

# Fantaisie des Fleurs

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# Prologue

The stars swirled slowly through the bright mists of galaxies, stirring up the heavens into a whirling pool of future possibility. Into this turbulent mixture, a single delicate mote was hurled. Her size was not great, but within she carried incredible potential; a seed, tossed carelessly aside from infinity, now planted in the fertile soil of constellations.

She grew into a celestial tree, flourishing swiftly, and bore bright, glowing fruits which fell into an eternal dance about their mother, twirling about forever in their preordained paths. Her children, too, had children, but they were as different from their mothers as her own had been, now taking the form of still tinier spheres, beginning to hold their own entire family trees of children. Generations later, their young began to move as they wished, and multiply, and grow strong. The great mother smiled upon them, and everything seemed to be well.

Some among her distant descendants grew very powerful indeed. She decided that it was time for them to come back a little to their ancestry, and she paired each of them with a little sister who would grant them the powers of those who had come before, anxious to see how they would react.

They began to relearn the skills that their mothers possessed. It made her overjoyed to see them start to imitate each other, gradually discovering their birthright. They grew nearly as powerful as if they had been of the first generation, but they were too different from their mothers to be understood. Finally, a decision was made to merge the most powerful among them with their elders, thus allowing them to act as liaisons between the little ones and the great mother.

For a long time, all were satisfied.

One day, however, they began to quarrel amongst one another, and tried to harm the little sisters of the others. This displeased her immensely, as it did all of her children. Between themselves, they decided to create a means of protection for the little sisters, so that no one would be tempted to harm them, and their solution worked perfectly.

But something had gone wrong. One of the earliest mothers' children had become lost and confused, and had started to drain away her energies. She could not understand this, but was powerless to prevent it, for she was anchored in place too firmly to act. Yet something had to be done.

# Chapter 1

## The Beginning

As the last flickering light of the autumn sun faded into oblivion, Cyrus watched the golden leaves fall from the trees. Each one, individual, different, melded into a beautiful yet indistinct mass upon the soft, sweet-smelling turf. He sighed wistfully and began tramping inward towards his mother's increasingly insistent cries for mealtime.

In reflecting on his life up to that point, the young Cyrus felt that it had mostly been an interminable idyll; a sleepy passage from one day to the next, one month, one year, until the passage of time had deposited him abruptly at the age of 16 with little conception of his future. He had been through a great many things, it was true, but to him they seemed much like the leaves; pleasing to the eye at first, but lacking in permanence and substance.

His doting mother Fiella had seen to it that not much excitement had come his way. Throughout his brief life, she had always made sure that nothing would upset her darling boy, a mission which had become increasingly irritating to the impetuous youth, but one which he now came to accept, if grudgingly. Yet nothing would prevent him from seeking out what little thrills he could seek outside of Fiella's hawk-like gaze. This had resulted in a broken arm and none too few scrapes and bruises; at the time, it seemed that the scolding would never cease. Still, he had managed now to work out ways of avoiding both Fiella's iron grip and the majority of the injuries, so his prospects had considerably widened.

Cyrus had an affinity for the white chrysanthemum; hardy, upright, regal, and honest. No one would ever guess it from his demeanor, but as Fiella always claimed whilst sitting down to meal, there was a virtuous man hiding inside within the somewhat scruffy youth before her. For all her blustering, she truly was a kindly woman, and the boy did indeed love her — but it was not enough for him.

The same exchange had unfolded time and time again around their cozy hearth:

"Mother, when will I be able to go out and seek my fortune?"

"When you're older," came the inevitable reply.

The young man had long been able to tap his magical skills, unlike others who struggled for years to gain even the slightest proficiency; he was a practitioner of earth magic, and could draw upon the strength of soil and rock to perform a great many feats. His aged teacher, Saltrio, had praised him often;

"A quick study, and always willing to learn what I can teach."

But causing minor tremors and digging shallow trenches never held his attention for long, and he had decided to cease with lessons altogether, despite the sage's numerous protestations. Half-formed plans to perhaps become a master one day percolated through his thoughts from time to time, but multitudinous objections arose swiftly to prevent any further movement towards such an arduous and challenging effort.

So it was that Cyrus sat at the table, pondering his uncertain destiny, when Saltrio ambled into his home and catapulted him, though unknowingly, onto the path of adventure.

"Ah, my good Cyrus. I see you have just sat down to dinner, so I will not keep you long. I merely wanted to present you with a little request."

The young man snapped out of his reverie and fixed an intrigued glance upon the scholar. "What did you wish to discuss?"

"I am acquainted with some few of the people in the port city, Rallia. Do you know it?"

"Only from tales. But what about them?"

"You see, I have not told you, but I have no small familiarity with the Gardener who resides nearby."

Cyrus gasped. The massive Gardens were holy places, closed to all but the unfathomable Gardeners who tended to their botanical charges inside. Each person had a flower growing in the Gardens, one which was intimately connected with their magical abilities and personality. The care of such flowers was a task of immense magnitude, and the Gardeners were obliged not only to know every flower in their Garden but also the one to whom each belonged. No one he knew had ever so much as seen one of the Gardeners, much less been on familiar terms with one.

"I have corresponded with him through various means, but he has not responded to me for some time now. It seems that someone must go there in person to ascertain what has transpired. As you can plainly see, I am far too old to attempt such a journey. Therefore..."

"You want me to go!" Cyrus jubilantly exclaimed, leaping to his feet in excitement.

"Not so hasty! I merely wished to know if you knew of someone suitable, perhaps a slightly older friend of yours..."

With barely concealed disappointment, the boy returned to his seat. "I can't think of anyone," he said, though he knew very well to whom the master referred.

"Are you certain? Perhaps a water practitioner, they're very good for travel on the paths."

Cyrus' "friend" Dalton was 21, capable, skilled, eminently suitable, and the dullest person he had ever encountered. He was introduced to him by his mother, in the hope that he would take after the man's considerably calmer ways. This had utterly failed, as the youth had little but scorn for him. As much as Cyrus loved the old teacher, he would never submit to have someone as uninteresting as Dalton take the trip in his place, especially one that promised to be such an adventure.

An avenue occurred to him, and he grinned.

"Aha! What do you think of Dalton for your trip?"

The scholar smiled, and said "He would be most acceptable. Do you think you could convince him to make the journey?"

"Well, he might have doubts, unless I could tell him the details. How exactly would he get there?"

"Oh, it's quite a long journey. He would travel north to the village of Melia in a fortnight, then two months at the least to the west. The road is far too treacherous for a horse, which of course slows things down."

Cyrus quailed inwardly. How could he possibly invent an excuse for being absent two and a half months? Still, he pressed onward.

"I see. And what challenges would he face along the way?"

"Nothing in particular, but the path is quite trying indeed. Oh, of course; fortunately, it's not winter yet, but the return trip would be most unpleasant. However, perhaps once we find out where the Gardener is, he would be willing to lend our Dalton a horse, and so he might escape the winter's chill."

"That sounds simple, but how would he go about searching for the Gardener?"

Saltrio faltered. "Er... there, I'm afraid, you have me at a loss. But surely Rallia must be full of friendly folk that would assist a traveler if needs must."

Judging from the tales that the youth had heard, it was quite the opposite. But he refrained from commenting.

"I'll be sure to tell him about it as soon as I can."

"Many thanks. My apologies for disturbing you; I'll leave you to your repast." He surveyed the table. "Sumptuous as always, Signora Fiella."

He kissed the lady's hand, provoking a furious blush, and shuffled out the door as slowly as he had entered.

Cyrus, meanwhile, was lost in thought. How would he manage to go on this trip without arousing suspicious beforehand? Furthermore, what would he do if he went all the way to the port and the Gardener was nowhere to be found? These questions were seemingly unanswerable, so he opted instead to focus on his meal and consider it in the morning.

The next day, the young man decided to visit his former teacher and ask if he might not reconsider his choice, as going clandestinely promised a plethora of difficulties. Getting closer and closer to the house, however, he

found himself strangely apprehensive. Instead of entering through the front door, the boy crept around to the side and peered in through the window.

The old sage was looking into a crystal bowl raised on a pedestal which seemed to be almost intangible. He was muttering in a strange, whispery tongue which at first eluded Cyrus' awareness. The water held a faint image of some sort, but it was impossible to tell what exactly it contained. All of a sudden, the meaning of the words began to be clear to the youth.

"But Verbena, you know as well as I what the stakes are. The boy is too young, he is more likely to fail."

Cyrus nearly leaped out from his hiding place in shock. Verbena! One of the Flower Maidens, the goddesses of the land. Was Saltrio really in conference with her?

"You cannot allow this other of whom you speak to attempt it. It requires an earth affinity."

"This is no time for your haughtiness! We need a level-headed individual to deal with this challenge."

