on the table, and rolled up his sleeve. Instead of the hardy, sunbaked skin of a warrior, his arm was flaky black, like the ends of a burnt log. "Two years ago, I got cursed helping a young knight battle the Northmire Necromancer. It used to just be my hand, but now it covers most of the left side of my body."

"Are you going to die?" intervened Asa. Jason gave him a sharp look as he covered his arm again.

"Of course lad, but now I at least get some sense of when. Now listen, this'll be of use to you. Ever since I got this curse, I've been more sensitive to magic. Have any of you noticed how we've had an oddly warm summer this year? Certainly, it's come earlier at least." We nodded in general affirmation.

"Well, that's just not the sun deciding to change schedule. For months, I've felt something emanating from Mount Gezan in the east. I stopped by a village near the mountain's base a few weeks back, and it was sweltering. The crops in the fields were starting to cook. If a dragon is stirring up trouble, start searching there."

Asa nodded, "We can see Gezan from here. The top usually has a ring of clouds around it, right?"

"That's the one."

"Alright, guess I'm heading east in a few days Er, thank you."

Jason gave a wrinkled smile. "Of course. Telling you youngin's what to do is why us old folk stick around." Asa returned the smile with an uneasy one of his own, and I decided to turn the subject back to another of Bart's antics.

Hours passed, and soon it was just me and my friends around the table. Sarah's family left hours ago, and I encouraged Asa to go with them. Better spend what time he had left with those he cared about. And speaking of that, it wasn't much longer until Bart noticed Reis trying to catch my eye. Reading the signs, he made an excuse to go up to bed, and suggested Jason better get some rest as well. And so,

it was just the two of us. When Jason's door closed down the hall, Reis turned to me and asked, "How about a walk?"

It was a warm night outside, and though the moon wasn't in the sky at this time, the stars gave us plenty of light. We talked in hushed voices, not wanting to disturb any of the houses we passed by. For a while, it was just small talk, but eventually, I had to bring up the big question that was bugging me since her surprise appearance. "Reis, I didn't want to cause a scene earlier, and it's not that I'm not glad to see you again... But where's Raymond? Why didn't he come?"

She turned to look at me, and I saw her eyes soften, though her voice held no quaver as she answered, "Raymond died last year. There was an accident while he and his daughter were out hunting. She spooked a boar, and he jumped in the way of its charge."

I stopped in my tracks. Raymond and Reis were twins, and two of my oldest friends. I spent my whole career in the Knights' Order fighting alongside them. Raymond was always the cautious one, more so than even Jason. I hadn't expected him to be the first to go. And for Reis to lose her twin... "I'm sorry, Reis," I said. "How are you holding up? And how is his daughter?"

Reis picked up a stick from the side of the road and started pulling at its twigs. "I'm... doing better. It's been hard on Rachel, but she still wants to master the bow, so now I'm teaching her in his place. She'll be getting her own prophecy next year. I... want to make sure she's ready."

"Rachel is also Fate-marked then?"

Reis smacked the stick into the ground, breaking off the tip. "Oh, yes. Fate has a cruel sense of humor. It wasn't enough to brand my brother and I, but it had to go and curse his daughter too?" She turned to me, tears now welling in her eyes.

"Don't call it a curse, Reis. It's a calling, a chance to serve."

She threw the stick down the road. "You mean a command for sacrifice. You and Asa are both orphans because Fate said so. I saw tonight's 'hero'. He was scared out of his mind because he has to let

someone he cares about die, or watch a dragon burn down his home. And if he tries to ignore it, the fire will come anyway!”

“There’s a difference between dictating the future and being able to see it. What if Asa never got a prophecy? I’d be dead along with half the countryside. Fate has given Asa an opportunity to change things. And we know that he will be successful. Would you prefer the alternative?”

“Is this really the only way to fix things? To brand children with the duty of saving everyone else? To curse their whole lives so they expect disaster at any moment?”

I was stunned. “What are you getting at? Once a prophecy is done, it’s done. We both survived when it was our turn.”

“Only for Raymond to die because his daughter got marked, and for Asa’s prophecy to say you’re next?” As she said those words, I saw the pain in her eyes, and finally understood. I looked away, praying she’d understand my next words.

“Reis, I chose this. It was my decision to help Asa. If that requires my life, then so be it.”

“You mean if it requires your death.” I didn’t have anything to say to that comment, so she continued. “I require your life, Isaac. Why can’t that mean anything to you?”

I turned further away from her before responding, “In another life, it could mean everything. But, well, you’re right; Fate has marked us for difficult lives, lives of sacrifice. I’ve lived my whole life knowing I could be called to die at any moment. How could I give such a marked life to you? And what are you even asking for right now? Would you have me abandon Asa to run away with you?”

