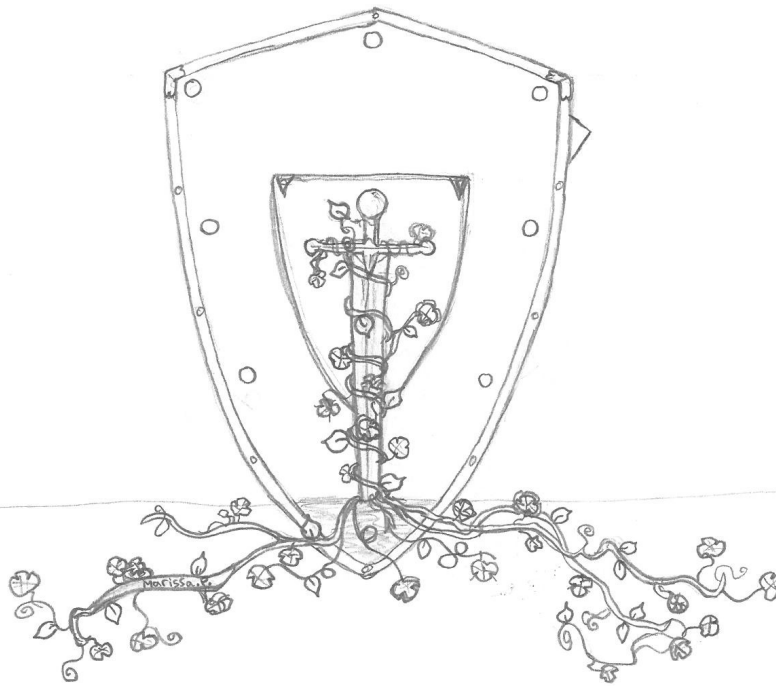


The Three Sisters

Book One in the Prophecy of Reckoning



By Derek E. Perrotta

3rd Passage

Cometh the Gatherer

It was an early spring morning, as Flax struggled down a mountain path under the weight of a heavy backpack and his gnarled staff.

More than half a decade had passed since Flax first entered the Halls of Golipia as a student of magic. He had completed his training, excelling in almost all aspects of his studies and finishing months ahead of schedule. Over the past five years, Flax had grown from a boy into a young man. Although he had grown tall, he remained thin despite his impressive appetite. His long blond hair flowed loosely and he wore an easy smile. His eyes were as blue as ever, sparkling with the hint of boyish wonder of the unknown.

With every step down the steep trail, Flax thought of The Prophecy of Reckoning. He had become the steward of the prophecy, which, if successfully completed, would bring the grace of Heaven back to the world. It was a heavy burden for the untested, young wizard.

In the prophecy, he had been named “The Gatherer.” It was his task to go forth and find six people, to bring them together, and to open the glory of Heaven to the forsaken world.

He thought of the three people he already knew so well, yet had never actually met. Throughout his childhood, he had dreamt of two little boys, named Timber and Kosis, and a little girl, named Kyra. He had never imagined that his dreams were actually visions. Visions of people he needed to go forth and gather.

But during his years of studying and training at the Halls of Golipia, Flax had neither visions nor dreams. The Titan's magnificent palace in the mountains was of another dimension. A dimension that blocked his visions.

Flax desperately wished to see Timber, Kosic and Kyra again. He wondered how they had grown, what they looked like. But there was no need to wonder anymore, he told himself, tonight he would finally see his old friends again. He was back in the world of Humanity, and with the help of one of the Titan's 'graduation gifts,' as he called them, he knew he was just hours away from the reunion.

But he also needed to find three other people, simply called "The Three Sisters" in the prophecy. He knew nothing of them, who they were or where they were from. This worried him greatly. But Flax was confident that once he found Timber, Kosic and Kyra, one of them would surely know The Three Sisters.

It would be impossible to successfully complete The Prophecy of Reckoning without finding The Three Sisters. It was written that "only the tears of the sisters" could reveal a passage of glory that would lead to the return of Leandra, the god of Mercy and Hope.

Although Flax was entirely focused on the quest before him, he could not help but to notice the earth change with every step down the trail. The further down the mountain he went, the more the trees that surrounded him grew in size. High up in the mountain the trees were still in their winter sleep, yet as he climbed down he could see signs of spring. Shadowed areas along the mountains still held patches of snow and ice. His ears began to pop as he descended, and the cool mountain air became a warm spring breeze.

As Flax entered the most northern tip of Birchwood Forest, the ground around him became less mountainous. The trees grew larger, reaching up into the sky. The forest had awoken from its winter slumber. Huge birch trees were bursting with new green leaves, vibrant against their white speckled bark. The clean spring air was filled with chirping birds, flying from branch to branch as squirrels chased one another around the mighty tree trunks.

The snow had melted from the forest floor, which was covered with soggy brown leaves. Brilliant yellow daffodils and red tulips broke through the thick brown carpet, reaching for the sun. Small streams and brooks, swollen from the winter runoff, raced down the sides of the mountain and rushed through the forest,

Stopping to survey Birchwood Forest, there was no doubt in Flax's mind why the Elves had chosen this forest as their home. The bright whites of the racing streams and birch trees, the greens of the flowering plants and leaves, and the yellows and reds of the spring flowers all made the forest seem magical.