"The Gardener could have done it even without our help, but where is he?"

"...you have a point. But we need judiciousness, not speed, to accomplish our goal."

"We have a greater need of haste."

"But the sun still suffices to sustain you."

"It weakens. You know this."

Saltrio sighed then. "Cyrus... he is too young. I do not want him to die."

"You yourself argued that it might be one man or the world."

"What can you know of sacrifice!"

"Immortality does not render one incapable of feeling sorrow. Iris feels sorrow."

"Iris..."

"Send the young one. It is the only path."

"What shall I tell him?"

"Send him to seek the Gardener. If he does not succeed in this, we must simply find another."

The elderly sage mutely held his head in his hands.

"I understand." He made a gesture and the crystal bowl disappeared into the floor.

## Chapter 2

# The Path

Amidst the soft breezes of a fall morning, Cyrus with his traveling gear stood facing his mother and Saltrio, who had come to bid him farewell.

"You've packed everything? You're sure? Things for cooking? Flint? Extra breeches?"

The boy just smiled and kissed her on the cheek.

The old sage's faced was creased with worry. "Now, you will be careful, my boy? Nothing rash?"

"Nothing rash, Master Saltrio."

"Then, it's time for us to part. Farewell!"

"Farewell!" he cried, and at once set off at a brisk pace. At last, the long awaited day had arrived! He would be free of his mother's overzealous ministrations... and yet, it pained him to leave her, as well as the old sage. He worried, too, about the inscrutable and alarming conversation which he had overheard between the sage and Verbena, the goddess. Cyrus knew far less than he might have liked, and everything had begun to make him uneasy.

Traveling along the path had proven easier than he had expected. Indeed, the path was nearly free of obstruction, but the scholar had described it as trying. Something, then, must surely await him farther along the road — yet further speculation was useless. He would simply wait and take things as they came.

As he walked along, Cyrus' mind slipped back to earlier in his childhood. Throughout his magical training, he had always found the exercises to be supremely easy. But now, he thought about those who were not as fortunate.

He remembered, now, one small boy who had not possessed any measurable magical talents. His flower had appeared outside the Garden; as Saltrio explained to his pupils, the boy could not practice any magic yet, but they were to treat him as an equal, and he would one day be able to learn alongside them. But the children were too cruel, too unfair. He had watched the boy's torment, but felt powerless to comfort him. The poor child had run

away, and was never seen again.

Guilt had wracked him for a long time thereafter, and he was haunted by the boy's mournful eyes peering into his. Though he knew this with his mind, his heart could not accept this cruelest of fates for the unfortunate child. But that was in the past — no action of his now could save him, so there was no point in regret.

Cyrus ventured farther still on the forest path. He began to perceive about him a slight drooping of the plants; surely the result of a slight chill? But he could not shake the feeling of trepidation that accompanied every step. Were the sage's words about the sun true? Was it really fading, even as he had claimed? Uncertainty swept in once again to make his thoughts turbulent and stormy.

It was in this state that he came upon Melia suddenly, without even realizing that he was approaching it. The town looked fairly hospitable, and he planned to rest there at an inn before continuing along his path.

Immediately upon entering the village, he was accosted by the frantically waving gatekeeper.

"Please, sir, leave at once. We must not have any strangers here, it would not do at all. Please, leave!"

Confounded by this unfriendly reception, Cyrus was entirely unsure how to react; after a moment, he elected cautious diplomacy.

"You see, I'm traveling from the small town of Norven, and must rest a while before returning to the path. Might I not stay in your inn for an evening or two while I recover my strength?"

The leader gave him another inquisitive look, then relaxed slightly. "Sorry, my boy. You see, we've been having a small number of... unfriendly visitors, and we've grown a little wary around travelers. But you are free to come and stay at our inn."

"Many thanks, good sir."

Once inside the village, he found it to be considerably closer to its reputation. The townsfolk were quite amiable indeed, some even offering him a portion of their evening meal. Yet many evinced a strange curiosity in whether he had met anyone along the road. He wondered who their "unfriendly visitors" had been, that they would be so concerned as to the whereabouts of every individual on the paths.

Later that evening, he was relaxing by the fireside within the inn, when he heard the first whispers hinting at who it may have been that had visited the town.

"That man wasn't a gentleman at all. As haughty as you please, and never a word of thanks to anyone."

"'e had a gleam in 'is eye, did'ya see it? A pair of beady eyes set in 'is irritating little face."

"They say he's from that Academy outside Rally. Them folk's a bunch of toffs, if you ask me."

"No one right proper ever came from that city. Bunch of rich toffs burst-

ing with silk and jewelry. I'd like to stuff it down their hoity-toity throats."

Cyrus had never realized that people felt so spiteful towards the graduates of the Accademia di Fiori. Saltrio, for all his minor faults, was certainly a very kindly old gentleman, and no one had ever said a word against him while they were in Norven. Perhaps the rest of them were not as sterling as his former mentor. He insinuated himself into their conversation to sound out the depths of this dislike.

"Pardon me, sir. Did you mention the Accademia di Fiori?"

"What of it, country boy?" the drunkard sneered.

Cyrus flushed, but held his composure. "You think poorly of its scholars?"

The man shifted suspiciously. "Why're you asking so many questions, eh?"

"As a country bumpkin seeing the world for the first time, I'm bound to be curious."

"Fine enough, I'll indulge ye. They're no better than gutter trash, those Accademia fools; think they own everything on account of their education and fancy clothes, always traipsing around and babbling about 'floral potency' and suchlike."

"And how many of them have you actually met?"

"Er... you see... well, just the one, but they're blighted nuisances to the man!" he concluded, as if there were no more to be discussed on the matter.

The boy passed on and retired to his chamber for the night, well-pleased to be rid of the drunkards' abrasive company. He thought towards the upcoming two month trek with apprehension. Living off his own provisions for so long would be quite difficult indeed. No other way seemed possible, though. Slowly, he began to drift into a soothing sleep, dreaming of the ground whizzing by under his feet while he stood stock still.

The next day brought no answers to young Cyrus' pleas, and the weather had grown colder yet. He must press onward, lest he be caught out on the paths when winter finally struck. Bidding goodbye to the innkeeper and those who had shown him extra kindness, he took once more to the roads.

Ennui set in quickly on the easy path through the forest. To pass the time, the boy tried to go over everything he knew about magic.

The lore of the flowers was something that all children learned at a young age. He vividly recalled the first lesson that Saltrio had given on the topic.

"The flower is a representation of one's innermost being; it has both an outward aspect and an elemental affinity. See, my flower is the lotus."

The old master picked up a nearby low basin, and summoned up a perfect replica of a lotus flower from the water before it collapsed once again into formlessness. "My affinity is for water. Now class, can you tell me who the most powerful water practitioner is?"

"Water-lily," the students chorused.

"Very good. The five most powerful magicians in all the world are the

Flower Maidens. Each one is actually two beings combined, the Flower Goddess and her priestess. Now who can name all five of the Maidens and their affinities?"

A little boy stretched his hand high into the air. "Rose uses fire, Waterlily uses water, Cherry Blossom uses wind, Verbena uses earth, and Iris uses..." The child screwed up his face in displeasure. "I dunno."

Saltrio laughed. "Excellent! You see, the reason you can't remember is that no one knows what it is that Iris controls. The other Maidens claim that she is the greatest of them all, but even my own teachers cannot guess the extent of her abilities..."

The countryside seemed to pass by swiftly; the youth wondered again at the old man's warning that the path would be difficult. He stopped briefly to examine his surroundings and try to find to what he had referred. He traced the path of the tree roots which surrounded the path with his eyes, and began to notice a distinct pattern. There were many roots which had carved divots into the ground, but they were considerably smaller than they must have been in the past, for the furrows were much larger than the shriveled roots that remained. But this year's rains had been as good as any other for the plants. Perhaps the path was simply more traveled than it had been in Saltrio's prime, and the gnarled roots had been trampled by the passing of many feet. Yet this would not explain why the indentations remained unsmoothed.

Cyrus stopped cold in mid-step. If the sun was waning, the trees would not have enough energy to grow new roots. But surely the people would notice if plants were not thriving as they should. Then again, the signs would be subtle if the decrease was slow. Easily attributed to the cold, such faltering would not be noticeable for a long time yet. Sobered by this realization, the boy walked on pensively, and hardly noticed as night began to fall.

The encroaching darkness finally invaded his awareness, and he shivered slightly in the brisk evening air. It was almost time to make camp, he realized belatedly. Hearing the howling of wolves in the distance, he felt a chill run down his spine. This, it seemed, was not the best place to rest.

Espying the glow of a fire in the distance, he hurried towards the sight; though there were sometimes dangerous folk by the paths, any company would be better than that of the wolves. A warmly lit cottage was there, just to the side of the road. He hastened to knock on the door.

