

The Prophecy

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Most prophecies are vague. Perhaps that is why this stone had been ignored for so long. The prophecy engraved into its surface was clearly spelled out:

The blond child of the grey haired witless and the fragile beauty will save her friends from the storm.

Dannon ran his hands over the grey stone, feeling the familiar shape of the letters engraved in its surface against his fingers. Yes, there was nothing hidden here. No great mysteries, no tales of treasure to find or heroic stories waiting to happen or events that would rattle kingdoms.

The fact that the prophecy was so vague was probably for the best. Otherwise the stone would have been hauled off to a major city long ago and its intended recipients would never have known. He turned and seated himself on the stone, looking out over the grassy knoll the stone stood watch over and over the great grassy plain beyond. He sighed again, and rubbed his long auburn brown hair. His hair color was the visual warning of the strength of the magic which flowed through his veins. Magic. The darker color a person's hair, the stronger that person was in the magic arts. Which is why, yet again, he had turned away ambassadors from the Kingdom Feuer today. They had offered him chances to study all the prophecy stones their kingdom had squirreled away. An even greater temptation, they had offered the chance to study the war magics that were forbidden to all but a chosen few magicians. If only he would leave the sleepy little village in the middle of nowhere and join the war.

Dannon looked out over the wind ripples on the plain and listened to the small sparrows singing their peaceful song. If only the peace all around him was not such an illusion. War was coming to his village. At least it was coming according to the ambassadors. The fragile truce between the mighty Kingdoms of Feuer and Wasser had been broken one too many times and soon the armies of both would roll across his tiny town as they battled. The magic they unleashed would score the land into ashes and leave nothing alive or growing for miles around any battlefield. His town was doomed.

Once again Dannon wished he had been born without the curse of magic. In this tiny little town there was no need for a strong magician. The inhabitants were all blessed with golden brown hair with very little variation between. Their weak magic was more than enough for growing their crops and simple household chores. He was not needed here. In truth, he could not have told why he stayed, except for the guaranty of seeing this one prophecy played out. It was an opportunity few magicians had the chance to witness and one he would not pass up for all the magic of the world. A prophecy Dannon would not live to see come into fruition if war ravaged the land.

"Dannon!" A high pitched child's voice rang out. He smiled to himself. Speaking of the child of prophecy. "What are you doing out here Dannon?" The voice came from behind him and he felt his smile grow as he turned. "Looking at the rock I told you about, Sunshine." A bright smile on an angelic little face greeted him. The child was roughly seven years old with long blond hair. A heavily patched light blue dress adorned her thin frame. Her face was a little bit grubby from the infrequent

washings. But her cheerful personality more than made up for her shabby appearance.

"The rock that tells everyone about myself and Daddy?" Sunshine asked.

"Yes, that rock." Dannon answered. "What are you doing so far away from the village?"

"I am looking for Daddy. I think he is lost again." Sunshine answered cheerfully.

"Did he wander off again?"

"I think so. I can't find him in any of the usual places. Will you help me look for him?"

"Sure," Dannon replied as he took the child's hand. "Where should we look for him?"

"I was going to go to the forest." Sunshine answered.

"But the forest is dangerous for a child!" Dannon exclaimed.

"Yes it is," Sunshine replied in a knowing tone, "but the villagers don't always like Daddy. So I didn't want them to know he got lost again."

"They are just scared because he is different. But we don't have to tell them that he got lost. Let's go look, shall we?"

It was a quick walk to the edge of the forest. There was little danger for a grown man under the branches of the forests trees, but Dannon worried about Sunshine wandering around in it alone. They searched the paths of the forest for a while until they came to the edge of a small stream. Sitting on a large stone in the middle of the stream, his cloths dripping wet, pounding a rock against a stick, was Sunshine's father, Grey.