The beauty of the Elven forest made him pause and reflect on the past half decade. He had learned so much with Achilles. The Titan's teaching made the art of wizardry easy to learn. Achilles' words seemed to echo in his mind, "...you were born to be a wizard, Flax..."

He learned fast in the Halls of Golipia, the ease of his learning due in large part to his early education with Xlender. The Sphinx had secretly protected him since birth, and taught him throughout his childhood, laying a solid foundation of learning for Flax to build upon.

But it was Achilles who had taught him wizardry, focusing his training on the four elements that the world was made of, “the commonly known elements,” as he called them. Once introduced to the elements, Flax found them easy to understand and manipulate. With a little practice and time, he was sure he could master them.

The fifth unproven element was gravity. Achilles and Flax spent many of his last months of study exploring its powers and capabilities together. In his final year of wizardry school, Flax began to throw flame, bend metal and lift stones without touching them. With each magic feat, Achilles warned him, “Learning wizardry is the same as learning how to walk, Flax. You must first crawl, stumble a bit, and try again before you can walk. With hard work, dedication, and a bit of falling, you’ll learn how to run. You learn wizardry and just about everything else in life the same way: crawl, walk, run. And when you leave the Halls of Golipia, you will be just starting to crawl.”

As he gazed across the forest, Flax knew Achilles was never more right. Someday he would be able to throw boulders like a catapult, but for now small stones going no further than a thrown dart was all he could accomplish.

A strong wind suddenly rustled through the trees blowing his cowlicks across his face. Flax had never managed outgrow himself of his boyish cowlicks, and they drove him crazy. Brushing his hands through his blond hair, he knew they would be with him for life, but he was too happy to let his hair get him down.

Time to get going, he thought, resuming his walk through Birchwood Forest. As he struggled with the weight of his pack and the downward slope of the trail, Flax couldn’t help but smile. He felt that he was much like the forest around him, a young flowering bulb just reaching out of the soil, ready to display his brilliance for all to see.

He felt reborn and fresh, ready to start his life's adventure. The whole world was in front of him, a world full of mystery and destiny. The possibility of finding the ones he had dreamt of, of championing The Prophecy of Reckoning, and starting a new life for his homeland was invigorating. Thinking about the future gave him great hope. However, he needed to focus, to channel his energy into being The Gatherer. His first task was to unite the people he had dreamt of since birth, to "Unite the Celestial Family" as the Prophecy foretold.

Without warning, Flax's thick soled boot sunk deeply into the mud on the trail. Using the staff Achilles had given him, he pulled himself out and found a few dry rocks on the trail to walk on.

As Flax stepped from rock to rock, his old dog Wimpy came crashing through the bushes, sniffing the ground as he went. Wimpy was a city mutt – half shepherd and half pit-bull – a thick, muscular creature. Wimpy had also changed in the past half a decade. The once black hair on his nose had turned almost entirely white, and his tan fur coat was now sprinkled with gray. Still, except for the dog's coloring, he was not any worse for the wear.

During Flax's training, Wimpy had found an ancient bronze helmet in the Halls of Golipia. Engraved with symbols of war and magic, the ancient helmet obviously had a history and legend, yet the Titan would not reveal its past. It made the perfect toy for Wimpy to grab, bite and fling into the air; yet the helmet never dinged or scratched. The dog beat on the helmet for years, tearing up the Titan's gardens as he went, but the ancient relic never changed its outward appearance.

Achilles constantly complained about the dog, yet Flax would find the colossal man and the little dog playing together for hours on end, throwing the helmet around like a Frisbee. Such play kept Wimpy in fantastic shape and Achilles very happy. The dog had an internal motor that would not stop.

The pack on Flax's back and the staff in his hand had both been gifts from Achilles, given the night before Flax departed the Halls of Golipia. The backpack's stitching bulged with the contents of thick books, candles, a lantern with oils, cast iron cooking pans, smoked meats, cheeses, water bottles, a bedroll, extra shoes, robes and a thick heavy tent with poles rolled up on top – everything Flax could need on his journey; but the backpack was far too heavy for his thin shoulders and legs. At first, walking down the mountain trail had given him the false hope that he could successfully carry the weight; the only ill effect he felt was his aching knees, nothing young legs could not take. But now he was beginning realize that the weight might be too much.

As the trail leveled out and the forest thickened, Flax's shoulders began to ache and his leg muscles stiffed under he pack's weight. His stride quickly diminished, and soon he was merely inching down the trail as he used his staff to help keep upright under his heavy burden. He moved a few more yards and then his legs could go no more. With his leg muscles trembling, Flax stood in place for a moment, leaning heavily on his staff and trying to regain some strength. Suddenly, the fur on Wimpy's back stiffend like a Mohawk. The dog growled as he stared ahead into thick forest growth.

Flax's heart, already racing, began to beat like a drum. He placed both hands on his staff and stood up straight, remembering the brief hand-to-hand combat training he had while in Golipia.

