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*The Loom
Of
Destiny*

Dedicat a la Laida

(Part 1)

In a village in the mountains, there once lived a weaver who could tell the future. Not all of the future, and not all of the time, but now and then would come a vision, or sometimes just a thought, such as: 'Violet will die before the spring is through.' And Violet, healthy and strong as an ox, was caught off balance by a sudden wind as she scrambled over some cliffs one day, rounding up her goats, and fell to her death. Or, another time: 'Old Paul will find the ring that he lost two years ago, in a boot.' Paul looked through all the boots in his house, but didn't find any ring. He thought the weaver had at last got it wrong, but a year later, ploughing a field, he turned up an old boot. And picking it up to throw to the edge of the field, he saw his ring fall out.

There'd been a time when fellow villagers would go to the weaver, and ask her what would happen on such-and-such an occasion, but Zaida would shake her head. "I can't try to see into the future: it's just something that comes to me by itself, when I'm not expecting it. And I can never choose what to see."

It sometimes happened as she watched the stream that ran past her house. It sometimes happened as she was dyeing wool, with dyes she herself made from plants: reddish browns from onion skins, purples from elderberries, yellows from elder leaves, blues from cornflowers. But most of the glimpses of things yet to happen came to her while she was seated on her tall stool, before her loom, sending the shuttle from left to right, from right back to left.

One market day in a town not very far from her village, she was selling some of her weaving, when a noblewoman and her escort stopped at her stall, and began to look at the clothes on display. Zaida picked up a baby's blanket and showed it to the lady.

"Won't you buy this lovely blanket for your baby?"

"But I have no baby. What would I want with a baby blanket?"

"Ah, now you have no baby, but within a year you'll have a beautiful baby, with bright blue eyes and curly brown hair, just like its father: the same shades of blue and brown as in this blanket."

The noblewoman was surprised, because it was true that her husband had eyes just that shade of blue, and that was the same brown in the blanket as his hair. And yet, she'd never seen this woman before. How should she know these things?

"Do you know my husband?"

"No... Ah, you're wondering how I know about the eyes and hair. I just saw him, a year from now, holding your child in his arms; and they looked so alike."

"You saw them...a year from now?"

And so Zaida told her about sometimes knowing what would happen in the future. And the noblewoman wanted to believe that it was true. For four years, she and her husband had been trying without any success to have a child.

And because she wanted to believe, she bought the baby blanket, took it home, and told her husband what she'd heard. He just called her silly, to be tricked in that way into buying a baby blanket she didn't need. But three months later, the noblewoman was sure she was pregnant. And, ten months after she'd bought the unneeded blanket, she gave birth to their first child, who (after the first few wrinkled, red-faced weeks) looked just like the father.

They told their friends about Zaida's prophecy. Soon the king got to hear about it, and came to visit the happy parents, to hear the story first-hand.

"Someone who can see the future!" remarked the king to himself. "That's something that could come in very handy." So he ordered a messenger to go find Zaida and bring her to him at the palace.

When Zaida appeared before him, the king said to her: "Woman, we hear that you can see into the future. Our messenger has enquired in your village and heard many stories of things that you foretold."

"It's true, Your Majesty, I can sometimes see the future."

"Sometimes? What do you mean, sometimes? According to our messenger, you're always right: whenever you say something will happen, it happens."

"That's also true, Your Majesty. What I meant is this - whatever I see, will happen: but I don't see everything that will happen. I don't know how or why I see some things and not others. It's something I have no control over. I must just accept each message or vision as a gift."

"A gift, eh?... well, we've decided that such a wonderful gift should belong to us, our Majesty The King, for the greater good and prosperity of the kingdom. We will make you our queen.

"Your Majesty," replied Zaida, "you do me a great honour. But I have no wish to be queen. I'm a simple weaver..."

"You're no simple weaver: that much is for certain! We will take no refusal. We've thought the whole thing out. If we were to offer you gold, might not some other king offer you more gold to betray us? But by becoming our queen, your destiny becomes caught up with ours... our lives, if you like, become woven together..."

None of Zaida's pleadings or arguments could dissuade the king from his plan. Against her will, they were married. She was given beautiful clothes, jewellery, and a whole tower of the palace to live in, full of servants, ladies-in-waiting, her own bodyguard of soldiers... And every evening, the king would call her to his rooms, to ask her what she'd seen of the future.

But she never saw the future. For two weeks, the king waited, then grew impatient. Zaida suggested that possibly it was the sudden change that was affecting her. The king gave her more time, but meanwhile grew more and more impatient. When Zaida told him that many of her visions had come to her while weaving, the king ordered a loom to be built for her.

Zaida was very happy to have a loom again, and, as soon as it was ready, spent two whole days weaving, pausing only to eat, sleep, and go to the toilet.