Dannon didn't know if Grey was his real name or if it was the name the villagers had given him when he and Sunshine's mother had wandered into the village so many years ago. He certainly never talked much. And what he did say never made sense. Because Grey had two very distinctive features that set him apart from everyone else. The first characteristic everyone noticed about Grey was his knee-length hair. It was a light gray color. A color no one had ever seen before. A color that seemed to have no magic connected to it. And the second fact that quickly became apparent to even an inobservant passerby

would be that Grey was crazy.

Not dangerously so, but still crazy. He could perform simple tasks that were given to him, as long as they were repetitive. Often times his conversation seemed to be in another language. He would seem almost coherent, if not very simple minded.

But then there were days like today, when Grey would wander off and do strange things. He had never hurt anyone. Although one day he set a wood stack on fire near the village; another he had chopped a tree down in the center of town. The strange things he did, although infrequent, were enough to set the villagers against him. When Sunshine's mother had been alive no one had cared because she had taken care of Grey and helped make sure he didn't get into trouble. But two years after Sunshine had been born the poor woman had died. Grey had gotten worse after that. The villagers had wanted to take Sunshine away, believing that Grey could not care for the child. Dannon had stopped them however, understanding that Sunshine was the child of the prophecy. The village elders had consented to leave the child with Grey on the condition that Dannon help raise her. Since that day Dannon had lived in the house on the edge of town with Sunshine and Grey.

"Grey" Dannon called, without a response from the gray haired man. "Grey, it's time to go back to the village. It's time to go home." Grey continued to pound on the rock with his stick as if he could not hear Dannon. Grey's long silver hair was splayed out in the stream behind him like the silvered strands of a spider's web lit by dew drops in the early morning. Dannon sighed in frustration.

"Daddy." Grey's head snapped up at the sound of Sunshine's voice. "Daddy, it's time to get out of the stream."

Grey stood, promptly slipped on the wet rock and plunged head first into the stream. Sunshine laughed while Dannon just sighed to himself again as the now completely soaked Grey extracted himself from the water. Sunshine let go of Dannon's hand and promptly attached herself to her father. Her cheerful chatter filled the long walk back to their house on the edge of the village while Grey's unintelligible replies broke in every now and then. That night Sunshine combed out Grey's hair for him and then braided it after their dinner was over.

A few days later Dannon was teaching school to the village children. Mostly he taught them the basics of magic, math and reading. There weren't many children in such a small village

and they had to work on their family's farm much of the time. Still, it was one of the highlights of his life, to watch the children grow as they learned about their world and their magic.

Sunshine was his star pupil. She seemed to drink up everything he tried to teach her. Unfortunately her magic was so weak that she had trouble casting even the simplest spells. Her problem was not that Sunshine didn't know the concepts of magic or spells that Dannon taught, but her magic was just too weak to make the spells work. It was frustrating for both Dannon and Sunshine, and more than once he wondered at the prophecy. How would a child who could hardly levitate an empty cup or barely light a candle save any one?

Maybe she would save her friends some other way. It was an interesting thought to Dannon, meaning that the prophecy might not be as plain and simple as it first looked. Dannon really hoped he would be around to see the prophecy come true. Of course with as friendly as Sunshine was, it probably meant that she would save the entire village somehow. He realized that he should probably start writing down everything about the prophecy and Sunshine so that when the prophecy was fulfilled he had a record to show his fellow magicians. Dannon resolved to start a journal on Sunshine that very day after school ended.

The following weeks were beautiful. Dannon almost forgot about the dire predictions of war as the days passed. He collected stories of Sunshine and Grey for the book he was working on. The villagers were more than willing to share stories of Sunshine's mother, every living soul of them talking about how beautiful and graceful she was. Almost like nobility. They were considerably less kind with the stories of Grey. But a few of the wiser ones always noted how he never hurt anyone, and despite his seeming lack of wits, truly cared for Sunshine and her mother. Dannon faithfully recorded all the stories, figuring they would provide valuable back ground for study later on.