Wait, what am I doing, he thought to himself. Shifting the staff to his left hand, he shook it once, as if it were a clogged saltshaker. The top of the staff puffed, and a flame appeared as if the staff were a torch. Flax then closed his eyes and concentrated, waving his right hand through the flame. At that point, the fire moved from the staff to his hand. The flame burned brightly, dancing in his palm.

There he stood, staff in one hand, flame in the other, looking ahead into the forest, trying to see the danger his faithful dog had sensed. All he could see was the thick forest and its undergrowth. As if he were holding a hot pan with a cooking glove, his hand began to heat up and he realized that he could not simply hold onto the flame forever.

At that moment, something moved just ahead of him, and Wimpy's growl became low and more intense. The dog's leg muscles bulged as the dangerous pit-bull inside of him emerged. His aggression made Flax feel safer and less alone. The shrubs shook and then, emerging from behind a giant white birch tree, someone stepped onto the trail.

In surprise, Flax examined the person standing before him. Her head and the right half her body was covered by a brown and white cloak. The white in the cloak was lightly speckled with black. The colors perfectly matched the leaves on the ground and tree bark of Birchwood Forest. The left side of her cloak was thrown back, over her shoulder, revealing high brown boots that stopped at the knee.

She wore perfectly fitted green pants and a top that was tightly laced together in the middle with brown leather cords. The green top hugged her thin waist and large chest. The leather cords stretched, cutting low in the front, revealing that the person was obviously a woman.

In her left hand, she held a small bow and a notched arrow. Along her waist strapped onto a leather belt were the scabbards of a short sword and dagger. She was almost half a foot shorter than he was, with thin shoulders that matched her perfectly curved frame.

As she pushed back her hood, long golden hair flowed down to her shoulders. Flax stood silently, shocked by her beauty. Blue crystal eyes and full red lips, curved into a gentle smile met Flax's amazed recognition.

"Hi Flax!" Julia greeted the teenage boy familiarly. Her voice was gentle and soft as she kneeled down and placed a hand out for Wimpy to smell. "Is this your dog?" she asked. Wimpy's ears perked up and his tail began to wag as he realized that Julia was no threat to his master.

"Yeah," was all that Flax could manage. He tried to say more, but the words just would not come. As Julia patted Wimpy, Flax tried his best not to stare at her, but he found himself entranced by her beauty.

"What a great dog," she said looking up at him and smiling. "Wow, look at you holding fire in your hand! You really have become a wizard."

"Yeah." Again, that was all that came out of his mouth. He shook his hand and the flame went out. He could not believe he was being such a lunk head!

I am supposed to be a genius, he thought with dismay. I am The Gatherer in the Prophecy of Reckoning. Yet this elven girl has me completely tongue-tied. I have to say something, he thought. "Wimpy was a great friend during my training," he finally muttered.

“I can see that. I love his brown eyes,” Julia replied, standing up and brushing the fur off her hand. “So how have you been? How was studying at the Halls of Golipia?” Her eyes lit up as she spoke of Golipia.

“Good,” he said enthusiastically, “really good.” That was all he could manage to say, his eyes locked onto hers, as he trying his hardest to not let them wander.

“You’ll have to tell me all about it when we get some time. But Billy, I mean Flax... Xlender told me to call you Flax now.”

“Yeah,” Flax replied. “They told me I needed a wizard’s name. I guess there are not many wizards called Billy, so I thought up Flax.”

“I like it. You’ve gotten so big!” Julia said as she walked up next to him, moving shoulder to shoulder, comparing their heights. “Last time I stood next to you we could look eye to eye,” she said looking up at him. “Do you remember?”

Remember, Flax thought to himself, how could I ever forget? Not one day passed when he did not think back to Julia on the beach, dressed in a small top and tight fitting bottoms, with her arm around him. His memories of that day numbed his senses, even five years later. Suddenly, he snapped from of his daze and realized that she was staring at him, waiting for him to reply.

“Oh yeah.” Stop saying that, he thought to himself despairingly. Remember The Prophecy! Remember what you have been trained to do! “That was an amazing day,” he finally said aloud. “Finding out about The Prophecy and about your people.”

“Yes, I found the whole thing a bit funny. Romulus was so mad! I think he’s still angry,” she said with a mischievous smile.

Julia would have loved to reminisce some more, but she did not want to waste any time. “I told Xlender that I would get you through Mirewood Forest, and since we’re still in Birchwood Forest with a long hike to our first camp site, I suggest we talk while we walk. It’s a long journey.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Flax replied. “How many days hike is it to the end of Mirewood Forest?”

“It’s three days through Birchwood alone,” Julia described. “And Mirewood Forest is almost twice as large.”

“So we’ll be hiking for nine days?” Flax’s eyes widened with the thought of carrying his overstuffed pack that long.

“It’s more like ten,” Julia said softly. “We’re bound to run into something in Mirewood that will slow us down.”

“Julia,” Flax spoke truthfully, “I can’t carry this pack for ten days!”

“I know,” she said with a queer smile. “I was watching you come down the trail and then stop. What do you have in that thing?”

“Not much really,” he said, “some books, pans, candles, a tent, a bedroll—”

“Wow, that’s a lot of stuff,” the elf maiden interrupted. “I wouldn’t be able to budge! Why did you bring it all?”