A homely woman wearing a coarse apron greeted him with a warm smile. "Good even to you, young sir. What brings ye to our door?"

"Good evening, ma'am. Well, you see, it's very cold, and I just wondered if I might... be able to stay for the night."

"Of course! Come in, there's a good lad."

A gruff man sitting by the fire looked over and growled, "Marie, we can't have just any old folk lying about in this household what I built with me own two hands. Run along now."

"Harold!" she shrieked. "Have ye no sense?! This boy's traveled far,

that's sure, and he's in need of a rest. Besides, if it weren't for me, this cottage would never have been built, thanks to your royal majesty's sloth!"

Harold turned red and stammered, but no retort was forthcoming. The woman turned back to Cyrus with a smile. "Now you go and sleep over there, on the cot." Seeing his hesitation, she added with a glare "And pay no mind to yon half-wit." Her gaze softened. "His tongue may be harsh, but he's a good heart, somewhere in that prideful chest of his."

The man merely grumbled under his breath, but made no further comment. Grateful for her kindness, Cyrus went over to the bed and fell at once into a delicious sleep.

Light from the sun filtered in through the cottage's small windows, and the boy began to stir.

"Good morning, sleepyhead! Here, have a bowl of porridge." Thanking her, he sat down to eat, while she commenced to tell him something of their history.

"Long ago, ere you were as much as a twinkle in your mother's eye, Harold was the strongest boy in the village, and everyone fancied a kiss with him out in the meadow. Back then, I was the prettiest girl around." Her faced was touched by a rueful smile. "It's plain to see that the years haven't improved us any."

As the boy started to protest, she cut him off with an upraised hand. "No need, my dear; I've little wish for illusions nowadays. Life has a way of doing that to a body. In any event, we fell in love very young, and decided to get married as soon as could be. But our parents were against it. They said it was ill fate for a girl of thyme to marry a boy of the thistle. 'The thorns'll scratch you something terrible,' my old mother used to say. But they were all fools, and we two the most of all. Yet we love each other still."

"Harold's a carpenter, you see," she said, gesturing towards scattered tools and assorted bits of wood scrap. She laughed. "Hasn't had a bit of work in years. Mostly, we live off what the land provides; the city life it isn't, but we manage. Don't we, Harold?"

The man grunted assent.

"Anyway, what brings you out so far away from home?"

"I'm on an errand for an old master of the Accademia di Fiori. Do you know it?"

"Oh yes, their people used to pass by all the time on this road. A little peculiar, but good enough folk nonetheless. Haven't seen any for a time, though, now that you mention it. Where are you and this master from?"

"Norven."

"My sister married a man from there. Honest fellow, if a bit daft at times. But what sort of errand is it, my boy?"

He hesitated a moment, and, perceiving his discomfort, she said "Private business, eh? Well, never mind. You'll have to pardon me, I'm a bit too nosy for my own good."

Encouraged by the woman's candor, he decided to tell her. What harm

could it do? Leaning closer, he whispered "He's sending me to look for one of the Gardeners."

Marie threw back her head and laughed. "Go on! If you want one of them, you've but to seek them at their Gardens! It's not as if they go out for an ale at the village pub!" Seeing his solemn face, she asked incredulously, "You're serious?"

The boy nodded. "I see," she said, bewildered. "This one is missing, then?" She shook her head. "I never thought I'd see the day when one of them wasn't in his proper place."

"I can't imagine where he could have gone, either, but it's my task to find out. I'm to look around in Rallia for clues to his whereabouts."

"Rallia, eh? That's a dangerous place for one such as you. That place is full of unsavory types, thanks to all the money that's around. I always say that too much money makes you wicked."

"I am determined to fulfill my obligation, nonetheless," the youth declared adamantly.

"Well, at least take a bit of advice, will you? Seek out such folk as will guide you about the city. You'll never last a day without someone to show you their ways."

Proffering his thanks yet again to the kindly woman, he set out once more on the road. Day by day, the weather grew colder and colder, and a fear that winter would come upon him before he was safely arrived in the city grew in his mind. Indeed, the lengthy trek seemed less and less desirable as time went on. Still, it was far too late to turn back now.

Peering at the sun through the gathering mists of a chill evening, Cyrus shivered in spite of himself. He imagined that it was always a little bit dimmer than the day before, but it must surely be a caprice of his overly worried mind. There would be no way to tell until he talked to the Gardener, whose job it was to know such things.

The forest began to thin, and finally to disappear altogether, leaving a series of gently tumbling hills from which the distant city could barely be seen through the dense, pendulous fog. The so-called "Jewel of Cities" was primarily large in breadth, not height, and considered beautiful by few. Indeed, it was not the city itself that was the jewel, but the titanic, crystal-enclosed Garden which was beside it. Its massive land area was covered in low, uneven buildings, whose sea of roofs comprised an irregular patchwork resting over the narrow streets. Cyrus' approach revealed more and more details of the city's architecture, but the size of it failed to impress upon him until he was nearly to the city's wall.

Wrought with anticipation, he timorously walked towards the massive iron gates. High above, in the watchtower to the side, a guard glanced lazily over and rang a bell, whereupon the gates began to slide creakily open. He walked inside, unsure of what might follow.

## Chapter 3

# In the City

All at once, Cyrus was overwhelmed by a riot of colors, sounds, and smells. He walked about feeling quite dazed in these new surroundings; the profusion of finest silk and velvet, the cry of the fishmonger, the alluring odor of sweets sold by the street vendors. Almost entirely out of his wits, he failed to notice the nonchalant approach of the type of skilled pickpocket so common on the streets of Rallia. The boy turned around abruptly, and the man looked shocked for an instant. He had figured the boy for an easy mark, and was unpleasantly startled to find otherwise. Yet then it was clear that the youth had taken no notice of him. Seeing an alternative way to earn his keep, he decided to turn on the charm.

"My good sir, welcome! Thrice welcome! I see you are new here to our fine city of Rallia, and may I say we are all the more blessed for your coming! Might I interest you in some gems? Very rare, these jewels. Finest quality!"

In a state of utter distraction, Cyrus could do no more than gape at the man. Regaining his senses a little, he stiffened slightly and reminded himself of Marie's admonition.

"I fear I must not buy anything from you, sir. But perhaps you might know — I am searching for a guide, you see, one who might teach me the ways of this place."

The footpad cursed his ill luck. Here was the very worst type of prey; possessed of that uncanny ability to turn about at the most inconvenient times, not naive enough to buy the counterfeit wares, but still just foolish enough to be a complete nuisance. Yet something in the boy made him take pity on his naivete.

"It so happens that I offer such guidance. Since you seem like a good-natured lad, I'll waive my usual fees for the business."

"Oh no, I would not deprive you of your gain. Here, take it," he said, proffering no few silver pieces.

On seeing the sizable sum arrayed before him, the thief was almost tempted to take the money and run. Once again, however, his better nature overcame

him, and he closed the boy's hand.

"It's complimentary, I tell you. Now, for your first bit of guidance: never offer money to a pickpocket, whether it be in your hand or round your waist."

Cyrus was astonished. This gentleman a pickpocket? How was it possible? His smooth, cunning face revealed no trace of the deviousness one would expect from a dastardly criminal.

"Surely you are no thief!"

He merely grinned and nodded his head. "Since my mother bore me. Now, what is your name, my boy?"

"Cyrus. And yours?"

"Maywren." They shook hands. "I'd wager this is the first time you've greeted a pickpocket with a handshake."

"To be truthful, this is the first time I've greeted a pickpocket at all!"

Bemused by the thief's curious honesty, Cyrus nevertheless appreciated having someone to talk to. He had been growing rather lonely since he had come close to the city, and even such dubious companionship as this was better than no company at all.

"I've taken a shine to you, my young Master Cyrus. I'll give you the special tour of our fair city, free of charge."

"Thank you," he said, still plagued with doubt about this new "friend" he had procured. After all, how could he be sure of the man's good intentions? But he had no other options at the moment. Maywren walked a few steps, then, realizing that the boy was not following, he cried "Come on, lad, I won't bite." Cyrus smiled sheepishly and followed.

Now that the fog had cleared, the boy could see a great deal more of what was in the vicinity. He recalled that the city of Rallia was divided roughly into 4 sections, corresponding to the historical divisions of the land. The entrance through which the boy had passed was called the Market, for its vast number of shops and merchants with wares to tantalize the city's wealthy elite. To the north, the poverty-stricken inhabitants of the Slums struggled to survive on what little they could obtain from the leavings of the upper class. South, on the outskirts of the city, was the fairly imposing Accademia di Fiori, visible even at this distance; yet it was completely dwarfed by the unimaginably huge, multifaceted crystal dome which marked the site of the Garden. Its subtle iridescent tinting caught the sun's rays and refracted them into a dazzling spray of light which drew the eye irresistibly towards it and invited them to come and peer inside.

