

## *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 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. Who else could have written it?"

"Please," Achilles said waving his hand. "More riddles and ancient prophecies? You're full of them."

“Well I’m still a creature of Heaven,” Xlender replied. “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 a 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 eye were now like Xlender’s, fixed on the sky. Slowly walking forward he watched the four souls in amazement. He stopped next to Xlender and said, “Look there, 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 even closer, Xlender could see that the middle soul was like the middle 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 just before flying away from sight. “See you in a decade or two...”

\*\*\*

Long ago, Hess was one of the greatest nations in the known world. Even from Heaven above, angels sang of the glory of Hess, and the gods of Heaven blessed their noble deeds.

Its knights and soldiers were loyal to the throne and second to none on the battlefield. Unmatched in strength and weaponry, the Hessian military defended peace in its lands while riding out on countless quests and crusades, driving back the forces of evil wherever evil dared to show its snarling face. Whenever the war banners of mighty Hess approached, the evil hordes and beasts of this world trembled in fear.

During this golden age, the people of Hess were productive and happy. In a land dominated by Humans, other races such as the Elves, Halflings, Dwarves and Centaurs played important roles in the kingdom and proclaimed loyalty to the King of Hess. All good creatures were welcomed and considered part of the great nation. Many of the king's most noble and loyal subjects and knights were from these demi-human races – most notably, The Elves of Hess and The Dwarves of Hess.

This union enabled Hess to flourish. Hess was able to capitalize on the knowledge of the finest Dwarven smiths and Elven agriculturists as well as the Human's ability to produce these items on a massive scale. As a result, Hess was able to mass produce the finest weapons, wines and foods in the known world in great quantities and thus became a leader in world trade.

The borders of Hess were open to all the good nations of the world. The mighty Hessian fleet and stone fortresses guarded the trade routes into Hess, providing safe markets and ports for the merchants of the world, while in turn, refusing the evil nations

and their allies from entering its markets. Considered “The Heart of the Known World,” the markets of Hess helped all virtuous nations to prosper and grow.

For centuries, Hess thrived and shared its prosperity with many honorable nations in the known world. But in the borderlands, which lined the corners of the map, mysterious evil forces cursed Hess and the good will it generated. These forces plotted to rape the nobility and to pillage of the wealth of Hess.

For many years, unholy crusaders and roaming hoards of vandals invaded Hess from the unknown world, risking all to feast on Hess’s success. Each attempt was quickly thwarted by the prepared and ever alert Hessian knights and soldiers.

As Hess rejoiced in its victories and prosperity, hatred festered in the Badlands. Evil minds hid in the shadows, plotting the destruction of this bastion of civilization. In desperation, dark wizards ripped a devil from the bowels of Hell, demanding his service versus the might of Hess. But the wizards did not summon just any devil, the summoned the fallen angel Duval. Within moments of stepping through the gate, Duval broke their summoning spells and consumed the souls of the wizards.

Plump from his recent feast and energized by from being back on Earth, Duval sat back and watched the world around him from his new home, a dark fortress in the middle of the Badlands. He saw that the world’s prosperity centered on the might of noble Hess. The goodness of Hess and its people sickened him, and fanned the flame of hatred deep within his soul. Duval became consumed with plotting the destruction of Hess.

While Duval was a devil, he had the brain of a warlord. He certainly knew better than to issue an outright challenge to the might of Hess. A year before, he had seen Hell’s armies decimated when evil challenged good in the War of the Heavens.

Smashing down the Gates of Hell, as if defended by mere children, the Army of Heaven extinguished Hell's fires of hatred one evil kingdom at a time. Duval's own hellish fiefdom was even threatened.

As Duval watched Hess, he pondered the bond between Earth and Heaven and wondered whether the destruction of Hess could dwindle the ranks of the Army of Heaven. Where would the Army of Heaven get its replacements if the fields of Hess did not continue to grow the souls of the righteous?

Duval formed a plan to help the Armies of Hell in their battle against the Army of Heaven. He would rot away the fields where the good souls that fueled the Army of Heaven were born, which he now theorized was Hess. Where else would Hess's fallen knights and crusaders go but to reinforce the Army of Heaven?

Duval's plan focused on weakening Hess from within by fostering greed and distrust among its people. To carry out his evil plan, Duval used the life energy of the consumed dark wizards and gave birth to scores of evil Imps.

