



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?

The Mourning Dove

by **Anonymous**

As he crested the ridge-line, he took a moment to survey his surroundings. Around him were the charred remains of trees, as far as his remaining eye could see.

He was still dressed in his flight uniform, which was more than adequate for the early autumn weather. As a former pilot, it was his most prized possession, and it only seemed fitting that he wear it on this journey. He had been hiking for several days now, carrying only a small water bottle which he periodically refilled at the streams. A certain numbness prevailed throughout his body, and he no longer felt the sensation of hunger.

The forest, or rather its remains, were dead silent. Perhaps at some point - back when the trees still held their branches – the chirping of birds may have filled the air. But this would have been sometime before the war began, well before he was born.

For all he knew, his birth – and by extension his existence – may have been a product of the war itself. At the time the air force had begun a biological engineering program, hoping that the next evolution in warfare would be the human component of their aircraft. His parents – both pilots at the time – had volunteered for this experiment. He was the result.

Despite being a prototype, his career had been very promising. He had become the youngest pilot to be given command of an aircraft. Not long after his sixteenth birthday, he had become the youngest pilot to successfully intercept and shoot down an enemy bomber.

It was hard to believe that three years had passed since then. He continued his march through the woods, only pausing occasionally to cool his exhausted legs. This area was considered off-limits for the civilian population. Enemy aircraft frequently crashed here, as did rocket-bombs that fell short of the city, igniting periodic fires. On occasion, a bomber would

crash carrying an earthquake bomb, and seismic impact could be felt as far as the city. Today, however, safety was not on his mind.

With his modified genetics, he could see further, fly higher, and corner faster than the other pilots. His aircraft was designed around these features. The cockpit was lightly pressurized, allowing him to fly at extreme altitudes without a bulky pressure suit. Instead of radar or failure-prone missiles, there was only a pair of hypersonic autocannons and an optical rangefinder. The high velocity of his shells, and the thin atmosphere above 24,000 meters allowed him to accurately engage targets at a range of nearly 10 kilometers.

The stealth coatings and lack of radar made him almost invisible to enemy fighters. The enemy's heat-seeking missiles, despite their advancements, could only reach a range of 5 kilometers. Such a combination made him the master of the skies, earning him the nickname of the "human peregrine". Even the enemy pilots – aware of his capabilities – were ordered to disengage if attacked by long-range cannon fire. It seemed that, just as so many had predicted, he was destined to become the greatest pilot of all time – the human weapon that would end the war.

To his left he noticed a strange log in the center of a large clearing. As he approached, he noticed that it was not a log at all, but rather the carcass of a rocket. Its long, tubular body had been flattened upon impact with the ground. From the holes near the tail section, he could tell that this rocket had been shot down mid-flight. He could remember when, as a child, he had been absolutely terrified of the rocket-bombs. They were seemingly unstoppable, and could strike with no warning. In the last few years, however, new radio beam-guided interception missiles had rendered the rocket-bombs obsolete.

"You too, huh?" he asked the carcass, out loud.

The memories of that final mission were still fresh in his mind. He was at a political science lecture (which he always considered a waste of time) when his pager went off, summoning him to the interceptor airbase. A few of his friends even wished him luck on his way out.

Upon arrival at the airbase, he was given his briefing. It was just the standard lecture about engagement procedures, estimated enemy strength, and intelligence reports about new aircraft. He tuned it out for the most part, instead focusing on preparing his flight suit so he could get airborne as quickly as possible. Soon he was out on the tarmac and climbing into the cockpit of his interceptor. The engines were started, and he was cleared to begin his takeoff sprint. Once airborne, he began his long climb, 24 kilometers into the sky.

Over the radio, his father, now the commander of all air defense operations in the sector, wished him a good hunt. He cherished this radio chatter. It was one of the few times he interacted with his father, who was always busy managing interceptions and warning systems.

Just as he had done so many times before, he fired up his rangefinder. One by one, he locked on to the enemy aircraft below, downing them with brief bursts of cannon-fire. The adjustment of the rangefinder as well as the compensation for the earth's rotation had become almost instinctive for him.

On his radio, one of the air defense operators alerted him to a pair of enemy fighters approaching him from the left, and provided an interception vector. He turned his aircraft to face the new threat, and quickly locked on with his rangefinder. As the aircraft approached, he noted something unusual about the fighters. They were flying high. Much higher than the aircraft he was used to intercepting, and almost at his altitude. Their higher altitude reduced his autocannon range to 8 kilometers, since he could no longer leverage his ballistic advantage.

This concerned him, but it was not a big deal. After all, as far as he knew, their missiles could not reach beyond 5 kilometers. At the 8 kilometer mark, he fired his first burst of ammunition. He watched through the rangefinder as the ammunition made its mark, causing one of the fighters to disintegrate.

But then the unthinkable happened. The remaining fighter did not break formation or disengage. Instead, it fired a single missile.