But they were not going there; the pair's present destination was the area surrounding the docks, called Port Town; long in the past it had been a separate village unto itself, when traffic through the harbor had been considerably less and the crystal dome had yet to be put in place. The forest of masts visible there now could almost obscure the view of the vast curving bay on some days. Today, however, the water was nearly empty due to the "Fête des Jardins," as Maywren explained.

"Everyone's celebrating for the last week that the flowers are in bloom. That's what caused all that commotion you saw on the way in. I figured I should take you someplace quiet first, before joining the festivities."

He stopped walking for a moment, and turned to the boy. "You know we have a Garden just outside of town?"

"Yes, I had some idea." Cyrus was a little offended. How ignorant did the pickpocket think him to be?

"Well, it used to be that the Gardener would come out and declare that the flowers had started to close, but no one's seen him in more than 10 years. It seems a bit odd, but no explaining the Gardeners, after all."

Cyrus said nothing, and they walked on silence for a time. Finally, they reached the shore, and a breathtaking sight it was indeed. The cerulean water positively sparkled in the sunlight, even more than the crystal of the Garden's dome. Beyond, the ocean's vast expanse seemed almost endless, and Cyrus could only stare in awe as the waves rolled in from infinity.

Maywren grinned good-naturedly at the gaping youth. "I thought you might find the view a little interesting. Come, let's find a friend of mine and see if we can't get you some lodging."

They walked alongside the docks, with the thief leading the way while Cyrus stole the occasional glance at the sea which seemed to be calling him at every step. They stopped in front of a large building with a sign on the front that said "Rooms for Rent."

The boy halted. "I don't have enough money to rent a room! I need to save it for as long as I can."

"Then how could you have offered me so much when I met you?"

"I was starting to worry about finding a guide, and didn't know where else to turn. Besides, someone with such expensive jewels as you would surely think of it as no more than pocket change."

Maywren laughed heartily. "Those jewels were no more than colored glass! I'm as poor as you, my boy. Poorer, probably. At any rate, money is no problem. The landlady here owes me a big favor, you see," he said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

Entering the building, they saw a strong, bulky woman sweeping the hallway.

"Hello there, Mattie," Maywren said airily.

Startled, the woman looked up and eyed him suspiciously. "What do you want, I'm busy!"

"My friend here needs a room for... how long?"

Cyrus shook his head. "I don't know how long my business will take me."

Looking curiously at the boy, the thief asked "And what precisely is your business? ...Alright, alright, keep your secrets. Well then, Mattie, my friend here needs a room until he says otherwise. Got it?"

"You must be joking! I can't take on a tenant who doesn't pay and won't say when he's leaving!"

Cyrus decided to speak up. "Might I work for my keep? I'll do anything you need."

"You can start by sweeping this hallway."

"Good enough."

"Now, wait a minute! Don't be so easily cowed, boy!"

"But I don't want to make things difficult for anybody. Besides, it's not hard. See?" he said, as he continued sweeping the floor.

Maywren shook his head. The boy must be crazy, agreeing to work for a room that he could have gotten for free. But it was hard not to like him.

"Very well. If you don't mind, I've some business to attend to. I'll come back and see you tomorrow, then."

Cyrus bid him farewell and continued sweeping. Mattie began to inquire after him.

"How did the likes of you come to be mixed up with such a seedy type as him?"

"He offered to sell me something, and I asked for him to be my guide instead."

"And he isn't charging you anything? I'd be wary, my boy, he's not a man as does things without something to gain."

"How did you come to owe him a favor?"

Mattie blushed bright crimson, and replied "It isn't proper for young men like yourself to hear."

Cyrus persisted, however, and the landlady finally gave in and told him.

"You see, this building used to be a... a parlor for sailors. I bought the building from him before I knew, but when I arrived I found out that he had sold it to me meaning for me to continue the business. Of course, I put a swift end to that. But he thinks I owe him a favor for what he did, and keeps threatening to tell the tenants if I don't do as he asks. I don't like it, but there's not much to be done about it."

"A parlor? But there's nothing here but bedrooms."

Mattie's blush deepened again. "Never mind that, just keep cleaning."

Dusk began to settle on the harbor, and Cyrus decided it was time to seek out a meal. Venturing out into the street once more, he walked along searching out someplace to eat. A warm and inviting pub beckoned him near, and went inside at once, glad to be out of the cold once again.

"What'll you have?"

"A maritelli, please."

Sitting down at a table, he began to eat the peculiar specialty of Rallian cuisine, a piece of crab meat with spices found only here in all the world, wrapped up inside a crispy pouch and garnished with herbs. Every restaurant, inn, and pub in the city had its own variant, and the making of maritelli was often a matter of immense local pride for the residents. He crunched away satisfyingly and surveyed the pub's many patrons.

To his left, he could see the regulars of the establishment; chatting merrily amongst themselves, each one had his own seat at the bar, and clearly

knew the proprietor well. On the right, there were a number of people looking as starry-eyed as he realized he must have only earlier today. Probably in town for the festival, he decided.

He considered how he might go about finding clues as to the Gardener's location. It seemed apparent that the majority of the townsfolk didn't know where he was, either, so that left only the Accademians to inquire of. But making his way all the way over to the institution by himself seemed daunting, as he would have to travel quite a ways in order to reach it, and his encounter with Maywren had illustrated that he wasn't yet familiar enough with city life to evade the city's numerous thieves. He determined to ask the thief about it in the morning, but he would have to find a convincing reason why he wished to go there aside from the real one. For all Maywren's generosity, the woman's story had made him doubt the purity of the man's intent. Thinking of this reminded him; what sort of parlor would have only bedrooms? It must be a very dull place indeed, he concluded.

At the bar, the long-time patrons began to strike up a song. Amused, Cyrus watched them launch into what was clearly an old favorite among the customers, as they laughed and clapped their hands along with the rhythm.

"Oh, I once knew a girl from Ilesia  
She swore that she would love me true  
Yet I never met one who was breezier  
She said the next day we were through  
Although I did beg and implore her,  
Remain is one thing she'd not do  
Though now I regret her, I'll never forget her  
'Sans toi, ma chérie, je suis perdu.'"

Everyone applauded uproariously, and the singers lapped in the fame before settling down once more to enjoy the pub's delicious food. Thinking a moment, Cyrus pondered what he knew of Ilesia. It was there that the "Fête des Jardins" had originated, for the first Gardener was born in that fair country. They had their own tongue, and indeed the boy thought it more melodious than his own, but it was very hard to learn, and despite his teacher Saltrio's best efforts, neither he nor any among his peers had possessed the talent to learn another language.

After finishing the last of his meal, the boy decided to go home for the night. It had been an eventful day, and he needed to rest in order to be able to enjoy the celebrations of the next day. Leaving a tip for the barman, he headed back to the apartments.

Just as he was about to enter the door, the moon leapt out from behind the clouds which had been obscuring it, and the surface of the Garden's dome burst into bluish flame, calling him like a beacon and glittering in the starlight. He felt a sudden compulsion to run all the way there in the dark and gaze into its interior, but merely shook his head slightly and walked through the entrance. Although he resisted its physical temptation, however, he could not get the Garden out of his dreams.

## Chapter 4

# A New Companion

Merry bells rang out over the already crowded streets of Rallia, and people began to congregate in the city's vast marketplace seeking to celebrate the passing of the flowers. Rallians were not the type to let the absence of the Gardener spoil a chance for a good party, and the festivities were already underway even as Cyrus sleepily arose from his bed.

A figure strode in through the door. It was Maywren. "Come on, hurry! You mustn't lie abed all day, my boy!"

They set out walking east towards the Market, passing quickly through the narrow streets. The youth had difficulty in keeping up with the thief, who was walking at full speed, with his long legs giving him a considerable advantage. Soon enough, they arrived at the celebration, with multicolored banners everywhere and the floral insignia of several wealthy merchants visible on their various businesses. The street vendors were out in full force, and just as before Cyrus was enticed by the many aromas surrounding him. He purchased a flat cake made in the Ilesian fashion, and munched away on it while the footpad guided him on a weaving path through the area.

Venturing past a group of particularly large and obstructive banners, they found a crowd of well-dressed people watching the sedate twirling of a pair of ballerinas and applauding, just as sedately, after they had completed every sequence of tedious revolutions.

Maywren frowned. "I don't know what I was thinking bringing you here. Let's go, I'll show you where the real party is."

He led the way north towards the poorer section of town. Passing by the progressively shabbier houses, decorations were conspicuously absent, but the beaming smiles and lively music were attractive enough on their own.

