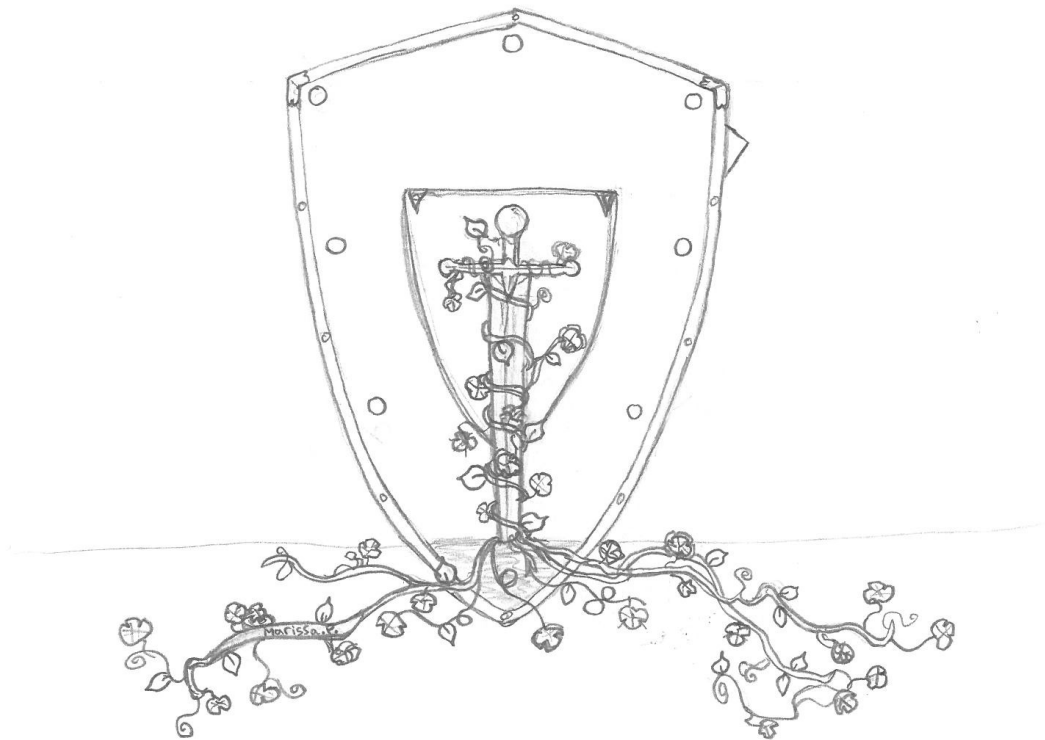


The Three Sisters

Book One in the Prophecy of Reckoning



By Derek E. Perrotta

Prologue

Sitting on the ledge of a great mountain plateau was the mighty Sphinx Xlender, looking up at the majestic night sky filled with sparkling stars. Behind him the plateau was filled with rich gardens, statues and a crystal clear lake reflecting the starlight above. From the lake shore was a huge set of marble stairs, flanked by scrolled columns that led up to a magnificent palace that overlooked the plateau. This palace was known as the Halls of Golipia.

Walking through the endless rows of fruit trees in the garden and hidden from Xlender's sight was an immense creature. With every step the creature took, the ground shook and ripples raced across the calm lake.

Yet Xlender never looked back. His eyes were fixed on the scene before him, a scene that was naked to the Human eye. Drifting down from Heaven were the small white glowing souls of newborn Humans slowly floating down like snowflakes to their future mothers.

In past centuries, such a sight was a magnificent thing, filling Xlender with joy. But the dark age that now covered the world filled the night with sorrow. For the Human race was in decline as more souls and their alike-kin drifted up into Heaven than drifted down. Other souls never got the chance to drift back to Heaven as they were consumed by the hellish powers that now dominated the world of Humans.

"Xlender," a booming voice called from behind the trees. Xlender turned around to see his friend Achilles the Titan looking over the top of a giant peach tree. He was searching for the perfect piece of fruit. "Stop watching such things. The Human race and all its kin are past their

time. It is the way of things. If I remember right, you sat there for almost a century as the dinosaurs passed, let's not do that again. Come, let's find the finest fruits and prepare for a banquet for tomorrow."