He was on his way to the stone of prophecy to take a rubbing of it for his book when he noticed the smoke. A thin cloud of it was gathered in the distance, covering much of the horizon. Worried about a forest or grass fire he started to run for the small hilltop where the stone rested. Out of breath he reached it and could do nothing more than lean up against a sapling and gasp for air. Once he recovered a bit he staggered up the hill and into a nightmare.

Several miles away was an army encampment. The smoke he had

seen was coming from the army's camp fires. It was a massive camp, stretching out of sight into the distance. From as far away as he was standing there was no way to tell which country it belonged too. Not that the nationality of the army would matter much. Armies of any country were notorious for plundering the land they marched through. Usually at a great cost of life to the locals as the soldiers raped and pillaged whatever they wanted. As long as the army was this close the village was in grave danger.

Movement about a mile away caught his attention and Dannon dropped into the long grass to hide. A scouting party had just left the tree line and the motion had alerted Dannon to their presence. Dannon could see five individuals, four of which seemed to be armed with the deadly long bows favored by scouts. They stood around the edge of the forest gossiping for all he could tell. He prayed fervently that the scouts would head back to the army camp, away from the village. Maybe the villagers would go unnoticed if they were extremely lucky. He didn't know much about armies, but Dannon seemed to remember reading that keeping an army in one place for too long was difficult because of the resources it took to keep an army supplied.

Dannon was watching the scouts and hoping they would head away from the village when he noticed Sunshine. She had just left the edge of the forest heading in his direction, about half way between Dannon and the scouting part. He glanced in horror back at the scouts. One of them had already pointed at the little girl. Dannon jumped to his feet and yelled at Sunshine.

"Run!" He screamed, waving his arms at her to get her attention. But she couldn't hear him as far away as she was so she just waved back at him. She couldn't see the scouts, who were pointing at her and talking among themselves. He couldn't tell for sure, but they seemed to be laughing about something. "Run!" He screamed again as she started to walking towards him after she finished waving. He looked back at the scouts in desperation.

One of the scouts had his bow in his hands and was drawing an arrow. The other scouts were definitely pointing at Sunshine and laughing. Dannon screamed again in impotent rage, pointing at the scouts, trying to get Sunshine to notice. They were far out of range for him to use magic to interfere in the nightmare unfolding in front of him. But Sunshine finally noticed his frantic waving and looked behind her. She saw the armed men and started running towards Dannon. The scout pulled his arrow back and released the black feathered shaft in one swift motion.

Time slowed down for him. The world narrowed in his vision and all Dannon could see was the little girl running in the wind, her beautiful long blond hair streaming behind her as the dark wings of the arrow arced almost lazily in its flight towards her. He might have screamed again, but he couldn't tell. The world grew even more still as the arrow reached its peak and started its slow decent. Almost agonizingly slowly it dropped towards the little figure that seemed frozen in place. His heart beat once. Twice. And the wicked head of that hideous arrow pierced the little girl he loved as a daughter and pinned her tiny form to the ground.

It felt like Dannon had been stabbed through the chest. He dropped to his knees. Emotions swirled through him like a storm. Feelings he couldn't tell and had no name for washed his consciousness. Until one feeling triumphed. Full of rage he stood, wanting nothing so much as to wash this plain with the blood of the men responsible and the army they belonged too. Dannon would start by killing those foolish scouts who were even now were laughing and slapping their comrade on the back for shooting a little girl.

Dannon tried to start walking towards the men. But his feet would not obey him. He seemed rooted to the ground. He glanced at his feet, only to have his shadow catch his attention. It was rotating around him, moving towards the sun, for all the world as if the laws of physics had been reversed. Dannon noticed that all the shadows were, from a single blade of grass to the still dark of the forest. He looked up, in the direction the shadows were now stretching towards, as if something was calling them.

Grey stood over the body of Sunshine. As if he had just appeared out of nowhere. Gently, ever so slowly, Grey reached down and picked up the body of his daughter, the arrow still sticking out of her back. The shadows had reached him now, only they were no longer simple shadows but a great empty darkness beyond simple black. A darkness so black it could and would absorb all existence of the universe and leave nothing behind. This absence of existence was flowing into Grey's feet.