Cheerful fiddles abounded in the alleys of the Slums. Perhaps they were not all in tune, or particularly beautiful sounding, but the fun was infectious and Cyrus soon started tapping his foot to the rhythm in spite of himself. All around, people were dancing jigs, snacking on roasted treats, or sharing bawdy and titillating jokes with one another. Surely, these people were

richer than the staid and restrained merchants could ever be.

Up ahead, the pair could see a curious commotion going on in the center of the street. Hurrying forward to investigate, they discovered that the crowd was betting on a cockfight. Maywren, as ever, was too eager to pass up this opportunity to make money. As he placed his bet, however, one of the observers looked up and squinted in recognition. "I know you — you're the one who stole the rest of my fake gems! Quick, get him!"

The thief grinned widely, and whispered to Cyrus, "You're on your own." He turned about with a flourish and started running, dodging around a baker who proceeded to drop a bag of flour with a cry, causing a billowing white cloud to obscure his passage. The counterfeiter dashed madly after him, while a thought could be seen building up steam in the mind of yet another of the watchers.

"Hold on a minute... Fake?"

In his fury, he ran straight through the ring, knocking one of the chickens far into the air by virtue of his haste. Bewildered, the remaining members of the crowd shrugged and started collecting money for the victorious bird. Cyrus, left to his own devices, was about to continue his tour when he heard a woman sobbing in the house nearby.

Once he had entered the domicile, the grief-stricken woman looked at him with her reddened, tear-stained face.

"Yes? What do you want?"

"I— I couldn't bear to hear you crying."

"No need to pay me any heed, young man. My sorrow will pass, never fear."

"But why do you grieve?"

The woman was taken by a coughing fit, and paused a moment before continuing. "My cousin, Arturo, is— was the head of the Accademia. I've never had very much, as you might guess, but he was very kind and let me board in the dormitories. But..."

She choked, sobbing. "He is dead. The new headmaster turned me out, and I've no way to support myself. And my son... my son..."

Once again, she broke down and wept.

"He begs for our meals. We can't pay the rent for much longer, I've only a little left in my savings. But I won't last for very long anyway. My son, though... please, do one thing for me. Take him back to the Accademia and make them accept him. I haven't anything to offer you, but I'll be eternally grateful if you'll grant me this one wish."

Moved by the woman's poignant tale, he agreed at once. "I will. Tell me, what is your name, my lady?"

"Elena. And yours, my gracious young savior?"

"Cyrus," he said blushing. "How will I find your son?"

"My son is Micael, he'll be in the Market, by the wine sellers. I'm sure you'll know him when you see him. Oh, thank you, thank you! I can't tell you how it pleases me to know that my son will have a future again." She

gazed thoughtfully at the boy. "Our world needs more people like you."

"But I don't know if I'll be able to succeed!"

"I have faith in you, you'll finish the task. I can see it in the way you move."

She coughed. "My mother told me, long ago, that you can always tell what a person is like from how they walk. My steps have always faltered, but yours go straight on their course without straying." The woman smiled reminiscently. "Your stride reminds me of Arturo's; he always knew where he was going." Her face clouded in remembrance. "But never mind that. Please, go to Micael, and tell him that I sent you. I'll be fine here by myself, but he never takes it well when he's alone, and I've not the strength to go and see him on my own."

With a heavy heart, Cyrus bid farewell to Elena and set out to return to the marketplace. The celebration had continued with its usual restraint and formality, but the boy ignored it completely and sought out the area where the wine-sellers hawked their wares. At once, he spotted a small child of no more than ten years peering out at the crowd. The boy turned to look at him, and his forlorn eyes spoke volumes of his past. That gaze was the twin of the poor child's who he had known so long ago. He had no known flower! That must have been why his mother had so insisted that he be taken to the Accademia. Only their adepts had the skills necessary to test such children and discover their skills. Surely, someone within the institution must be kind-hearted enough to take in such a child, even if the headmaster was against it.

"Micael!" he called.

The boy opened his thin mouth in surprise, then shut it again. "Yes?"

"Elena asked me to find you." He extended his hand. "Please, come with me."

Hesitating a moment, the child slowly walked over and placed his hand in Cyrus'. He peered up at Cyrus, who in that moment felt inextricably bound to help this lost boy looking for someplace that he might at last truly call home.

They went through the maze of streets which led into the Slums, and arrived at the dilapidated building which was the child's residence. As soon as they had entered, Elena greeted them with an enthusiastic cry.

"Thank goodness you're safe!" She stroked Micael's head. "I worry about him every time he goes out like this. If only he didn't have to..."

"May there be an end to his trials," Cyrus said with feeling. And mine, he added internally. The Accademia seemed to present a challenge in and of itself, and he hoped that it would not be too difficult to both put the boy in good hands and ascertain the information he needed to proceed.

The day was too long for the pair to travel on the moment, so they agreed to wait until the morrow. Cyrus returned to Mattie's boarding house, happy to rest his tiring feet. However, he found it difficult to sleep, and when he at last entered the realm of dreams, his thoughts were full of foreboding.

Sunlight streamed through the small window of Cyrus' room, and he knew it was time to leave. Mattie greeted him as he came down the stairs.

"I knew that Maywren was up to no good. He had been planning to have you make money by working for me, then running off with it when the time was right. Fortunately, the authorities managed to catch him, and he shan't be troubling me or you or anybody else from now on."

"He really did? I was sure he had changed his ways."

"You can never be too suspicious of such types. Anyway, I see that you're planning on leaving. But I warn you to be careful, my boy."

Cyrus thanked her for her consideration and continued on his way. He promptly traveled over to Elena and Micael's residence to take the boy.

Mother and son were already outside waiting for him. "He's all ready, as you can see. I can't ever thank you enough!" She turned to the young boy. "Now, you're sure you're ready? You may not see your mother again for a long time, but I want you to be strong and keep your head up high."

"I will be, mummy," the boy replied in his quiet fashion.

"That's my dear Micael." She kissed him on the forehead, then coughed again slightly. Cyrus could see that she was holding back tears. "Please, have a safe journey, both of you. And thank you again, Cyrus."

He nodded with determination and offered the little boy his hand once more. "Ready?"

"Yes."

"Let's go!"

Though young Micael was much smaller than Cyrus, he was very enthusiastic in trying to catch up with the older boy, and they made better time than he had expected. Cyrus had his own worries about traveling through the city feeling so alone, but for the child's sake and his own he must at least put on a show of confidence. One thing at least was certain; they would not be lost, for the Accademia di Fiori was an expansive building, and the Garden behind it even larger. Passing through the narrow streets, the shabby buildings began to thin out as they neared the outskirts of town and grew closer to the towering structures.

They had been lucky so far, in that the majority of people remained in the Market and few thieves thought it lucrative enough to be over in the less frequented districts. Still, the youth was on the lookout for any signs of danger; he had, after all, two lives to guard, not just his own. As they went along, he felt the chill of winter set in, the twin of the chill in his spirit.

They drew nearer to the forbidding Accademia. Once at its foot, even the Garden behind it was obscured by its fortress-like construction. In its center, a single spire extended upward until its point was exactly aligned with the top of the crystalline dome from their perspective, and it was adorned with an intricate metalwork crafted in the form of a lotus, the traditional flower associated with the institution's masters. Saltrio, the boy's aged mentor, had possessed that flower, as he now remembered. Was this new headmaster also a lotus? Surely not, for wisdom and charity were the noted traits of

such folk, not such cruelty as would turn a destitute woman out of doors. Perhaps this would not be as easy as he had imagined.

Drawing closer to the entrance, Cyrus grasped the ornate bronze knocker on the door and struck it three times. Nothing happened for a moment, then a barely audible stirring could be heard inside. The pair held their breath, for they had no guess what might come next.

## Chapter 5

# The Academy

Soon enough, the iron doors of the Accademia slid open on well-greased hinges, and a rather nondescript man had appeared in the doorway.

Cyrus' visual sweep reinforced his every expectation; the hall was richly appointed, with a grand stairwell directly ahead, extensive chambers to the left and right, and various inscrutable artifacts which emphasized the esoteric nature of the studies performed within. He was quite beside himself and felt rather intimidated, which was of course the purpose of the entry's layout, though it did not occur to him at the time. Suddenly, the man before him, whom he had all but ignored, cleared his throat softly in order to jar him out of his reverie.

"You knocked?" he inquired, with the cultivated subtlety of tone that was common to all butlers; polite, but with a hint of disdain.

Cyrus straightened up slightly. "We wish to speak with the headmaster."

"He is not disposed to taking visitors at this hour."

"But surely it is barely evening!"

The butler shrugged. "As you wish, I will attempt to summon him. In the meantime, would you care to sit—"

As he was about to gesture them inside, a man in a luxurious fur coat entered calmly from the chamber to the right and fixed the two boys with a piercing stare. "Ignatius, who are these... children who have chosen to grace us with their presence?"