Typically, the missiles would struggle to elevate to his altitude before exhausting their fuel, and tumbling harmlessly below. But this time, the missile rocketed upward with incredible speed, soaring to at least a thousand meters above him. He watched in disbelief as it streaked effortlessly across the sky, until it was right above his aircraft. Finally, it began its dive, like a falcon preying upon a mourning-dove.

At last, he had reached his destination. The cliffside overlooked a beautiful waterfall, which tumbled at least 50 meters down to a pool below. Around the pool was considerable greenery, having been spared from the ravages of war by the cliffs to either side. Despite its beauty, however, this ravine was well known for all the wrong reasons.

He took a seat on the cliffside, and peered westward toward the setting sun. In the distance, the occasional twinkle of a jet afterburner could be seen in the darkening sky. Most likely, they were interceptors preparing to defend against a nighttime bombing attack.

The doctors told him that he was very lucky to have survived, considering the extreme altitude and the shrapnel that had torn through the cockpit. His left eye had recovered for the most part, but his right eye was completely gone. The loss of pressure had heavily damaged his lung tissue. The pain had been excruciating, but not as bad as the debriefing that followed.

Following his discharge from the hospital, he was called before a tribunal. Following his interrogation, the officers noted that the advent of the new aircraft and missiles had rendered

their long-range airborne artillery obsolete, and that their air defenses doctrine would be altered.

In addition, they noted, the loss of one eye and degradation in the other made the use of a rangefinder impossible. They concluded that, with the severe loss of his physical capabilities, he would become a liability in the air.

In other words, he was no longer fit to be a pilot.

In a sense, he still couldn't believe it was real. It had just ended so quickly.

Suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted by a bright flash of light behind him.

He turned around to identify the source of the light, only to be greeted by the shockwave of an earthquake bomb. The blast pressure shoved him forward and left him dangling haphazardly from the cliffside. He desperately called upon his remaining strength reserves to pull himself back up, but it was no use. Beneath him, ground began to rumble as the seismic waves caught up. The rumble escalated to a violent tremor, causing the rocks to shift and crackle. He finally felt a sensation of weightlessness, and began tumbling down.

When he came to, he found himself in a cavern of sorts, covered by a warm blanket. His uniform, still slightly damp, clung to his body. He sat up, and began to take in his surroundings.

The walls and ceiling were made of smooth limestone, and the air felt strangely warm. The cavern floor was only half visible, with half of the floor being damp sand and the other half being submerged in water. A strange light flickered beneath the water. Even stranger, perhaps, was the campfire burning next to him. Beside it sat a figure.

The figure looked to be in her early thirties, at most. Though the expression of her face seemed a lot older than that. She was dressed in a flight uniform, similar to his albeit an older model. She looked strangely familiar, and he felt that he knew her from somewhere. Besides her lay some fruit, what appeared to be pomegranates.

She noticed him awaken and smiled lightly.

“Who are you?” he queried as he glanced around the cavern, “and what is this place?”

She produced a knife from her uniform, and began cutting into one of the pomegranates.

“In a way, you could say that I'm a part of you” she noted as she completed the first incision, “As for ‘this place’, you could consider it a bridge of sorts.”

His eyes widened “Am I dead?”

“Does it matter?” she snapped back, “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

He remained silent for a moment.

“I’m not sure”

She handed him a slice of the fruit. “You walked awfully far for someone who’s ‘not sure’”

He wondered how she knew about his journey, and how much she knew about the rest of his life. “I was a pilot, you know. I was always supposed to be a pilot. I was supposed to bring an end to this war. And then...” he gestured to his patched eye, “and now, I’m not. I can’t.” “So?” she asked.

“So,” his eyes fell to the fire, “I’m useless. What good is a bird that cannot fly?”

“You’re a man, not a bird” she remarked, with a hint of annoyance in her voice “You know, there are people who care about you, regardless of your ability to fly.”

He chuckled lightly, abused by her statements. “Yeah right, like who?”

“Well, your parents for one”

“You know, the only time I talk to my father is when he wishes me good luck on the interceptions, or when he congratulates me on my return” he recalled, “I see him maybe once or twice a week, at most.”

“As for my mother, she died when I was born, and maybe he hates me for that” he mused, “Now the one thing that redeemed me in his eyes, my ability to pilot, is gone. Gone forever.”

“He has a lot to worry about” she noted, “Did you ever think that he keeps distance, because he fears growing attached to something he may lose? Something he is forced to order into harm’s way, whether he likes it or not?”

He thought about it for a moment. “I don’t know”

She tossed a few arils into the fire, and an image flickered to life.

He recognized the scene instantly, though it had occurred many years ago. It was the concluding lap of a 200-meter freestyle swim, and a younger version of himself could be seen pulling slightly ahead in the concluding lap. Though he had never excelled at the sport, he had always been quite competitive. Unlike the rest of his teammates, however, he never had anyone watching from the stands.