Dannon tried to move again but his body would not respond. There were great patches of darkness seeping across the entire land now, all moving towards Grey. Dannon thought his head was spinning, until he noticed the clouds that had formed out of the thin morning air. They were slowly spinning, the epicenter located over Grey. And the clouds were growing. The darkness was also starting to swirl with the clouds, but its inky

blackness continued to flow into Grey. As if in another world, Dannon's mind told him that he was seeing magic. Magic unlike anything any magician had ever seen.

There was a pulse to the spiral now. A pulse that set Dannon's heart beat in tune with itself. He could not even try to do more, just stand there held in the grasp of a power beyond his understanding. Watching spell bound as a storm of magic flowed into a man Dannon realized now that he knew nothing about. A man whom also held in his arms the still body of his daughter, his only reason to live.

Dannon could see every detail of Grey and Sunshine as clearly as if he stood beside them. He couldn't explain how he felt every slow agonized breath Grey drew. Could not explain how he felt every beat of Grey's heart in every fiber of his being. And certainly couldn't explain the terribly cold hand that slowly squeezed his heart. But what he could see in crystal detail, despite the thousands of feet between them, was Grey's hair changing color. The very tips of his hair were black. Black hair, a color no one had seen before. And the blackness was spreading, ever so slowly up from the tips of his hair towards his head.

Grey spoke. Whispered really, yet it was a sound that reverberated through every living soul.

"I gave it all for them. I gave my power, my kingdom and even my mind. Gave it gladly so that I could live in peace with the woman I loved. And you took them from me."

The world had grown completely dark now. All Dannon could see was Grey. As he watched Grey threw his head back and roared. A sound full of anguish and rage, primal and raw, a sound that captured every aspect of pain imaginable, ripped through Dannon. As Grey cried out a single tear rolled down his cheek and dropped. When the tear struck the ground Dannon finally lost consciousness.

He woke up several hours later, or so he guessed from the position of the sun. It took several weeks to verify the extent of the damage caused by the magic storm Grey had unleashed. Not that there was any physical damage to the world, but every human being outside of the villagers had turned to dust. They were literally the last people for hundreds of miles in any direction. Dannon imagined they were the last people on the earth now. The cities, the buildings, the carts and animals, even cloths remained where they had been. But all that could be

found of people were piles of gray dust that strongly resembled ash.

Grey and Sunshine were still there. They had turned to a black stone the color of obsidian but stronger than any other mere rock. Every detail perfectly preserved, from the bloody drops rolling down the arrow that was still piercing Sunshine's small body; to the look of pain on Grey's face as he screamed at the cruel world. All the villagers had experienced the same things Dannon had, no matter where they had been. They had all experienced with Dannon the death of Sunshine and Grey's reaction. To honor Grey and Sunshine the villagers moved the stone of prophecy to the feet of the statue that Grey and Sunshine had become. It was the only memorial to the man and his daughter that seemed fitting. Around the statue a beautiful new species of flower was also beginning to grow, almost like a natural memorial. The flowers had deep blue petals the color of Sunshine's eyes while long golden hairs grew from beneath the flower's head.

Dannon stood observing the memorial several months later. He was holding his finished book on the prophecy that he had started. It seemed now like years ago he had lived in another world with Sunshine and Grey. He had worked feverishly hard to finish the book since the magic storm. What he held in his hands was every scrap of information on the prophecy stone, Grey and his wife, Sunshine and finally the magic storm that ended civilization. It was his personal memorial to the little girl that had saved even a tiny town from the end of the world. It would also serve as a history book so that future generations would know her story. As he showed the book to the statue his eyes fell on the prophecy stone and the words engraved in its surface. Dannon wondered at the simple words etched in stone that had perhaps been the vaguest prophecy of them all.