

Prophecy Unfolded ©

By Christopher Cherwin

Chapter 1:

New Year's Day, 2988 O.R. (Year of Obon's Rule in Heaven)

It was the moon that woke him, the smoke only an afterthought—something unregistered and beyond the child's worries. At first the boy did not comprehend the shadows. Sleepy eyes imagined clouds gathering over the mountains. Excitement stirred the boy from his mattress. He had waited a long time for this.

"It's here, Father!" Tiny hands pushed at the polished sheep-horn window, anxious to reveal what summer and autumn had failed to produce. Whether rain or snow, the boy did not care. He did not think it cold enough for the snow yet, but he was only six. What did he know? Father's crops had not drunk in nearly a year.

The land was thirsty.

To the boy's dismay, the window remained firmly sealed. Across the room, dinner's coals glowed in the hearth. Heavy smoke lingered from the evening meal, but that was nothing unusual, not with such stubborn windows. The boy rubbed his eyes and walked the short span to his parents' bedroom. He pressed an ear to the door then knocked. Nobody answered. The boy looked around. Maybe they were already outside.

Grabbing his blanket, the boy remembered what his father had warned. If the rains did not come soon they would have to move to the city— a place called Cantore. Though the idea of a home with tall buildings and castles sounded fun, he did not want to leave his friends behind. His father claimed that a king lived in the city. A queen, too. And a prince! All exciting prospects, for sure...but the boy knew better. Even at six, he realized peasants were different than kings and queens. No, he was happy right here in Wells Valley. Amongst what Father called common folk — his friends.

Wrapping his blanket around tired shoulders, the boy leaned into the front door. It always took a little extra effort this time of night. With a moan the door opened. Moonlight flickered as the boy stumbled outside. It was unusually hot for the first night of the new year. The boy dropped his blanket; too hot, really. He walked through the garden. Moonlight cast his image in wavy darkness.

Where can they be? he wondered. Mother rarely wandered far from the cottage these days. The sickness in her belly caused terrible cramps, and Father would not permit her to travel. Salmo's Winter Festival had come and gone, another year they had not made the journey. The boy was starting to believe he would never see the famed water city again. He did so enjoy the colorful merchants.

The ground remained crisp beneath his bare feet, but something felt wrong, like the cold was melting. He looked up. Then his heart stopped. Sheer terror gripped his insides. Those were not clouds dancing across the moon. The boy dropped to a crouch.

“Are you all right?”

The voice startled the boy. Angry wind stirred smoke and fire, casting shadows across a tall soldier's face. The boy nodded, his eyes suddenly filled with tears. Tiny fingers pointed at the smoke.

“It will be okay. Stay here,” the soldier said.

Though the smoke burned his eyes, the boy obeyed, sensing kindness in the man's voice. Beyond the garden, his cottage burned. Dark shapes hovered above the flaming roof. Long beaks and flaming whips lashed out at the night.

For a long moment, fire snapped and embers glowed hot against the child's leg, but he dared not move, afraid the monsters would see him. Screams echoed from the cottage. The boy raised trembling hands to cover his ears.

Still, his mother's cry lingered. He had never heard such a sound. Bravely, the boy picked up a stone and hurled it at the fire. “Go away,” he shouted. “Leave us alone!”

Overhead, heavy wings whooshed and more thick shapes blotted out the moon. The smoke parted. Glimmering green eyes stared out the cottage's front door. The boy folded into himself, willing the shadows to hide him. Footsteps thundered near. Men grunted like hungry animals.

Then a hand pulled on his nightclothes.

“Get up,” the soldier said. Two strange-looking men lie bloodied at the child’s feet. Looming above the shadows, the soldier dropped his weapon. “We need to get out of here.”

Steel gloves reached down and grabbed the boy.

“Your parents are gone.”

The boy kicked and screamed, but the soldier would not let go. Beyond, the moon was dark. Where were his parents? Why did they leave him? Smoke poured from the crumbling cottage.

When morning came, the church doors opened. Talbank Cambrian’s new home smelled of pine and sorrow.