“Achilles gave it all to me last night before we left,” he explained. “I’m starting to think my Titan professor doesn’t know much about hiking.”

Just then, a distant, booming voice echoed through the woods.

“WIMPY, WIMPY COME ON BOY!” the thunderous voice called.

Julia spun around, aiming her bow, searching for a target that was not in sight.

“Whoa Julia! It’s okay,” Flax said to her with a smile. “That’s Achilles calling my dog.”

“What?” she replied with surprise, lowering her bow.

“Because I was leaving early, Achilles and I weren’t sure if you knew to meet me,” Flax started to explain.

“Of course I was going to meet you,” she interrupted. “Xlender kept me up to date with your schedule.”

“Ah, I didn’t know that. So that explains why you knew to call me Flax.”

“WIMPY!” the Titan called. “COME ON BOY!”

“Well I took Wimpy along,” Flax continued, “just in case we didn’t link up. Achilles said he’d call Wimpy back if we did.”

“Why don’t you bring him with us?” Julia asked looking at the dog affectionately.

“I’d love to,” Flax replied, “but there are bound to be some rough days ahead, and I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to him.” Julia was impressed with Flax’s obvious affection for his dog.

“WIMPY!” the Titan’s voice echoed again through the forest.

“That’s amazing,” Julia said, with the Elven wonder of magic gleaming in her eye. “How did he know we just met?”

“He does a lot of crazy things like that,” Flax said shrugging his shoulders. “He is a Titan you know.”

Wimpy ran halfway up the trail, then he stopped and looked at Flax as if asking for his permission.

“Go ahead boy,” Flax said. Flax was a bit sad, but he loved his dog enough to let him go. “Go on now, up you go,” Flax ordered, motioning with his hand. “Go see Achilles! Up you go!”

“WIMPY, COME ON BOY! COME GET YOUR HELMET!” The Titan’s calling plus Flax’s coaching sent Wimpy flying up the trail.

Julia and Flax went through the items in Flax’s backpack. They split up some of the gear and discarded what Julia decided they did not need. They hid the cooking pans, lanterns, tent poles and the tent in a secret place Julia knew of, and then began their hike through Birchwood Forest. Flax was relieved at how much better he moved with his lightened pack.

They hiked for hours. The farther they went, the more stunning and mysterious the forest became. The forest appeared perfectly groomed to Flax. He noticed the small well-kept trails lined with white rocks and flowers. Various trails splintered off the main one, heading into the forest in all directions. All around him were magnificent thick birch trees that stretched high into the sky. Rays of light shone through the thick canopy of healthy green forest from above.

Throughout that first day, Flax and Julia they ran across elk, bear, deer, fox, lynx, bobcats and many other woodland creatures. With each encounter, the animals came very close, but then hesitated when they noticed Flax. Julia would step out calmly and call to the animals, easing their fears. Then she would tell Flax to come forward so he

could pat the animals. They must have spent hours patting the wild animals of Birchwood.

“The animals in Birchwood Forest have no fear of Elves,” Julia explained.

“We’re vegetarians. But they’re still a little wary of Humans.”

“How do they know I’m a Human?” Flax asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied with a playful smile. “I guess you smell funny.”

“Hey!” Flax replied with a chuckle.

The forest was filled with colorful blue jays and cardinals, sitting on branches very close to the trail, singing as Flax and Julia went by.

Every so often, the forest filled with the delicious smells of fresh breads, pies and strong cheeses, but Flax never saw a bakery or a cutting board.

From time to time, Flax saw shadows down the small trails that did not appear to be from animals. Frequently, he heard distant conversation and laughter from these shadows. Other times he heard flutes, chimes and violins playing in the distance. However, Flax never got close enough to see any of the musicians or the happy faces of those who laughed. Whenever he seemed to get close to the voices or the music, it would stop.

Julia explained that some of the Elves of Birchwood were watching as he passed by their homes and theaters. Flax could feel their eyes, yet he never actually saw an Elf, a home or a theater. The stares felt like they were coming from curious observers watching him go, rather than the distrustful spies of strangers.

Flax felt an intense sense of freedom as they walked through Birchwood. Although he had enjoyed his time in Golipia, he much preferred walking through this

beautiful Elven forest in the company of this stunningly beautiful Elf. As Julia spoke, Flax could not help but to look at her and smile. How fortunate he felt. He was free. There were no classes to attend, no homework to read and no theories to master. He simply walked through the forest, talking to Julia about simple things: the pink and purple spring butterflies of the forest and the giant birch trees.

As they walked, Flax and Julia took the time to stop briefly and enjoy their surroundings, smelling the fresh cool spring air of the forest. Flax could not get over how much he enjoyed the beauty of Birchwood.

Hours had passed since he had last seen or heard any sign of the Elves, when suddenly the forest opened up into an immense glen of wild tulips, over half a mile wide.

Flax had never before seen so many flowers in one place. From one side of the wood line to the other, the ground was covered by a thick blanket of healthy, vibrant tulips in shade of yellow, pink and red. Green stems and leaves sprouted from the moist soil, dark and rich with minerals. The sun shone down brightly, adding to the flowers' strength and beauty.