“No! I- er...,” I could hear her pacing as she searched for an answer. When it finally came, she sounded defeated, “Just, at least try to live, okay? No need to think of yourself as a martyr. Prophecies can mean many things, right? And it’s Asa’s prophecy, not yours, so don’t let it define your future.”

It took me too long to come up with an answer, so she marched her way around me and grabbed me by the shoulders. I couldn’t avoid her eyes again. “Isaac?” she pleaded.

My words came slow, "I don't really see a way out of this, Reis... but I can promise you this: I don't seek death. I expect it, but I'm not one for suicide."

"And if you do survive? What then?"

"I don't know, and please don't ask again. I promised I won't seek death, but I must prepare for it. If I die, don't let me die with regrets."

Her grip on my shoulder eased as she said, "Very well. I can't ask for more than that,"

I responded, "Thank you, Reis." After a moment, she still hadn't let go of me, and I figured I owed her something after that whole argument, so I put my arms around her and held her close.

Though not a lifetime, but at least for a minute, it was just the two of us in this quiet world beneath the stars. When we broke apart and made our way back to the tavern, she wasn't the only one with tears in her eyes, and we both knew this would be the best we'd have in this lifetime. And that was alright. Having made the last peace I needed, I went to bed, ready for one last adventure.

+~+~+~+~+~+~+~+~+ *The Prologue* +~+~+~+~+~+~+~+~+

Blood splattered across my cheek. Strange, there shouldn't be blood in heaven, should there? I took a deep breath and coughed. Why did the air smell of brimstone? Surely, I hadn't been consigned to the devil's pits?

An ear-splitting roar shook the sky, and I clutched at my ears. Finally, I opened my eyes, and saw what Hell looks like. Some distance to my right, Asa's bloodied body lay crumpled. The dragon stood over him, crowing in victory. My mind raced awake as I realized what happened. Asa had knocked me out of the way, taking the hit in my place.

I scrambled to my feet, almost slipping on the blade of Asa's sword. Mine was nowhere to be seen. As I picked up his blade, the dragon's nostrils flared and smoked, warning of the fire soon to come. I charged again. It saw me in the corner of its eye. I swung viciously, but the blade just skirted across his

scales. It tried to knock me aside, but I reached out with my open hand and grabbed hold of one of the spikes protruding from its head. It lifted me up into the air and swung around to try and shake me off. I responded by kicking my foot into the deep cut Asa left along its mouth. With a twist, I anchored my foot behind the layer of scales. The dragon swung its head into a wall, but my shield took the brunt of the impact, and my body was well past caring about pain at this point. With a scream, I twisted Asa's sword into a back-handed grip and plunged it deep into the dragon's eye. I let go of the hilt and twisted my foot free, dropping some ten feet to the ground. My joints wouldn't let me stand up at this point, so I just rolled over, hiding beneath my shield as the beast screamed and convulsed overhead. Rocks fell along the pass's walls, peppering my shield while the monster convulsed. I chanced a peek and saw the dragon clawing at its face, desperate to attack the source of the pain, but this only rattled the sword, worsening the wound. In one final act of defiance, the dragon screamed fire at the sky, and collapsed, dead.

I lay beside it, feeling just as broken. There was nothing else to do but listen to the dead wind snake its way through the pass. After a while, I thought it was calling my name. Fair enough, maybe the angels had finally come to pick me up. But a moment later, I realized it was Asa's voice.

I found the strength to get to my knees and crawled over to the boy. He was lucky not to have been crushed by the dragon's convulsions, but loose stones covered his blood-splattered chest. The dragon's claws had torn through his brigandine and lacerated his chest. It was a miracle he was still breathing.

"Asa, lad, I'm here," I said.

He tilted his head to see me, and his lip twitched as he tried to smile. "We got 'em master. We won."

"No!" I cried out, fighting to get enough air in my lungs to yell. "You're supposed to live! *'There are many years to tread'*! This is wrong! 'You can't be dying.'"

In between weakening breaths, he gave a labored chuckle and said, "Feels like I am."

I pounded my fist against the ground, “No! I can’t watch you die like this. It was my calling to be the one who goes. I was fine with that. I made my peace. How am I supposed to live now?!”

Asa vainly gasped for air before replying, “Please, tell Sarah... I’m sorry... I was hoping to make it home. But... It looks like this is your story...” His voice grew fainter. I had to strain to hear his words. “Promise me you’ll... do my share of living too, okay?”

I could hardly see him through the tears in my eyes, and I couldn’t find the right words to say. Instead, I gripped his right hand, the one free of that accursed mark. He gave me one last smile, and then his eyes glazed over. Like the dragon’s last breath, I screamed at the heavens, at Death, begging to be taken instead. Again, Death didn’t listen.

