

PROMPT #2: You've been raised all your life to fulfill a prophecy, only for the seer to realize they were mistaken — you have no great destiny after all. What do you do now?

Cycle of a Fantasy

by **Liam Fergola**

Hopeful parents plea to the townsfolk of their child's purity – sanctity birthed by naught but an angel's descent upon the world which they woke. Yet, it is the wretched caretakers of Dawnshome who curl those words to the backs of their throats. Words which should never befall a young one's ears – that should never escape the lips of an Incubator.

We were raised in that place, home to children bereft of parents from the first moment light met their eyes. Dawnshome, some ramshackle building constructed for scraps of bread, had existed on the far outskirts of Panthaven. It was abandoned in every sense of the word. Wall paint chipped from years of disregard. Floor boards peeled upwards with dull nails still awaiting an unshod foot. Not to mention the clothes we wore – the sacks they'd given us – were simply stitched and drab, thrown together to resemble the concept of clothing. The food we ate – pails of slop – had but a hint of flavor packed inside their messy form. But we ate their food all the same... we wore their clothing all the same. For all we knew, that was our life.

We sat plainly among those groups of children. Those who were raised to competency, trained for strength, and then kicked out and sold off somewhere in the city where their young, newly built muscles could benefit a lord for years to come.

Dawnshome consisted of a dozen open rooms, each of which served a purpose in the building it once was, now lost meaning through the Incubators' renovations. Each room held three beds – meaning three Eggs, as we were titled – and a small desk with a stack of books placed atop it. Of our reading material was a self-study in common human language, a guide to poisons and medicinal herbs, and finally, a history of Panthaven.

The Incubators weren't too keen on seeing to us, only barging in to ensure we kept up with our studies, were fed, and given pails of water when we needed to bathe. After all, it was their heads at risk – and subsequently ours should we not follow their word. They needn't do much else besides keep us contained. Needless to say, they never kept a keen eye on us. Thus, a fourth book in that room would never rouse their suspicion.

Aside from myself were the twins – a boy and a girl – who'd been abandoned for that very same reason. I'd learned later that their mother had died during childbirth – a common occurrence in Panthaven – but to twins? They were seen as scourges of their blood. The law had prevented their death sentence, so just like the others in Dawnshome, they were sent here as a last resort. The final stop shy of death.

Although they were given no names, much like the other young of Dawnshome, they carried with them a story which – although not their creation – was inspiring to all who's circumstances matched our own. That included us, of course, who'd marveled over the scrappily-bound novel the twins whenever we had a chance. The hero's tale went as follows:

“A young child – birthed in the countryside – had lived a humble farmer amongst the people of his village. His father, lost to war, and his mother dead by birth, sent gossip amongst the people – both young and old – exchanging thoughts of the abandoned youth. It wasn't until a travelling seer visited that homestead, the orphan, that the villagers learned he was a hero. The hero slew monsters of unique and horrific design, radiating hope to those cast in the darkness of kingly corruption. In the care of his companions, the warrior Erron and archer Eliza, Samuel made his final march onwards to The Capital, marking the last stretch of his journey and end to his heroic tale. The hero thus was immortalized, not as a slayer of monsters, but as a bringer of peace and prosperity amidst war and strife. A beacon to the people. A beacon to those who may follow.”

Along their lengthy journey, the trio cast fortune to the poorest of villages – gracing others as ill-fated as them with but the knowledge and muscle they'd garnered from sordid beginnings. Keeping with them the coin he stole, the purses from the Incubators which they fled, the hero's party met face-to-face with their grandest challenge yet: a dispute of faith amongst themselves.

“To be a hero is to have a sense of justice – of pride within yourself to be stronger than your challenges, yet tolerant of the means to overcome them!” I spouted, a glare meeting my sight through his partly furrowed brow.

“You cannot excuse the wrongs we've done, Sam!” affirmed Erron, “Theft is a crime, no matter the lies you loft yourself on.”

I reclined in my chair, pressing a leather boot to the edge of the tavern table as I rocked on its back legs, “We’d get nowhere with such petty ideas. We’re Eggs, Erron. No common civilian or wretched noble would send us glances if we were still wandering in bags – much less without that blade you keep. How do you think we afforded that, hmm?”

“I bought this sword, Sam. I bought it with the money we’ve gained from our deeds. If I could, I would return it, but your words now answer my suspicions.” Erron stood; his hand pressed tightly to the pommel of his blade as he looked to his twin. She sat bored, an open palm pressed to her cheek as she poked the meal in front of her with a wooden fork.