"Julia," Flax said in awe, his eyes locked on the field beyond. "Your forest's natural beauty surpasses that of the gardens of Golipia. Its beauty is as simple as it is magnificent."

Turning to Julia, Flax realized that she was gone. He spun his head back and forth but there was no sign of her. Then, from along the edge of the glen, Julia leaned out

of the woods, waving Flax over to her. He saw the concern on her face, and knew he had to get to her.

Rushing through the forest without thought, branches and leaves slapped Flax's face blinding him. Trying to keep his momentum, he blindly pushed through the vines and bushes, but they were like walls blocking his path. Flax pushed forcefully through the vegetation, causing every bush, vine and tree caught on his robes and backpack to shake.

"Shh," Julia whispered, looking at him sternly. "Can't you move any quieter than that?!"

"Sorry. It's this backpack," he replied feeling more than a little foolish as he fought the vines that clung to the edges of his robes. The young wizard pushed in a little more, inching forward, causing the branches that clung to him to stretch to their full length and break free, whipping through trees with a whistle. Branches swung back and forth, shaking the vegetation which surrounded them, as if a minor hurricane swirled around Flax.

"Very subtle, Flax," Julia whispered rolling her eyes. As he moved a few more feet into the forest, his robes again became twisted in the undergrowth. Flax did his best to fight himself free of the forest and then knelt down next to Julia, breathing heavily from the wrestling match.

She looked at him in amazement until he felt his face turn red. Julia started to giggle. "What?" Flax questioned, still waving his hands. "Shhh," she said softly with a sarcastic smile. "Quiet you stealthy forest predator, you!" Flax's face flushed a darker shade of red as he realized that in this forest, he was a fish out of water.

“I’m amazed that with all the noise, it’s still here,” Julia said pointing through the trees into the glen of tulips. Flax turned and looked into the glen. He saw nothing but flowers and an occasional butterfly.

Then his eyes caught onto something moving to the right side of the glen. He saw a pure white baby horse looking back at him. It was small with thin, nimble legs and a glorious golden mane. Flax made eye contact with the small horse for a brief moment, until the horse looked away and began to eat tulips. As the horse grazed, Flax was astonished by his sudden knowledge that the horse had both intelligence and kindness and was much greater than a normal horse. In fact, it seemed almost as if Flax had communicated with the horse without words.

As the baby horse continued to eat tulips, Flax almost fell over backwards, noticing for the first time the golden spiraled horn which rose proudly from its forehead.

“It’s a unicorn!” he shouted. Julia reached out and grabbed his arm, shushing him quiet.

“Quiet Flax! You’ll scare it away,” she warned him in a soft tone. As he quieted, she leaned into him. Her shoulder touched his, and his senses became frozen as she whispered into his ear. A chill ran through his body.

“I can’t believe with all the noise you’ve been making, he’s still here.” He nodded with a rueful smile, trying to hide the fact that a chill had taken over his body

He turned and looked at Julia as she kneeled back down and pointed into the glen, redirecting his focus.

“This is only the second time I’ve ever seen a unicorn,” she said. “Aren’t they beautiful?”

“Oh yeah. It’s beautiful alright,” Flax said in amazement, shaking off the shock of her touch.

“Hey Julia,” Flax called in a low tone, his face filled with excitement. She turned to face him. “Let’s go see it,” he proposed with an uncontrollable grin.

“You’re crazy!” she said with a smile. “It will disappear before you get off your knees.”

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s try! I’d love to pat it.”

“Flax,” Julia replied. “Only the purest of Elves can get near a unicorn, and…” she stopped short from saying what she was thinking.

“And what?” He asked with a smile.

“Well,” she looked down shyly, but Flax’s face demanded an answer, “and it would never stay put for a human.” Flax got a queer look on his face. “Sorry Flax, but woodland creatures don’t exactly greet most Humans with open arms.”

“That’s not true,” Flax argued. “I’ve been patting animals all day.”

“That’s because you’re with me,” she said sympathetically.

“Okay,” he said, “then you go and try first. If it doesn’t work then I’m going.”

“It will never stay for me either,” she said. “Don’t get me wrong, I don’t have a heart of coal, but I don’t think I am exactly pure of heart.”

“Would you at least try?” Flax pleaded. Julia looked at him doubtfully. “Please, for me Julia. Just try…it can’t hurt.”

“Alright,” she said resignedly. As Julia stood up, the baby unicorn’s fragile legs sprung to life as he jolted into the air and dashed through the tulips. Julia sat back down and the unicorn stopped running. “See? What did I tell you?”

Flax reeled with disappointment. Maybe she was right, he thought. If unicorn ran from an Elf, it would certainly bolt from a Human. Humans log the forest for its timber, clear beautiful glens in order to grow crops, and build roads through the natural spaces. However, as Flax sat there looking at the magical creature, a surge of inexplicable confidence came over him. He thought, why not, why not try?

“Help me take off this pack,” Flax said to Julia.

“Why?” she asked

“Because I’m going to go pat a unicorn for the first time, and I’d rather avoid stumbling like an idiot when I do it.”