"Achilles, there is more to life than perfect peaches," Xlender said as he turned away. "Tonight is a special night. A night that brings chance, a slight glimmer of hope for my Heavenly cousins below." Xlender pointed up with his huge paw and extended a claw stronger than steel. "The constellation of the Celestial Family is at its highest zenith in centuries."

"What?" the Titan replied stepping out from behind the trees. Achilles was a gigantic man-like creature, dressed in a white toga lined in fine woven gold. His shoulders and arms were rounded with muscle. His plump belly stuck out, a result of the fine fruits and wines his garden had produced since the dawn of time.

His hair was clean, long and gray with natural curls. Uncombed for a millennium the Titan's curls were kept in place by a fine crown made of golden leaves. On his feet he wore thick leather sandals. He stood taller than the trees around him.

"The Celestial Family?" Achilles answered back with a queer look. "You're not still thinking that that old prophecy of gibberish is some secret hope for the world of mortals, are you? Come on now, if their gods have given up on them, shouldn't you?"

"You don't know that," Xlender replied, still studying the sky. "Who's to say The Prophecy of Reckoning wasn't sent from Heaven, a vessel of hope for all good creatures? Who else could have written it?"

"Please," Achilles said waving his hand. "More riddles and ancient prophecies? You're full of them. Think about it Xlender. Think if you were one of Humanity's gods; if you were

their Creator. And in return for the gift life that you have given them, what does Humanity do? They invite the one you banished from Heaven into the world you made for them. And look at the result...”

“You make it sound as if the entire Human race went to the Gates of Hell and threw open the doors” Xlender replied never moving his eyes from the constellation of the Celestial Family. “You know as well as I, it was a handful of Humans that summoned the fallen angel...”

“Yes, I do; and what did the fallen angel, Duval, do in return?” Achilles continued in a casual tone, continuing his search for the perfect peach “He broke their spells and consumed the Human wizards who had summoned him; giving birth to scores of Imps that spread his greed, deceit and every sin known to Hell throughout the ranks of Humanity. Those Imps showed every Human that held the slightest bit of power over their fellow man what they could gain through sin and Humanity gobbled it up.”

“See! You said it yourself” Xlender replied “It was the trickery of Hell that did this to Humanity.”

“What!” The Titan’s voice boomed “Come on, Xlender! Duval simply showed Humanity the road to take. They walked this trail of their own doing. Now Humanity is on the brink of extinction. It is the way of things Xlender. That is why their gods have given up on them. That is why Humanity has given up hope for itself, given up the ideals and ways of Heaven. If I were Creator I would...”

“Well you’re not their Creator and you’re not a creature of Heaven. You’re a Titan.” Xlender replied. “I am a creature of Heaven and I believe in them and in The Prophecy of Reckoning.”

“Believe all you want,” Achilles replied. “It won’t change—”

“Look there!” Xlender’s voice roared like a lion as he jumped to his feet.

Floating out from Heaven came the soft firefly-like glow of four souls. They drifted like snowflakes through the constellation of the Celestial Family, slowly drifting down toward the lands known as the Kingdom of Hess.

“You see?” Xlender said looking back, his eyes filled with excitement. “The Prophecy of Reckoning is true.”

“It can’t be,” Achilles responded in an astonished voice. His eyes were now, like Xlender’s, fixed on the sky. Slowly walking forward he watched the four souls in amazement as they drifted further, until there was no doubt where they were headed.

“Why Hess? Why send the Celestial Family there? This doesn’t make any sense.” The Titan said shaking his head “Hess is in ruin, its knights and holy crusaders gone. Its royal bloodline murdered by its own people.”

“I know not the ways of Heaven, but have faith Achilles.” Xlender replied, his eyes aglow. “It’s something that all Heavenly creatures must have, faith.”

“Faith? Will faith protect them from the Society of the Goat? It now rules almost half of Hess...” Achilles struggled to understand. “The Goat is consuming souls by the thousands. And Hess borders the very castle that Duval has made his home. This doesn’t make sense, Xlender. This can’t be true...”

“Was Hess not once the glowing gem of all the good nations?” Xlender asked with a smile. “Did its reign of glory not help all of the good nations of the world.