“Hmm?” Eliza’s attention rose to her standing twin, then to the onlookers about us, then to me, “Oh, right. Samuel...”

“You have something to say to me as well?” I fell forwards, planting the chair on all its legs, and my feet along with it, “Go on then, let the world hear it! Just how awful a hero am I?”

“You’re not a hero, Samuel. Never have been.” Her hand left her face and fell beside her plate, pushing her to a stand to meet with Erron. “That old seer was right after all. Had I known you’d go to such lengths... I shouldn’t’ve urged you to travel with us.” Eliza turned to face her brother, muttered a word into his ear before they both turned face and began to flee.

“What of our journey!?! You’d leave me for this!?” Before I knew it I stood, hands slamming to the table as my gaze bore a hole through their backs. For such a simple thing... I’m not stealing... It’s going to good hands!

“Sam.” Erron looked back to me now with that wretched glare of his, “The greater you corrupt these lands, the greater the weight we have to tow. We’re the ones who have to pick up after your wrongs. We do the heavy lifting, not you. And you can hide your blunders through good deeds but...” He looked to the ground before returning to my eyes, “You’re no longer the man I thought you were. You are not that boy who sought adventure through aiding others. You’re a thief, Sam... a criminal.”

Erron gave a slight smile to his sister as the tavern doors swung open, leaving me behind in the midst of hundreds of eyes. I sank back into my chair, eyes fixed to the forgotten meals left at the table.

Just as the atmosphere lightened, eyes drifting back to their own company, music filled the tavern by tone of a lute. A bard, who stood far on the opposite end of the tavern – by the fire place – sung praises of the hero Samuel’s tale. Through his lengthy stanzas a single word came to me. “Dawnshome” he sung. Right, it was Dawnshome’s fault.

I raised from the table and slinked across the tavern floor, meeting with the cheery lutenist with a hood pulled over my hair. I reached for the coin pouch at my waist, yet hesitated

as that word returned, “Dawnshome he fled with spears to his head, three cheers to the hero, the people he led!”

I lowered the hand from my waist, reaching into my pocket for a single, untainted coin, and dropped it into his hat. His music stopped for a moment.

“Why, thank you kindly.” His arms shot across him in a deep bow, before returning to playing position.

“Hey.” I called, “Dawnshome... don’t let it leave your lips. The nobles will have your head.” I’d glanced back at the man who looked to me with confusion.

“C-certainly, sir.” He stuttered, dropping to a knee and scrambling about the case at his feet.

“And while you’re at it. This... hero. He was no inspiration to the youth.” The lutenist turned, looking to my hooded visage. “You shouldn’t spout lies so readily.” I turned to face the door, arms receding into the depths of my cloak. Three cheers to the false hero of old, slayer of beasts and spawn of misfortune. I’m sure that’d do well in the history books.

“So... the heroes made it to The Capital, right? What did they do there?” I asked, candle light flaring in my dark eyes.

“It’s said they ended the corrupt king’s rule, handing the royal’s riches back to the people and even instating themselves as the royal counsel.” The twin walked beside me, carrying with him the tattered novel.

“Hey, c’mon already!” The other twin urged in a silent shout. She crouched in a space of the cave wall, moonlight pouring in from the other side of the opening. “Are we doing this? Or are you gonna keep marveling at that novel?”

“Ugh. Fine...” I clutched the candle frame in my palm and lowered to meet with her, grabbing with my other hand the outside surface of the opening. “This... this is it!” I lurched outwards, tumbling down the shallow cliff side and onto the leafy ground. The seasons had changed in Panthaven, and with it, the Incubators had loosened their guard.

“You ready?” The other twin dropped down from the opening to meet me; his arm still wrapped tightly around the novel.

“Yea,” I looked over to his sister, who now jogged to meet us. “You ready?” She nodded.

Our party of three convened in a circle about the leafy ground, smiling to each other as we looked to the moon through patchy leaves above.

“Together now,” I said. “1, 2—”

“Who needs a seer!? We’re gonna be heroes!”

We raised our arms to the sky in a cheer, locking hands and sprinting off past the tree line. With but a candle to light our way through the night, makeshift bags formed from leftover clothes, we’d win back those who were taken from us, and bring peace to Dawnshome – no, to the world. Because... what else would you need to be a hero?