

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?

Finishing in 1st Place

by **Carly Henry**

“**H**udson! Remember your breathing techniques!”

My dad’s deep voice boomed over the cheering crowds. I nodded solemnly, attempting to mask my nerves. I leaned down to reach my toes and stretch out my tight hamstrings. I glanced at my burnt orange running cleats and recalled the number of races I have competed wearing them. I recalled the number of times they had helped me win. I hope they can help me today.

“Yo, dude. Loosen up. You look like you are about to puke up your breakfast,” Jack jokes from beside me. My best friend appeared nervous himself, but I knew better than to chirp back. Jack always had a way of joking around in serious situations. I knew it helped him calm his nerves before every race.

I forced a smirk and a small laugh. However, there was no chance I was going to loosen up. I could feel the weight of my destiny resting on my shoulders. Today wasn’t just any normal race. It was the State Qualifiers. My performance today could quite literally decide my future, my college career, and my chances of running professionally.

I nostalgically began to recall all the memories of running when I was a young child. My dad and I would race down our narrow street. I could vividly picture my dad, a former Olympian sprinter, staying in pace with me to make me feel like I was running faster. He would encourage me to pick up my speed and model how I should pump my arms. He would joke, “You must fulfill the family prophecy!” Little did he know that I would still remember those words today. I glanced up into the stands, where he stood with his arms crossed, and lifted my chest. I took several more deep breaths and walked to my assigned lane on the track.

Jack took the lane directly next to me and patted me on the back. No words were exchanged. I stretched my left, tight hamstring one more time, and got into a low position. My left leg still felt sore, but I ignored it. Nothing mattered except for crossing the finish line. *CRACK!*

The sound of the gun echoed in my ears. My legs moved at the speed of light as I advanced to the lead. I felt a surge of confidence, and I smiled. I only had to run 400 meters. Only one lap. One lap that would decide my destiny.

“Atta boy!” My dad cheered at me as I rounded the corner.

His encouragement filled me with another burst of energy. My legs felt as light as feathers and my arms pumped in perfect form. I bounded down the straight stretch of the track with wind whistling in my ears. If I won this race, I would go to the State Championships. There would be prospective college coaches at the meet to watch me compete. Winning this singular race would place me as one of the top recruits in the whole country. All I had to do was finish in first place.

Fulfill the family prophecy! This is your destiny!

The words vibrated through my brain. I could do this. I kicked into another gear, fighting against the fatigue. I was nearing the second and final curve of the lap.

Then all of a sudden, a sharp pain shot down the back of my leg. I winced. It felt as if a knife had been stabbed into my left hamstring.

It's okay. Push through.

I coached myself, trying to distract from the pain, but my speed started to slow. I lost my significant lead against the other runners, and fell into the same pace with Jack. “Hudson... c'mon... you got this,” Jack grunted in between breaths as he gained speed next to me.

The pain intensified. My left hamstring felt like it was being ripped open. I continued to slow down, and Jack eventually passed me. Tears started welling in my eyes. I couldn't believe this was happening. Not right now. Not during this race.

I caught a glimpse of my dad in the distance. His face was grim, and his eyes were worried.

Another runner passed me on the right. Then another on the left. And then another. The pain in my left leg turned into a burning sensation, and I couldn't help but start to limp. Glancing ahead ten yards, I saw the finish line. A tear rolled down my cheek.

One more push.

I crossed the finish line and collapsed onto the track. My leg was throbbing, but it was nothing compared to the disappointment I felt deep inside. I blew my chance. There was no destiny for me. I failed.

“Hudson Jones! Coming in 6th place!” the announcer shouted over the speaker. Holding my limp leg, I glanced up to see my dad running over towards me. I couldn’t stand up. I couldn’t even bear to look him in the eyes.

“Dad, I don’t know what happened...” I hardly whispered to him, burying my face in my hands.

My dad crouched down next to me and leaned in close. He firmly grabbed my shoulders and pulled me into a tight hug.

With his mouth directly next to my ear, he said, “Hudson. I love you, no matter what. Win or lose, I’m so proud to call you my son.”

A huge weight lifted off my shoulders as I said back, “I love you too, Dad.” My dad lifted me off the ground and wrapped my arm around his strong, stable torso. Together, we hobbled back towards the stands.

In the middle of the stands, a frail, elderly man stood up. He started clapping. Following his lead, a little girl stood up and clapped with him. A group of teenagers began to shout my name. My teammates quickly joined the growing applause. Within seconds, almost everyone at the track meet was cheering at the top of their lungs for me.

Pride coursed through my veins as I gazed upon everyone on their feet. I beamed with great joy. That’s when I decided that my prophecy wasn’t all I thought it was. Maybe I had no destiny after all.

And I was okay with it.