Something unrecognizable flickered through the butler's eyes, but he simply bowed, saying "Forgive me, Master Kamril. I had not yet ascertained their names when you arrived."

"No matter," he said carelessly. "What do you want."

"We — ah, we..."

Cyrus trailed off under the continuing intensity of the man's gaze, but he would never get anywhere if he did not state his purpose. He swallowed.

"We are here to request that Micael here be tested for magic and cared for by the Accademia, on the grounds of his relation to the former headmaster."

"Ah, Master Arturo... it was most unfortunate. But I fear we do not have enough room here to keep students due to mere charity."

"But, you can't! You can't..."

Kamril smiled humorlessly. "My apologies, but there is simply no way. Now, if you will excuse me." He swept up the stairwell, each footfall making Cyrus fall farther into despair until he had gone out of hearing. At once, the spell was broken.

The butler cleared his throat once again. A strange pity was in his gray eyes, but his tone varied not an iota from its norms. "I'm sorry, but you must leave now. You may wish to inquire again next year, when some of the students will have travelled home. Farewell."

Broken and dejected, both of them walked out into the snowy night with heavy hearts. They would not be able to make it back to the city, but even if they could, what would be the point? Nothing awaited them there on the run-down streets of Rallia, only more disappointment. It seemed that despair was inevitable.

Cyrus turned to Micael, whose wide eyes were on the verge of tears, and realized that his own were much the same. He wiped a tear off the young boy's cheek. "Don't fret, little one. We'll think of something."

The two found a sheltered niche out of view of the front entrance, and began to ponder their options. It was too cold and snowy outside to venture all the way back, so they would have to find someplace warm. Perhaps they could prevail upon someone else among the servants to allow them in; surely there must be another entrance somewhere. With no other plan seeming suitable, they got up and began a circuit around the building.

The great size of the building and the inclement weather hindered their progress, but at last they discovered it: a small entrance presumably used for messengers and others traveling on errands. Yet it was securely bolted. Despair encroached yet again as he tried futilely to force the door open. About to give up, he had a sudden flash of inspiration.

"Micael, stand back. I'm going to try and use magic on this door."

The boy mutely complied, as Cyrus closed his eyes and concentrated his energies. Because it was the wintertime, everyone's flowers had closed and magic was generally harder to utilize. Since most people had very limited magic to begin with, the wintertime all but prevented them from exercising even the slightest control over their element. However, Cyrus had been the best of his class.

Focusing all his thought on the door, he began summoning earth energy to himself, visualizing his white chrysanthemum glowing with power. After he had gathered what he deemed enough, he readied himself and directed the energy towards the door in one blast.

The door rattled briefly on its hinges and remained locked. The youth collapsed, exhausted and panting, and became even more embroiled in despair. Micael regarded him gravely for a moment, then offered his hand.

"You can do it, I'm sure!"

Grasping his hand, Cyrus clambered to his feet. Once again, he was reminded that now, he was not looking out for one, but two. He started collecting energy from the earth once more, and holding hands with the child somehow made him feel ten times stronger. Once again, he willed the power to travel towards the door.

The solid iron door was flung clear off its frame and hurtled towards the opposite wall, crashing with an enormous clang onto the floor.

Cyrus mutely stared at his hands, while Micael only smiled. "I knew you would do it," he said. "You're really strong."

The older youth shook his head in disbelief. In the knowledge that the little boy believed he could, he had utilized more energy than he had thought possible. Coming back to his senses, he crouched and listened intently to hear if anyone would come to investigate.

After several minutes, no further sound could be heard. The pair cautiously crept inside and began to survey their surroundings.

Cyrus jumped back in surprise noticing the prone form of Ignatius lying crumpled on the floor. He relaxed slightly when he realized that the butler was still breathing; he must have been knocked unconscious by the force of the door's passage. He did not appear injured. Despite his condition, the boy declined to verify his health; after all, his reception earlier had not suggested that he would be the one to help them, and he was rather inclined to leave him in this state. At the least, he had not witnessed them enter, and so would not be able to give any indication of their whereabouts.

They decided to carefully explore the extents of the cellar. It seemed plain that Ignatius had been the only one present who might have investigated the noise, for no one else had so much as stirred. After a short time, it became evident that the basement was just as extensive as the rest of the building, if not more so; the multitude of labyrinthine passages might have lost them, had not Cyrus possessed such a strong sense of direction thanks to his earth affinity. Discovering a small storage room which appeared to have been disused for ages, they decided to settle down for the remainder of the night, as there was little else for them to do. The pair lay down, resting comfortably on impromptu beds of dusty but serviceable sacks, and went fast to sleep despite their nervousness about being found.

Waking up in the morning, Cyrus' eyes snapped open when he realized they were not alone. Leaping up, he found that Ignatius was already at the door to the small room, tranquilly regarding them and making no move. He froze, and the two simply looked at each other while Micael lay asleep, oblivious to the world.

The butler was the first to speak. "Do not fear, I will not harm you."

At this, Micael began to stir. Glancing towards him, Cyrus nodded slowly and relaxed his stance, though he began to collect some power from the earth. Surely, just a little would suffice to bowl him over, and then they could make their escape.

"There's no need for that, my child."

Startled, the youth lost his concentration, scattering the gathered strength harmlessly. How could he have known? He had made no sign.

Ignatius smiled, divining the course of the boy's thoughts. "I, too, am an earth affinity. Let me assure you, I have no intention of telling Kamril —" he practically spat the name, as if it had a foul taste — "that you are here. You've heard that the former headmaster has passed away?"

Cyrus nodded.

"I tell you now that he has not."

The youth was astonished. "But then, why — how —"

"Though I cannot locate Master Arturo, I know for a fact that he lives still. Kamril has done something to him, in his underhanded fashion, for he is not strong enough to overcome the Master in a legitimate battle. What this is, I cannot guess. But I, in turn, am not strong enough to overwhelm the pretender, and so I bide my time and search as best I can for hints to his location. For some time, I've been searching the cellars, suspecting that he might have been ensorcelled in some way and concealed down here. In fact, I was on my way to the nightly search when you entered so... forcibly."

Cyrus looked chastened, and mumbled an apology. The old mage merely laughed.

"Think nothing of it. I remember in my youth I used to be nearly as hasty as you, hard as it may be to believe. The years have taught me temperance, and many years they've been indeed." His eyes took on a wistful cast, and he sighed. "Ah, well. Come, I'll take you to the servant's kitchen, and we'll have a meal. Kamril never condescends to venture down here, thankfully, and there'll be no one else around to ask any questions just now. Most of them have snuck off to town to enjoy the last days of the festival." He smiled ruefully. "Would that I had that luxury. But let us go!"

As they wound through the twisting passages, Cyrus was grateful of the butler's assistance. Though he would have been able to find the way out, it wouldn't have been much use if it was so impossible to seek out anything else in the catacombs without a long-standing knowledge of their layout.

They breakfasted like kings on the stores of the kitchen, treating themselves to copious quantities of bread and dried fish. Rather frugal kings perhaps, but they ate royally nonetheless. As they ate, the two boys began to discuss plans with Ignatius.

"How do you intend to find Master Arturo? What do you think happened to him?" Cyrus asked.

"I was planning to search the entire basement. Kamril's refusal to go down here, though it might be just vanity, seemed a bit suspicious, and I wondered if he hadn't tried to conceal my poor master somewhere here. I know for a fact, however, that he isn't dead."

"But how can you be so sure?"

"All people with an earth affinity can sense the presence of others. The ability must be taught, which is why, I imagine, you've not yet learned to utilize it, but everyone has a unique pattern which we can pick up on. Only

the earth practitioners have this ability, although of course the other elements have their own benefits."

This was new to Cyrus, and he wondered that no one had told him earlier. "Why didn't my teacher tell me of this?"

"Ah, such skills are only taught to those who complete the basic training. How long were you taught for, and by whom?"

"Master Saltrio, for nearly 8 years."

At the mention of the old sage's name, Ignatius' eyes lit up in recognition. "Saltrio! My word, I've not seen him in ages! How is the old fellow?"

"Well enough. You knew each other?"

"Yes, we trained together, long ago. To think, Saltrio a master...!" He shook his head. "Well, he always was a better student than I. Where is he now?"

"Norven, where I live."

"Ah, if only I could go to live in the country, free of cares... but then again, I don't want to leave with Master Arturo yet to be found."

Cyrus considered telling him of Saltrio's mysterious conversation with the goddess Verbenia, but he shied away from the idea. It sounded preposterous even to him, and he didn't want the man to think he was making up spurious tales.

"Might it be possible to learn these skills without having finished the basics?"

"I suppose, but it would be rather..." Ignatius paused. "You mean that you would learn them?"