Duval's spawn knelt before him, swearing undying loyalty to their True Master. The Imps flew out from Duval's dark fortress and moved unseen into Hess. For many years, these small creatures hid by disguising themselves as Pixies in the rural farmlands and as the magical servants of wizards and noble families in the cities. In order to gain the trust of the people of Hess, the Imps preformed small deeds and helpful acts. However, they never forgot their True Master. While they portrayed themselves as helpful and never called much attention to themselves, they quietly spread the seeds of discord, greed and mistrust through the ranks of Humanity.

For decades Duval's Imps slowly degraded the morality of Hess, chipping and cracking away at the people's belief in one another and in their faith in Heaven. Greed caused the Hessian markets to open their doors to any merchant with gold. As a result, the evil nations of the known world grew in wealth and benefitted from the avarice of Hessian merchants. As Hess began to value gold over righteousness, Duval rejoiced in hearing the first crack in Hess's moral foundation. Duval felt the dismay of the good gods.

The whispering Imps continued their campaign of evil, slowly poisoning the hearts of the people of Hess with distrust, playing on the small differences between one another and the races. Within decades, Hessian nobles were divided, squabbling and bickering amongst themselves. Farmers no longer trusted the city people, and ancient tribal squabbles flared into riots and civil strife.

Racism flared its ugly head. Elves were blamed for the hard times and burned, Centaurs were drive from the rich fields, which were their ancestral homes. And when the mighty Dwarven Hess Crusaders, loyally defending the King's mountains, called for aid, they received only silence from the Hess nobles.

Before the arrival of Duval's Imps, the King's royal halls were the birthplace of great reasoning and ideas that helped to resolve the problems of all the great nations. But soon these noble debates deteriorated into finger pointing and political theater as the King's halls became utterly devoid of true wisdom.

Between sessions with the King, the noblemen formed political alliances based on their distrust of one another. Duval laughed with delight as he watched the widening cracks in Hess's foundation. Treachery festered in the King's halls, and loyalties



disintegrated in a downward spiral. With the weakening of morality in Hess, its nobles and people were no longer united. Now a nation of individuals, each looking to protect his own interests, the nation's success dwindled. As if summoned, wave upon wave of the evil hordes began to fall on the once mighty Hess.

In the dark era that followed, the Hessian knights were slowly and mercilessly slain, their ships sunk, and their fortresses overrun. With distrust and greed abundant, fewer subjects rallied around their King, thinking of themselves instead of the greater good. And as the last noble knight fell so did the King of Hess. Within days his royal family was exterminated at the hand of rioting mobs.

With the fall of Hess, the entire known world slipped into a time of dark wickedness. It was a time when the evil nations of the world were on the march and the innocent were carried off to the slave fields. Children were wrenched from their mothers and homesteads were pillaged and destroyed.

Humanity itself began to decline as more newborn Human children died than lived. The gardens of Humanity became overgrown with weeds and infested with pestilence. In these ruined grounds, Duval's evil seeds took root and thrived, as nations of the devil's men sprang up, taking over parts of the known world. In the very heartland of Hess, an evil nation called the Society of the Goat grew to great strength, worshipping all that was dark in Hell.

And in the Light of Heaven, fewer good souls arrived to replenish the forces of the Army of Heaven. The tide of The War of the Heaven began to turn, as the Army of Heaven found itself on the defensive.

In his dark fortress surrounded by his grown Imps, Duval drank a toast to his evil plan with a goblet filled with the blood of Humanity.

During this dark time, the good gods were angered at Humanity's failure and loss of morality, and they turned away from the people. All hope seemed gone. But an ancient prophecy, once forgotten, reemerged. Many thought it was nonsense. Others saw its words merely as more doom and strife. But a few saw it as a prophecy of hope, a prophecy that gave the world a second chance to prove its worthiness of Heaven's grace. A prophecy that would free the world from the dark grip of evil that surrounded it. A prophecy the a few thought foretold of the coming of a Gather and small group of adventurers that would be chosen to face all the evil the world could muster. If they were successful, they could bring about the return of the good gods to the known world, the chance to recreate the glory of Hess. The prophecy was known, as 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 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.

The pious will not find shelter in their cathedrals.  
The Sacker of Churches will defile their idols,  
Crack the hollow ground beneath the alter,  
Demolish the foundations of their religion.