On the third day, she had a vision: the king would fall down the stairs and break an arm. When she told the king, his reaction was a mixture of joy (at last the visions of the

future!) and dismay (for he must break an arm). But he decided to take precautions to prevent it from happening. He used the stairs as little as possible, and, when he had to use them, was very very careful. But that didn't stop him breaking his arm. It happened ten days after Zaida had seen it. And when it happened, his reaction was a mixture of frustration (for he hadn't, after all, been able to prevent it) and excitement ("It works: it really works !!!")

From then on - not regularly, but now and then - Zaida would foretell small pieces of the future. Sometimes it was a piece the king could use: for example, a flood in such and such a region (so that the crops could be gathered in time, and the people moved to higher ground). He was especially interested to know how neighbouring kings (or his own noblemen) would act, because he was always suspicious of them. But many times, the pieces of future had no interest for the king: the cook would burn a cake, a servant would lose a slipper. The only interest these had for the king was that he could check to see that the prophecies were coming true. And then there were the prophecies that he didn't bother to check on, that had to do with future events in Zaida's home village, way up in the mountains. These interested Zaida a great deal, but the king not at all.

The king complained about these "useless" prophecies: "Why can't you concentrate on important events, instead of these tiny details of what's going to happen to the baker's cat?" And once again Zaida explained that she had no control over what prophecies she was to make. "Besides," she added, "what happens to the baker's cat *is* important, to the baker's cat."

The king tried all kinds of ideas to make her only see matters of state or of special importance to himself: he had her eat only very rich food (but she only got an upset stomach); he got her to weave things for him (hoping that by working on a cloak for him, she'd see what would happen to him in the future). He talked to her for days on end of King Charles, hoping she'd foretell what King Charles would do... None of it worked.

One day, she told him that Susan, one of the maids, would have twins. The king immediately had Susan thrown out of the palace. For one thing, the girl wasn't even married and so "had no business getting herself pregnant." And for another thing, twins - aside from "bringing bad luck" as he believed - meant two more to feed, and a servant who'd have to spend much of her time looking after her children.

When Zaida saw what had happened because of reporting what she'd seen to the king, it made her think. If she had said nothing to the king about Susan being pregnant, the poor girl would've been able to work for longer, to save up some money for the arrival of the twins, and might have had the time to persuade Edward (a stable-hand and the father of the children) to give her support. But now she'd been thrown out of her job, and Edward was scared enough by the king's reaction to keep his mouth shut about his own part in the story.

Zaida was able to send some money to Susan, to help her along. But what about all the other cases? How could she be sure if the king was putting her information to the best uses? Here'd been a case where he'd definitely acted wrongly, using information that *she* had given him. She'd have to be more careful from now on what she told him about the future.

So from then on, every time she saw into the future, Zaida had to decide whether the king was likely to misuse her prophecy. When she thought that this would happen, she simply didn't tell him what she'd seen. And when he thought it strange that she didn't

have as many visions as he thought she should, she'd invent a "vision" from her village: something that he that he wouldn't be able to tell if it came true or not.

In the meantime, Zaida began to interest herself more in the way the king was ruling the country, and the state of his relations with neighbouring kingdoms. By learning more and more about this, she could better decide which information she could and should pass on to him. She had to act carefully because she could sense that he was getting suspicious of her.

When Zaida had been married for three years, she herself became pregnant. she realised she was pregnant at a time when her husband was acting particularly impatient with the "unimportant details" that she'd been telling him about the "future" of her village, and it gave her an idea. She went to the king.

"Your Majesty," she addressed him, curtsying, "I've just had a message of great importance. Your good friend and loyal subject, the Duke of Westworth, will die in his sleep on the night of the winter solstice."

This news upset the king a great deal. For some time after getting married to Zaida, he'd tried to control the future, wanting to use her prophecies to actually change what was to have happened. But it hadn't taken long before he'd become convinced that whatever she foretold would happen, and that there was nothing that he or anyone else could do to stop it from happening. This had caused him a great frustration in the early years, but he had at last grown to accept the fact, and put the information to whatever use that he could. You can imagine, then, the king's surprise when, four days after the winter solstice, the Duke of Westworth came to visit.

By this time, Zaida had told him of two other prophecies that were also soon to prove untrue. The king called her before him.

"I don't know what the matter is, Your Majesty," said Zaida. "I've been feeling quite strange lately, it's true, but that message I had of the duke's death was a particularly strong and clear one."

"You've been feeling quite strange lately, eh? Well, we'll have the royal doctor have a look at you. Perhaps you're ill, and that's affecting your prophecies."

Of course, the royal doctor found that the queen wasn't ill, nothing of the sort. In perfect health. And (he announced, smiling from ear to ear) pregnant.

The king was overjoyed. An heir at last! So that was why the queen wasn't having true prophecies: being pregnant affected her so that she couldn't see the future. Well, no matter: this was even better. An heir. At last an heir! He could stand the halt in the prophecies during the pregnancy, if it meant having an heir. 'The future king.' (Well, let's hope that it'll be a boy.) And - could he hope for it? - what if this prince were born with his mother's gift of prophecy? From his birth, he would be schooled in matters of state, in things of importance. When he grew up, his head would be full of ruling the kingdom. And so his prophecies would treat of this, of matters of state. Not with the useless comings and goings of some tiny worthless village lost in the mountains.