"I want to help with the search in whatever way I can."

"Hmm, hmm... perhaps that would be just the thing. You are young and able yet, while I have grown rather old for such practice. Well then, we shall begin even now." He cleared off the table, and peered intently at Cyrus. "I can see you know how to gather energy, but do you understand the mechanism by which it operates?"

He shook his head, and the mage continued. "Everyone is constantly drawing upon the energies of the earth, and the earth in turn draws upon them. We of the earth affinity can increase this energy transfer, but we cannot unbalance its flow. This world is stronger than we could ever be; still, we may redirect its energy currents by our will. Now, you must learn to feel the current as it is. You know intuitively how to seek it out and draw it to yourself; now, you will not compel, but merely accept."

The youth emptied his mind and sought out the flow of the earth's energies; yet he found that he was blocked by a tendency to seize the energy, disrupting the natural pathways. He broke his concentration and sighed in disappointment.

"Patience. Do not fear, this is a difficult thing to learn. Try again, now. Simply observe the currents."

He closed his eyes and began to try again. Slowly, a fuzzy mental image began to impinge on Cyrus' awareness. There was no definite shape in his

vision, but where Ignatius and Micael were sitting was strikingly apparent. He could "see" them, surrounded by a vague cocoon of slow drifts.

"I see it!"

The butler clapped his hands. "Excellent! Now, let me give you a test."

In front of the old man's figure, the drifts began to coalesce into an amorphous object, gradually gaining in definition and clarity. He held up his hands, and in between them, Cyrus could observe the shape of a flower.

"A lotus?"

"Yes!" he cried out in delight. "You've nearly mastered it already. But of course this is merely the beginning of how to observe others via your powers. Indeed, there is an entire mode of awareness to be learned. But that's for another time. I suggest that today, you remain hidden, while I go and tend to the upstairs. Feel free to explore the cellar; I trust you'll be able to find your way about. Don't travel upstairs, though; it would be disastrous if you were to be seen."

He nodded his assent. After the butler took his leave, the boys at once began to explore the underground expanse in search of the missing Arturo. They treated it as a game, looking in every corner and rashly shouting "Master Arturo!" in every passageway. The time passed swiftly as they discovered the many rooms that had long been in disuse. One contained nothing but dusty tomes filled with long-forgotten languages which neither could understand. Here and there were an old closet full of moth-eaten robes, a whole dining hall's worth of tarnished silver, an broken clockwork model of the stars' positions. It would take years to sort through all of the contents; it was no wonder that they had long been abandoned, for it all seemed to be of little worth. Still, it gladdened Cyrus' heart to see little Micael delight in every little trinket they found together.

As the day drew to a close, Ignatius descended into the basement to find the pair resting in the kitchen, exhausted.

"It looks like you had a busy day," he observed with a smile. "Waiting on Kamril is a trying business indeed, but I can deal with him. I must caution you, the others will be returning from their visit to the center of town on the morrow, and you must know how to evade them so as not to arouse suspicion."

He told them of the patterns of every one of the servants who worked for the Accademia, revealing his surprisingly detailed knowledge of their ways.

"How did you find out so much about their movements? Surely you could not have observed all of them so closely by yourself."

Ignatius smiled slowly. "That is the next aspect of what you must learn. With our earth magic, we can expand our awareness to encompass as much or as little as desired. This is considerably more difficult than merely observing those in the room with you, but you can learn it with a little practice."

"First, you must begin by going into the awareness you had earlier."

Cyrus complied, putting himself into a receptive state. As before, the

shadowy figures of the others appeared in his mind's eye.

"Try to expand your sight, now. Sink deeper into the trance."

He felt as if seismic waves were radiating and reverberating outward from his body. A strange sensation of expansion invaded his thoughts, and all of a sudden was swept away by a new state of experience. He could now be aware of the entire Accademia, all at once. *Ignatius and Micael were watching him intently*

*Kamril, high above, was sitting in his chambers, looking haughty and dissatisfied*

*One of the jolly, drunken servants had just arrived at the side entrance and was peering inside*

*He saw a somberly dressed man with a distinguished face lying prostrate on a slab, in a circular room. Arturo? Where was he?! But his new awareness would not stop*

*Cyrus could see Mattie sweeping the entrance of her building*

*Vendors crying out exhortations to buy their goods*

*His mother Fiella humming softly to herself and wondering where he was*

*The awareness encompassed the entire planet. Everything: all the marvelous scintillating threads of life, the crystal domes of the Gardens, the immeasurable domains of the Flower Maidens, everything was present and past and future and echoing and constant and joyful and inevitable and unremitting and wondrous and terrible*

*He reclined onto the iridescent, fantastically suspended circle in the center of the temple and began to dream.*

*A young woman sang in the meadow, a song brimming with love without words, and two men were frozen in wonder, in the same moment desiring ardently to go and see the one who had crafted this heavenly music.*

*It seemed that the song sprang forth into the world and was boundless, resonating in the deepest crevasses of the earth and the highest reaches of the sky; everything could not help loving it and loving her.*

*Singing and singing, the melody began to overlap and harmonize with itself. Yet here there was a poignant note hanging in the air, creating discord and overwhelming the song's purity, and all the harmonies were unraveled and began to falter and suddenly everything —*

stopped.

## Chapter 6

# Finding Arturo

Cyrus returned to the present abruptly, feeling as though someone had physically struck him. He had ended up on the floor, and both Ignatius and Micael were standing over him, looking at him with worried faces. Struggling to a sitting position, he could do nothing more than wait for his breath to return to him.

As soon as he had regained his composure somewhat, he described what he had seen to the others. Ignatius looked grave and Micael was simply wide-eyed with astonishment.

"I cannot guess what it is that this vision means. But you must try to resist the temptation to let your awareness run wild. You can see the result of such folly for yourself."

Cyrus nodded mutely, barely able to focus on the present world. He remained shaken to the core by the strange and incomprehensible barrage of awareness he had just experienced, and calmness was not about to return soon.

"At any rate, your vision gives me courage. Arturo remains well, and must be somewhere nearby. But I have never seen any circular rooms... it is curious. But I forget myself. For now, it might be best if you found someplace to conceal yourselves, as the remainder of the servants will be returning any minute now. I suggest you return to your storage room, while I go and talk with the others."

The boys returned to their abode of the previous night, feeling distinctly unnerved by the thought that others might be around to discover their presence. However, no one came to roust them from their hiding place, and they eventually settled down to rest for the evening.

In Cyrus' dreams that night, a deep, sonorous voice seemed to speak to him.

"Where the lotus meets the sky, there it is that I now lie."

"But where is that! Can you not give me a plain answer?" Yet the voice stayed silent.

On the following day, he told Micael of his dream, and the boy merely looked at him with a wisdom beyond his years but said nothing. Soon afterward, Ignatius came down and told them of the goings-on upstairs.

"They won't find you here for some time. Kamril has the whole of them occupied with cleaning all of the Accademia, the vain fool that he is. They shan't be down here to bother you for a long time yet."

The older youth in turn told him of his new dream.

"Hmm... a riddle, eh? I was never very skilled at such things. Between the two of you, though, I've no doubt that you will find the answer yourselves. In the meantime, I think it may be safe to show you around upstairs. If anyone asks, you're a pair of traveling students touring the grounds, understand? Rest easy, the staff of the Accademia are not known for their inquisitiveness. Come with me."

The butler escorted them up one of the winding stairwells, and all at once they were back into the imposing and stately main halls of the Accademia di Fiori. The grandeur which they had observed briefly just a few days ago was doubly impressive now that they were no longer under duress. Lavish velvet curtains covered the high, ornate windows trimmed with gold leaf. All the furniture was of oak and mahogany, with many chairs and tables set up around the extensive perimeter of the first hall they entered, apparently some type common area. In the center of the room, a thin, very high spiral staircase ascended into the tower above, and the passage behind them led to the myriad smaller chambers in the western wing of the institution. They walked slowly, savoring the luxury which surrounded them, eventually traveling through the enormous opening which led to the main hall.

Cyrus shivered in remembrance of the chilling first encounter they had undergone with Kamril. He was glad that the brooding mage did not see fit to patrol his premises on a regular basis. This area too was unoccupied; the servants must have started on the eastern side and started working their way westward. The boys grew a bit more cautious with the knowledge that they would soon be among many people, not all of whom might be trusted as much as Ignatius.

On the other side of the great hall, a great commotion could be observed. As they drew closer, the cause of the bustle was evident. All of the servants were cleaning at top speed, apparently wanting to be done as soon as possible. It seemed that no one would notice any additions to this chaotic of a scene, and they proceeded ahead with more boldness than before.