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The First Chapter

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An hour after the funeral, I still stood at Asa’s grave. Reis was right, Fate was a cruel master. The young are meant to bury the old, not the other way around. Heroes are the ones who are supposed to return home. Not me.

In the last light of the day, I repeatedly ran through the prophecy in my mind, trying to find some loophole that could bring Asa back. The final line of prophecy said he’d *‘live renewed again’* but having just watched his body buried under topsoil and tears, I knew not to expect a miracle here. It didn’t make any sense. Perhaps it was hubris to believe one could understand Fate through a handful of words. And yet...

The sound of footsteps behind me shook me to my senses. However, I didn’t turn around until a soft hand grabbed mine. It was Sarah. Her eyes were trying to weep, but they had run out of tears hours ago. Behind her stood Reis, watching me with gentle apprehension.

“Dinner is ready...” Sarah said. I grunted in acknowledgement. She tugged gently on my hand. I stood still.

Sarah prompted me again, “Master Isaac, please, everyone is-”

Reis cut her off, saying, “Sarah, it’s alright. Why don’t you go tell the others to start without Isaac and me?”

“Sarah shook her head. “Mother would just tell me to come and get you again.”

“Alright. Then, just give us a few minutes, okay?” Reis answered. Sarah paused for a moment, nodded, and then walked past me to sit by the grave, her left hand weakly pulling on a few blades of grass. Reis walked up beside me, not saying a word. I didn’t feel like I had anything to say either, but when she rested her hand on my shoulder, the words just came out, making concrete the fears I had been holding back.

“When Asa... when Asa said goodbye, he told me that this was ‘my story’.”

She didn’t make a response, so I continued, “I thought he was just trying to tell me to live. But now... I think I understand.”

“What do you mean?” Reis asked.

“Who knows when he figured it out, or maybe it’s just coincidence... but, I think the prophecy was mine, not his.” At this, both Sarah and Reis twisted around to stare at me.

“We were both there at the Oracle’s house. We’re both Fate-marked. Blazes, I even helped stoke the prophetic fire. ‘*Many sorrows*’, ‘*bereft of family*’ - We just assumed it had to mean him.”

From her spot in the grass, Sarah quietly whispered, “But what of, ‘*Your road is long and full of pain*?’”

I clenched my fist and stepped away from Reis, moving over to the other side of the grave from Sarah. “Of course, we thought that meant Asa. He was so young, he had a life ahead of him!” I shook my

head and swung around, away from the grave. "But it looks like I'm going to be stuck here, trapped for years with an empty life."

Reis's voice swept into me from behind, shocking me, "Isaac, how could you say that!? We're here with you. Sarah's loss is just as much as yours, not to mention her family!"

I turned around to face her, anger rising in my voice, though at the world, never her. "Sarah has her life ahead of her still. So much potential remains for her. But me? I made my amends. I found my peace. I was ready to greet death!" Those last words came out with a roar, but quickly faded into a dry sob.

Once I regained use of my voice, I said, "Sarah. I'm sorry. Don't think me cruel or heartless. I just... I just..."

Sarah stood up, circled Asa's grave, and hugged me. Bless this child. She and Asa were so pure. My words died in my throat as I accepted her forgiveness.

A moment later, Sarah stepped back, wiping at her eyes, and said, "Sir Isaac, if the prophecy is truly yours, then I think you need to '*release what you still hold*'". I looked at her in surprise, "I did. I gave up everything. I'd given myself to fate long ago."

Now it was Reis's turn to surprise me. She said, "But that's the point. You still think you have to die. You're committed to it. But if that really was your prophecy, then you know you still have time. You're free now."

Before I could respond, Sarah nodded, saying, "It's what Asa would want."

I looked at them both before turning back to face the grave. As I watched where his body lay, his last words echoed in my mind. *Do my share of the living too, okay?*

The others waited for me to say something, so I weakly stated, "I'm not sure I know how to do that anymore."

Sarah knelt down to touch the dirt at the top of Asa's grave, grinding the specs lightly between her thumb and forefinger. Without looking at either me or Reis, she said, "Before my grandparents died, they'd play with me and my siblings every day. Asa and I used to wonder how they'd manage to do that, with bodies so frail. Ultimately, we decided on this: elders teach the young how to survive, but it's the young who mentor the elders about how to live."

She paused to lock eyes with me. "Master Isaac... If you'd like, my family can help you with that."

Reis stepped beside me and held out her hand, saying, "And I'd like to walk that road beside you."

I nodded, and then gently, took her hand.

Sarah patted the grave. One final tear escaped her eyes, sparkling brilliantly for a moment in the last rays before dusk. Then, she stood up, brushed herself off, and turned to guide us back to her house and away from the grave.