“Yes once, but it is destroyed, Xlender. A mere shadow of its former self.” Achilles replied.

“It will find the bastion of civilization in ruin” Xlender looked into Achilles eyes quoting the Prophecy of Reckoning “The Prophecy is coming true my friend.”

“That could mean anything...” Achilles stopped in midsentence as something caught his eye “Look there” Achilles said, stepping next to Xlender “three of the souls seem like they are floating around the one in the middle.”

Xlender looked harder, squinting his eyes. Achilles was right three of the souls circled slowly around one in the middle as they drifted closer to Earth. As they got closer, Xlender could see that the middle soul was like the center of a wagon wheel, with three fine silver cords stretching out to the other three souls.

“It’s The Gatherer! The middle soul is The Gatherer!” the Sphinx roared jumping off the ledge and taking flight.

“Wait!” Achilles yelled out. “Where are you going?”

“To find The Gatherer!” Xlender roared back, circling the Titan as he quoted The Prophecy of Reckoning, “In the gardens of Humanity, Ravaged by rodents and choked by weeds, One flower will be nurtured and thrive. This mystic Gatherer shall go forth uniting the Celestial Family.”

“Well, what the hell does that mean?” Achilles yelled back as Xlender changed his direction, flying straight for the four glowing souls and the land of Hess.

“It means I’m going to find this Gatherer and nurture him or her...whatever it is,”

Xlender roared back filled with joy.

“But what about the other souls?” Achilles yelled, trying to make sense of it all. “And aren’t there others in the Prophecy, a church destroyer and something about a couple of sisters?”

“That’s up to The Gatherer to figure out,” Xlender replied as he drifted on the winds for a second. Then he added, “You, my friend, need to think about teaching The Gatherer wizardry! Whoever it is will be a mystic after all.”

“What?! Wait I can’t teach...” Achilles yelled back obviously not knowing what to say. “But I...oh no you don’t...you can’t just teach any Human wizardry, they need to know astrology, the sciences, mathematics and—”

“And the elements that make up the world,” Xlender finished Achilles sentence. “Yes, yes, I’ll take care of all that.”

“But, but even with all that,” Achilles tried to counter as Xlender flew farther away, “he must be born with magic in his soul.”

“Would you expect Heaven to send anything less?” Xlender replied. His eyes flashed with magic and a titan-sized scroll tube appeared in Achilles’ hand.

“You need to read up on your ‘...old prophecies of gibberish...’” Xlender roared just before flying out of sight. “See you in a decade or two...”

Popping off the top of the scroll tube, Achilles tapped its bottom and a thick, coarse roll of parchment slid out into his other hand. Unfurling the scroll, he read it to himself:

The Prophecy of Reckoning

*When the air becomes stagnant and heavy with the scent of decay,
When the outcome of war in the most ancient of battlefields is in doubt,
When Hell's furnaces burn hotter than the morning sun,
The Gatherer will be found.*

*In the gardens of Humanity,
Ravaged by rodents and choked by weeds,
One flower will be nurtured and thrive.
This mystic Gatherer shall go forth uniting the celestial family.*

*Seeker of ancient glories,
It will find the bastion of civilization in ruin.
Its hope ravaged and reborn,
The Immigrant shall become the Invader.*

*None will be able to hide from its vision.
The Destroyer of Forests will fall the mightiest.
Nature itself will be challenged to survive.
The unworthy flushed out without mercy.*

The pious will not find shelter in their cathedrals.

The Sacker of Churches will defile their idols,

Crack the hollow ground beneath the altar,

Demolish the foundations of their religion.

The Three Sisters, ever watching the empty morning.

Only their combined tears shall reveal The Passage of Her Glory.

With the return of divine morning,

The counter attack shall begin.

Scratching his wild tangles of hair, Achilles stood puzzled by what he had read. He turned the scroll over, but its back was blank parchment. Raising the scroll tube to his eye, as if it were a spyglass, he searched the tube for more parchments, but the tube was empty. Tapping the tube against his chin, he thought aloud. "I could have sworn there was more than just this passage," Achilles said to himself. "I hope Xlender knows what he is doing..."