Flax slowly walked out into the glen, unknowingly covered in sticky burs. He held his arms and hands stretched out to his sides, with his palms facing the unicorn. As Flax advanced slowly, the little unicorn sprang into the air, turning to run.

Flax stopped, not wanting to frighten the creature. He stood frozen like a statue, waiting for the nervous look on the small horse’s face to fade. He then took another step. Its reaction was less harsh, as the unicorn watched him closely. Flax continued taking slow steps, carefully making his way across the glen, trying his best not to scare the amazing creature. He guided each step with extreme caution, trying not to crush the sea of flowers surrounding him. Pollen covered his robes from the knees down.

As he slowly made his way towards his goal, Flax wondered whether the mystical horse would become frightened. What would it do if he did frighten it? Would it

disappear into the Elven forest or would it charge him? Although it was a baby, Flax knew that the horn on its head could be as deadly as a knight's lance.

As Flax moved closed, the unicorn became even more magnificent. It was plain to see that the statues in the Halls of Golipia had been unable to do justice to the true beauty of the unicorn. There was an unseen, magical aura surrounding the creature; something that could only be felt.

The unicorn's mane was not made up of coarse horse hair, but of fine golden silk. Its spiraled silver horn sparkled in the noonday sun. Its large deep brown eyes were locked onto Flax as he slowly stepped forward.

Flax moved slowly, gaging the reaction of the unicorn, who in turn watched him. Seconds passed like hours, as small beads of sweat ran down Flax's face. But his efforts were not in vain. As Flax moved slowly, stepping gently through the tulip beds, the mystical horse grew calmer. Flax began to believe he would be able to accomplish his goal, when suddenly the unicorn moved. Flax froze in dismay, fearing that he had pushed too far. But he quickly realized it was not fear that had caused the unicorn to move but hunger. Its frozen stare faded as it leaned down and munched on a tulip growing near its hooves.

"Are you hungry, little one?" Flax asked aloud. The unicorn stopped eating and looked up at him with its deep brown eyes. Flax could immediately feel the atmosphere become less tense. Scanning around him, Flax noticed to his luck, that he stood in a large bed of red tulips. The flowers around him were not like the other smaller plants that covered the clearing. Instead these blossoms were each almost the size of two fists, with stems reaching as high as his knee. He reached out and picked four of the most luscious

red tulips within his reach. Tulips in hand, Flax resumed his approach towards the unicorn, attempting to approach as gently as possible

Finally, Flax was so close that he could almost reach out and touch the magnificent creature. He slowly presented the tulips to the unicorn in a gesture of goodwill. The young unicorn paused at first, glancing at Flax. Deciding that he posed no threat, it stepped forward, without apprehension, and began to nibble on the tulips from Flax's outstretched hand.

Its flat, pearly white teeth made short work of the blossoms. While the unicorn chewed, it gently nudged its nose into Flax's palm. In moments, Flax was running his fingers through its silky, golden mane.

Laughing with joy, Flax felt so lucky, so full of energy and life. He was totally aware of how immensely fortunate he was to be in the middle of an Elven forest, patting a young unicorn. Joy filled him as he reached down to pluck more tulips, feeding them to the unicorn and stroking its golden mane. I knew I could do it, he thought to himself.

Suddenly, Flax realized that it was even more than just happiness that he was feeling. Magical energy flowed throughout his body and it felt incredible. His whole body tingled from the power emitted by the unicorn.

Julia loves magic as much as I do, Flax thought. She has to come out here. He turned and looked back at Julia, motioning for her to come over. But she stayed in the woods, shaking her head. Waving his hand in the air, he motioned for her to come out and wondered why she hid. "Come on Julia," he yelled over to the wood line. But his voice only made her disappear further into the wall of green vegetation.

Flax felt the unicorn push his hand, nudging him for more pats. The unicorn's

desire for friendship made him smile as he roughed up its mane. In return, the baby unicorn rolled its head back and forth, pushing against him with his body. For a baby, the young unicorn was powerful, easily pushing him backward. Playing with the unicorn, Flax felt magical energy pulse all around him as his fingers were tangled in its golden mane.

"You're a magical creature," Flax said to the baby. "Would you like to see a trick? How about some magic?" Looking up at Flax, the unicorn began bouncing around on its small thin legs as if excited by the prospect.

"Well now," Flax said with a large grin, "I'm starting to think you understand me." The unicorn continued to jump around, this time pushing Flax with its small shoulders.

"Okay, okay," he said, regaining his balance. "Let's see. I know, how about..." The unicorn sprang forward, nudging Flax again. "Okay, easy!" he said with a smile.

Flax stuck out his right hand, closed his eyes and concentrated. His hands and body began to move, swaying back and forth, as if he were a tree in the wind. His swaying became more and more dramatic, and the unicorn hopped back and forth playfully, matching his moves. Continuing his motion, Flax held out his right hand and blew across his open palm. Quickly stopping his sway, he circled his left hand around his right palm, as if catching the breath he had just blown. Flax whispered magical words and wiggled his fingers playing with the unseen magic and causing a whirlwind to form in his right hand, no more than six inches tall.