The scene shifted to the command center of the airbase. Among all the radar screens

and instrumentation, there sat a small television screen, showing a live broadcast of the event. Much to his surprise, his father was watching it. He smiled briefly as his son concluded the lap.

“Why would he care?” he muttered, surprised by the scene before him.

“He has always cared about you” she noted, “It’s just that his duties as a commander take priority over his desires as a parent.”

As she tossed more arils into the flame, the scene shifted to a large open field. He could recall this scene as well; it was the final competition for his high school rocketry club. It was the last year he had competed before becoming a full-time pilot. His team had finished setting up the launch stand, and were now huddled together in the bunker nearby. As the countdown reached zero, the boosters thundered to life, and the rocket began climbing upward.

With the completion of the launch, the scene shifted yet again to the control room. This time, the control center staff were watching the scene as well, and the entire room began to applaud as the rocket’s apogee was announced.

Even his father had called him that night to congratulate him on the win. Outside of his aviation career, it was probably the fondest memory of his high school years.

“So you see, there is at least one person who really cares” she concluded, “Even though he can’t always show it.”

“Yeah, but all of this was years ago” he refuted coldly, “Things are different now.”

She said nothing, instead flinging another handful of arils into the flames, and the scene flickered again. This time it was another room in the command center, one with a large map at the center, and small indicators depicting the position and flight paths of various aircraft. By the flight patterns of the aircraft, it looked like some sort of search was occurring.

“They must be looking for something important” he observed.

“Of course they are searching for something important” she explained, “They are searching for you.”

He was surprised to hear this. As he glanced around the scene, he could see his father hunched over one of the radar displays, his normally cold expression replaced with one of genuine concern. Strangely, he was smoking a cigarette. He never smoked.

“I don’t understand, why are they wasting their resources looking for me?”

“Because they care for you.”

“You were their comrade, a person they knew and respected. You may not accept it, but they think of you more than just a blip on a radar screen.”

Was it really true? After all, a lot of the operational staff had become friends with him over the years. Despite the age gap, they had always treated him as one of their own.

He shook his head “It doesn’t matter. How am I going to end the war if I can’t even fly?”

“Good question” she mused as she flung another handful of arils into the flame.

The scene flickered again, and this time a large conference room was visible. There appeared to be a mixture of officers and civilians seated in the various seats, with papers being handed around. Finally, a man who resembled an older version of himself, walked over and shook hands with his counterpart across the room.

“Is that me?” he asked, though he was certain of the answer, “What am I doing?”

“You just finished negotiating a cease-fire” she explained, “The first of its kind in over two decades.”

He went silent, and watched his older self shaking hands with the various diplomats. The room slowly cleared out, until the only remaining officers were himself and a gray-haired rendition of his father, his typical stone-cold expression having melted into a warm smile.

“So is that my destiny?” he asked, “Is that how I end the war?”

“Destiny is not something that is decided or ordained,” she noted, “rather it is something to be discovered.”

Slowly, the image faded from the fire.

“You asked me if that was your destiny. And I am telling you that it can be, but only you can discover that.”

She pulled open her flight uniform, revealing a deep scar which ran across her abdomen. As he glanced upward, he noticed for the first time the name that was printed upon it. It was a name he recognized instantly. The name of the one he had never met.

He paused for a moment, paralyzed by the sudden realization.

“I did not know my destiny until the final hours and minutes” she whispered with pleading eyes, “So please, don’t let it die here.”

The cavern fell silent, with only the occasional crackle of the fire echoing between its walls. He raised his eyes to meet hers.

“I won’t” he promised.

She smiled, and the two embraced for the first and final time.

“Will I see you again?” he asked as a tear crept downward from his eye.

She smiled as she reached up and wiped it from his cheek. “In due time.”

Finally, turned towards the submerged side of the cavern, and began wading into the lukewarm water.

He turned around and looked to her for the final time. She raised her hand, in a gesture that resembled something between a wave and a salute. He nodded in response, before taking a deep breath and plunging into the abyss, following the red light as it guided him down a long, submerged tunnel. The water grew colder and colder as he descended.

As he swam further, the light grew ever brighter, until it was completely blinding. His air supplies began to grow exhausted, but he had gone too far to turn back now. Suddenly, he felt himself being pulled forward, as all the water surged around him.

There was a bright flash of light.

He awoke to find himself laying on his side, the sand beneath him abrading against his face. He began to cough violently, and water hosed out of his mouth.

As he sat up, he noticed that he was soaked to the skin, and was now at the bottom of the ravine. The waterfall thundered away overhead. He struggled to his feet, still dazed and slightly disoriented.

Had he been dreaming? A dream would have explained a great deal. It would not, however, explain the faint glow in the eastern sky, nor the thirteen hours which had passed on his watch.

Unlike the rest of the forest above, these trees still held their branches. Some were lush with ripening fruit.

For the first time in days, he felt hungry.