His head filled with fantasies of this sort, the king made preparations for the birth of the prince. The best teachers were told to get themselves ready. Fifteen rooms in the palace made ready for the future prince. And Zaida was given special care. Not so much because she was the queen, and no longer because of her prophecies (her prophecies, after all, couldn't be trusted now), but because she was carrying inside her the royal heir, the prince, the future king. (The king had by now convinced himself that

it would be a boy. And - as a matter of fact - he just happened to be right, but that wasn't his fault.)

Zaida, in the meantime, went on having prophecies. Prophecies that she - as always - knew she could trust. Prophecies that came true. But the trick she'd played on the king, with the prophecy she'd made up about the Duke of Westworth's dying, and the other false prophecies, meant that now the king wasn't interested in her prophecies, and so left her more in peace.

Several of her prophecies showed herself and her child living a simple life in a fishing village, then later in a large port. Zaida wondered how this was to happen. Her life, before she became queen, had been in the mountains. What did she know of life by the sea? If she did leave the palace, she'd have thought she'd return to her village. She *would* have thought, if it hadn't been for what she now saw. But she trusted what she saw. She knew that it would be that way.

And so the time went by. Zaida sent for a midwife to help her prepare for the birth, and to help during the birth itself. The midwife made her pots and pots of a tea made of the leaves of raspberry, blackberry, milfoil, and st. johnswort. This isn't the best tasting tea in the world, but it's very good for the health of pregnant women. she taught Zaida how to take care of herself during her pregnancy, and showed her some exercises that would help her and the baby during the birth. she told her to remember always to trust in herself, in her own strength and ability to give birth.

"This will be hard work now. Don't you ever doubt that. The hardest work you'll ever do in your life; and much harder than any work most men ever have to do."

And it was. During the birth, Zaida sweated and threw off all her clothes. Then she felt cold and the midwife wrapped a blanket around her, but soon Zaida threw it off again: too hot. she shouted out during her contractions, she cried sometimes, and sang sometimes. But all the time, she believed in herself, and was proud of her own power. The midwife stayed with her, and gave her whatever support she needed. she talked with her and gave her advice, reminding her when to breathe deeply, and to pant during the contractions. She asked her what she, Zaida, wanted: a drink, a blanket, to have her back and neck rubbed? Sometimes they used no words, but looked into each other's eyes, and what passed between them no-one will ever know who doesn't go through this experience of giving birth.

And Zaida talked to her baby as yet unborn, sang to it, shouted to it: "Come out, come out: I want to see you. I want to hold you in My arms, and have you suck at My breasts. Oh, My beautiful, strong baby, I've felt you inside for so long, but now I want to see you!"

Before the baby came out completely, when just the top of its head was showing, Zaida reached her hands down between her legs, and stroked her baby's curly head. Just then a tremble ran through her body - not a birth contraction, but a spasm of power and wonder - and she cried out: "My child, what a job you have before you!" Then, in a quieter voice, but still full of wonder, she continued: "To rid this land of its hated king. To throw him off the throne, your own father!" The next minute, the baby slid out into Zaida's and the midwife's hands. Zaida lifted him up to her breast, and gazed at him in wonder, joy, and pride. Yes, and love. For the first time in her life, Zaida had fallen completely in love.

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But while, in love, she watched and felt her son sucking at her breast, running her fingers over every part of his body, convincing herself of his perfection, one of her servants was running to tell the king. To tell him that his son had been born, yes, but also to tell him of what Zaida had cried out and whispered in that last moment.

The king was outraged and... and afraid. Had Zaida grown to really hate him? Was she planning to teach the boy to hate his own father, planning to get rid of him, so that she could rule the kingdom in his place?... Or was it a prophecy? One of her visions into the future, over which she had no control? he turned to one of his advisers.

"Your Majesty, ever since her Highness Queen Zaida became pregnant, her prophecies have proved to be false. This is one of those prophecies, surely: it will never come true. And if Your Majesty thinks that the queen will try to turn the prince against him, he only needs to get rid of the queen. Then he'll have no reason to worry."

But the king wasn't convinced. Perhaps in the moment of giving birth, Zaida had once again got back her power of prophecy. he could never be sure. Even without the queen around as long as the prince was alive, the king would live in fear of the prophecy coming true: fear of being overthrown. The only way to make absolutely sure he was safe was... to kill the baby. It must be done. It must...

And so, he gave the order: that night, while the queen was asleep, the baby was to be taken from its cot and killed.

But that night Zaida didn't sleep and the baby wasn't put in his cot. When the soldiers went to do their evil job, the room was empty. The king never saw Zaida again.

[End of Part 1]