The unicorn stared at the whirlwind in wonder. Smiling broadly, Flax cocked his right hand back and threw the whirlwind into the air like a ball. It flew high into the sky

moving faster than a bird. It doubled in size before dissipating into nothingness.

"Did you like that?" Flax asked. The young unicorn happily jumped back and forth on his little legs as if applauding Flax's trick.

Turning back again to Julia, he again waved for her to come out of the woods. Julia continued to hide, shaking her head and pointing in his direction. "What? What is it Julia?" Flax yelled out to her, becoming a bit annoyed. As his voice rose, she seemed to shrink back into the woods, almost completely disappearing from his sight. Then she reemerged and again pointed towards Flax.

Belatedly, Flax realized that she was not pointing at him; she was pointing behind him. Flax turned to see what fate awaited him. .

Standing but inches from him was a giant white unicorn. This beautiful, muscular beast was clearly the child's mother. If the baby unicorn was the size of a pony, then the mother was as big as a Clydesdale. Flax froze as the mother unicorn tossed her head and breathed through her nose, stomping her front hooves aggressively. Just one of her front hooves was wider than Flax's chest. Her massive silver horn gleamed brighter than a Titan's spear.

Although the mother was just as magnificent as the child, her beauty in no way diminished her strength or fearsome nature. Flax noted the faded small lines which crossed her breast, as obvious scars of battle. Although he was a tall man, his eyes barely met the midpoint of her chest.

Flax did his best not to show the fear that he felt course through him. Taking one step back from the giant unicorn, he remembered Xlender's lessons about manners and etiquette and bowed deeply, as if he were greeting a queen.

"Your Highness," he said loudly and honestly, "forgive me if I have foolishly entered onto your land or disturbed your family in anyway. I meant no harm or disrespect to you or your child. I have come here simply to make a friend." The large unicorn stared down at Flax without expression. Its silver horn gleamed sharply in the sun.

"What was that?" Flax asked, looking up at the unicorn. He stopped as if he was listening to someone talk, yet there were no words spoken. Then he spoke, directing his words to the unicorn, "Why yes, of course I can. It would be an honor." Flax again bowed.

Flax again began to wave his hands, moving back and forth like a tree swaying in the wind. His casting of the spell continued, as he blew into his right palm. His left hand circled his right and once again a small whirlwind appeared in his hand.

The young unicorn bounced around happily at the sight of the whirlwind. Flax threw the whirlwind up into the air and the young unicorn ran underneath it, zigzagging through the field as the whirlwind turned unpredictably left and right before dissipating into the sky.

"Thank you, your Highness." Flax knelt down and looked up at the mother unicorn as if listening to her speak. "You can make it stronger?" He stood there silently, staring at the unicorn. "Of course I'll do it again, of course."

For a third time, he prepared to cast the spell. He paused to gather his strength, as the two prior castings had drained him. The large unicorn stepped forward and leaned her head down, rubbing her silver horn up and down the length of Flax's left arm.

His magic, located in the core of his belly, became reenergized and overflowed with strength. His left arm tingled with energy. Turning to the other side of him, the unicorn rubbed her horn along his right arm. He felt intense magical energy swirling within him. He never felt so strong and absolutely powerful. Unbeknownst to him, his eyes radiated a soft yellow glow.

A third time, Flax waved his hands and moved his body, blowing on his palm. With a quick swirl of his left hand, the whirlwind reappeared. Yet instead of a small whirlwind a few inches tall, his creation immediately appeared about three feet long and continued to grow. The magic granted to him by the unicorn quickly dissipated as the whirlwind grew into a small tornado.

It grew taller and taller, wobbling back and forth in Flax's hand as he struggled to control it. Like trying to steady an unbalanced stack of dishes, Flax ran back and forth wrestling to control the ever-strengthening tornado in his palm. Tulips, sticks, rocks and dirt flew in his direction as pollen blurred his vision. His arm grew heavy from the tornado, now too large for him to fully view. Fearing for his own safety and for the safety of the unicorns around him, Flax used all the strength in his skinny arms to throw the tornado as far from them as possible. In his weakened state, he was only able to send it a few yards away.

The baby unicorn began to jump back and forth, playing with the tornado. It grew so rapidly in size and strength that Flax felt the rushing air trying to pull him in. He became truly frightened when he realized that the magic that had gone astray. It was magic out of control, magic to be feared.

"Get back, get back!" Flax yelled to the unicorns. "It's out of control! Get back!"

The unicorns did not heed his warning as the baby jumped back and forth happily playing, not realizing the danger. The tornado grew larger and larger as it touched the ground and began ripping a path through the tulips. Before Flax's eyes, a huge tornado larger than the trees surrounding the glen ripped through the field as everything became covered with black dirt. The air rushed by Flax and blew him to the ground. He yelled again for the unicorns to leave, but the baby unicorn continued to play, disappearing at times behind clouds of debris.

The mother looked down at Flax, locking her eyes onto him. What was she thinking? Was she angry? Would she attack him? Or did she pity him? He hoped she understood he was no true wizard, but a mere magician.

Rearing into the air, she charged forward, her horn suddenly glowing a magnificent blue. Lowering her head down, she rode straight into center of the tornado, disappearing behind the walls of dust. The tornado burst into a rush of air and dissolved into nothingness.

As the dust settled, Flax sat up rubbing the dirt from his eyes. He noticed the mother unicorn watching him triumphantly. She had somehow taken back the magic energy she had given him. Flax lay on the ground, his heart was pounding from the near-death experience. As if trying to comfort him, the baby unicorn stepped through the dust and nudged his back. He looked up at the baby, shocked to that its joyful expression remained on its face.

Through the dissipating clouds of dust, the mother unicorn slowly trotted up next to them. She appeared neither angry nor distrustful. In fact, as Flax sat up and brushed the dirt off his robes, he wondered if she was smirking at him.

"You knew that was going to happen all along, didn't you?" Flax asked the mother unicorn. The unicorn said nothing. "I think you know more about me than I do myself, your Majesty." The mother's head tilted sideways and then back. Flax once again listened to her silent words.

"You'll take me through Mirewood forest?!" Flax exclaimed aloud. He again stood quietly listening, and then replied, "That would be fantastic!" He bowed deeply to the mother unicorn and said, "I have nothing to repay you with but my thanks, Your Majesty."

"Julia!" Flax yelled. "Grab my backpack! She's going to give us a ride!"

Tossing Flax's backpack to him, Julia leapt onto the back of the mother unicorn. The speechless elf could not help but to be impressed with Flax's results. She took a close look at the unicorn's silvery horn, golden mane and pure white fur. It was amazing.

Flax turned around to look at her. "Did you see that? Do you know what just happened?"

"Did I see it? How could I have missed it?!" Julia spoke quickly, like an excited child. "I can't believe this unicorn is going to give us a ride! But I have to be truthful with you Flax, I thought that tornado of yours was going to kill everyone, including me."

"Yes, but that's not what I'm talking about," Flax said with enthusiasm. "Her Majesty taught me a valuable lesson."

"What? How to get yourself killed?" Julia replied sarcastically.

"No...well maybe, but you are missing the point, wise guy!" he said, twisting his thin frame around to look at her with a smile. "She taught me about amplifiers!" His arms flew out, too excited to explain.

"Amplifiers? What do you mean?" Julia asked.

"Amplifiers! Magical amplifiers!" Flax calmed himself so he could explain. "Her Majesty used the magic from her horn to amplify my power. She more than tripled my ability to create magic! This is something Achilles did not teach me. If I could find another type of amplifier it could really change things. With the right amplifier, I could have the magical strength of Xlender or Achilles," Flax said seriously, considering the possibilities.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Julia asked, a bit worried. "That tornado got big awfully fast."

"Oh, don't let that scare you," he replied confidently. "There is a learning curve with anything. I'm sure the first time you shot that bow, the arrow didn't go where you wanted it to."

"No it didn't," Julia said, tilting her head to the side. "But I didn't come close to shooting two unicorns, myself and a friend with it either."

The unicorn shifted below them as she began trotting into the woods. Squeezing the unicorn with his legs, Flax held onto her mane. Looking back at Julia, Flax said, "She told me to tell you, hold on." Flax smiled silently to himself – he was conversing with unicorns! But as elated as he was, he knew the order to hold on was to be taken seriously.

Julia also took Her Majesty's order seriously, wrapping her arms around Flax's

waist and pressing up against Flax's back. She had seen as plain as day the effect she had had on him earlier, and could tell she was causing the same numbing chill that had overtaken him earlier, and she was enjoying it.

Suddenly, the unicorn began to gallop rapidly. Within seconds, the unicorn was racing through the woods at a tremendous speed. Running behind them, keeping pace with its mother, was the baby unicorn.

The white birch trees flew by in a blur as the unicorn's horn began to glow a soft blue. Magical sparks flew from the horn, racing by Flax's and Julia's faces. Tucking their heads inward and squinting their eyes, they tried to avoid the sparks. However, the faster the unicorn ran, the more the sparks flew, until the wave became blinding.

The sparks sprinkled their foreheads and cheeks. But rather than burning, each spark sent a sensation of tingling coolness across the exposed area of skin. The sparks felt like snowflakes made out of low voltage electricity.

The blue light from Her Majesty's horn became brighter the faster she galloped. When Flax opened his eyes to look around, the wind caused tears fall across his cheeks. He fought off the urge to close his eyes, forcing them to stay open.

The racing wind rushed past his eyes, forcing tears to race across his cheek and past his ears. They were moving so fast, everything around him was a blur of blue and white, as glittering sparks of magic rained across his face, fading behind him. Flax's adrenaline raced through his veins. He loved the intense feeling that the high speed created as they weaved between the trees. They galloped for almost a half an hour, until the blue light of the unicorn's horn became so bright that it blinded Flax and Julia. Then suddenly they stopped.

Looking around, Flax noticed that everything was very different. He was no longer surrounded by the giant, healthy white birch trees of Birchwood. Instead, the forest was brown and black, and the trees grew twisted. Vines and thorns stretched outward like spider webs, curling, choking and devouring the old trees around them.

“Welcome to Mirewood forest,” Julia said to Flax.

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