Indeed, not a single person paid them the slightest bit of attention. The hall was the mirror image of the one they had just seen, save that its furniture was largely in disarray and it was considerably more occupied. Occasionally, one of the workers would glance towards the trio and nod in Ignatius' direction, but there was no other acknowledgment of their presence. The aged butler led the way to the center of the room.

"Let us go upstairs, there's something I wish to show you."

They began to climb the stairs, winding round and round the intricately woven design of the central pillar as they rose. Their ascent made the scurrying folk below seem tiny by comparison, and Cyrus had a fleeting image of floating high above them in midair before coming back to reality.

Past the level of the main hall, the tower rose up until it terminated in a graceful spire far above their heads. The reasonably sized room into which the three of them had come was nearly claustrophobic in comparison with the expansive area downstairs. The climb did not end there, however. A ladder led upwards into a curious room which the two boys surveyed in puzzlement as the butler slowly clambered up the rungs. It was completely empty except for a conspicuous lever in the center of the room.

Noting their bewilderment, Ignatius smiled and gestured towards it. "I think pulling that lever will clear up your confusion."

The older boy pulled the lever and immediately discovered that the room was indeed more than he had suspected. Triangular sections of the walls began to separate outward and spin via an elaborate system of gears which could be heard plainly but remained well concealed from view. In place of the stone, glass so pure it was almost invisible clicked into position with only the most insubstantial wisp of a frame holding it in place. There could be no doubt that the engineers of this place had been exceedingly skilled.

After the rotation was completed, the new-formed portals revealed four different views: one of the brightly shining dome of the Garden, one of the opposite tower in front of the distant bay with an infinity of glittering stars flecked upon its surface, one of the shabby buildings of Rallia's vast urban landscape, and one of the endless forests which stretched out far to the east. Cyrus fancied he could spot the path leading back to his home of Norven, while Micael wondered which of the many buildings he could see from this height was the one where his mother waited patiently for his return.

Ignatius peered distractedly at the immensity of the crystal dome to the south. His countenance grew grave as he looked into its depths.

"The Gardener has been missing for so long, now... but the flowers are safe, surely, for it is nearly impossible to enter the Gardens without permission, and no one has ever been able to before."

"Do you think that someone might?"

The butler shook his head. "I did not mean to worry you with such talk. Sometimes I speak aloud what I do not intend. No, I believe that the flowers are safe for now."

It was a long time ago indeed when the crystal domes were put into place, long before any of them had been born. Yet they had not always been there. The tale was well known to all: long ago, Ilesians fighting a war against Rallia and her neighboring states had begun to attack the enemy's flowers instead of the actual people. The tactic was overwhelmingly effective, rendering the most potent of the enemy's magicians harmless in one stroke. But the result of this was that war became more gruesome and

deadly than ever; no longer could battling mages have gentlemanly duels in the stead of direct combat. The horrors of purely physical war afflicted both sides equally, and leaders on both sides met to end the violence in a permanent way.

The Floral Pact was established as a result of their meeting, to ensure that no one would ever have to fear for the safety of their flowers again. Appeals were made to the Flower Maidens, and the goddesses decided to grant the perfect crystalline domes to protect each Garden from invasion, as well as appointing the eternal Gardeners to make sure that no one violated the terms of the agreement. After these safeguards were in place, the two sides became friends, and initiated a profitable trading relationship that had continued to the present day. Indeed, the whole world had benefitted from this realization that the flowers should be considered sacrosanct, and aside from minor territorial quarrels everything had been relatively peaceful since.

In and of themselves, the domes were mostly sufficient to protect the flowers from tampering. The Gardeners served therefore mainly to maintain order within and had considerable power to prevent anyone from interference. Yet what indeed if the Gardener went missing, as this one had? Cyrus was sure that the goddesses knew of his absence, from what he heard pass between his old master Saltrio and the Earth Maiden, Verbenia, but it seemed they were equally in the dark about his location.

At this point, Ignatius interrupted his pondering. "We had better get back downstairs before the servants start to thin out and leave us visible."

Micael was resistant to being torn away from the fascinating views afforded by the tower. He tugged on the butler's sleeve.

"Can't we stay just a bit longer?"

The elderly mage merely chuckled and patted his head. He pouted and refused to leave, but once the others started to climb down, he grudgingly acquiesced and started down the ladder after them.

It was fortunate that they had ventured down at that moment, for the cleaning had started to move into the central hall and their presence might have been considerably more noticeable had they waited much longer. They walked down the winding staircase and arrived on the ground floor once again.

"Has our little expedition made you hungry?"

Cyrus and Micael's stomachs growled in response.

The old butler laughed. "Come on, I've just the thing."

He led them down to the kitchen where they had been spending their time, and they dined on the remainder of the freshly cooked fish that had been served for lunch. After the delicious meal, they sat around contented for a time.

"I want to go exploring again," said Micael plaintively.

Ignatius looked weary, and Cyrus interceded on his behalf. "Maybe tomorrow, alright?"

The child nodded eagerly. He could wait, after all.

"I still don't know what that riddle means."

"Where the lotus meets the sky, there it is that I now lie.' It sounds so simple, but I cannot fathom it."

Something jogged in Cyrus' memory. "There's a metal lotus on the top of the central spire. But that would mean — Arturo is in the Garden?!"

"Impossible! How would he have been put inside? The Gardener went missing before he disappeared."

"Do you have any other ideas?"

The mage shook his head. "But still... it seems unlikely."

"I remember my vision now; the circular room where I saw him was entirely made of crystal, except for the stone slab in the middle... I don't know why I didn't think of it before!"

"Let us not be too hasty. Even if he were in the Garden, there is no way for ones such as us to enter it."

"But how did the Gardener go in and out? There must be some way to get inside."

"He had great power at his disposal, whereas we do not have nearly enough. Besides, getting inside without permission would be a severe offense indeed."

"Would you rather wait for him to come back and give you leave to enter? We don't mean to even touch the flowers, and we'd leave as soon as we'd retrieved him."

"Therein lies another problem. How do we undo the enchantment upon him?"

"You're the Accademian, not I."

"Too many different spells could be the cause of his affliction. I would have to go there in person to find out how to deal with it."

"Well then, why don't we try it?"

"Preposterous! Searching the dome for an entrance could take years, and even if we found one, how to open it would be another matter."

"Have a little faith. I'm sure we'll be able to find a way in."

The butler shook his head, but he was softening as time went on. After all, what was there to lose? And he would love to see Master Arturo in his rightful place again...

"Very well, we shall attempt it. But for today, let us wait while I seek any learning surrounding the precise nature of the domes." His careworn face creased with worry. "Be careful that the others don't see you; Cyrus, I advise you to try and use your earth awareness, but avoid letting it run free at all costs! Keep it restrained to just the immediate area and you should be alright."

The boys bid him farewell, and Cyrus played with young Micael as the pair impatiently awaited his return. He reflected on how young and fragile the child seemed; what he had been like at that age. Indeed, despite his childlike face, Micael's eyes had curiosity and liveliness in them, eager to

learn of what the world had to offer. He hoped that he would only learn of the good in life, for anything so innocent should remain unspoiled if it might be so. Thinking of the boy's mother, Elena, he wondered how she was. She had been ailing when they saw her last, but perhaps she had gained strength in knowing that her son would be taken in. Though they had not yet succeeded completely, it seemed certain that it was only a matter of time before Arturo was back in the headmaster's quarters and Elena could live with the boy just as they had before.

Almost before he realized it, evening had come and Ignatius returned carrying several weighty tomes.

"I have found a way in," he said triumphantly.

Cyrus and Micael grinned.

"But it may be a bit complicated."

"Well?"

"As you may know, the domes are actually made of individual 6-sided crystals, each of which forms a facet of the overall shape. There is a set of crystals which can be passed through as if they were insubstantial as air."

"Then what's the problem?"

The butler frowned. "They are nearly halfway up the side of the dome."

Cyrus was stricken. Would it ever be possible to enter if they had to scale the side of the Garden's enormous dome?

"How did the Gardener do it?"

"The ancient texts are silent on that topic."

"So we've gained nothing."

"On the contrary. We now know where it is that an entry must be made, and it merely remains to find a way of reaching it."

"What do we know of the Gardener's powers?"

Ignatius shrugged. "Nothing, I'm afraid. No one was ever able to find out his capabilities."

"Perhaps there is some mechanism in place to raise him to the level of the penetrable crystals."

"But how would we find such a mechanism without searching the whole perimeter?"

"Think. It would be somewhere easily accessible, since he did have to come and go occasionally."

The man considered a moment. "Yes, but how does that help us? He could have gone through any side."

"We could try using our awareness. If we just allowed it to encompass one small section of the wall, and tested only along one side, we could complete the survey in a very short time."

"It is dangerous. You saw yourself what happens if the awareness expands unchecked."

"What other choice have we?"

Ignatius grumbled, but had no rebuttal for the proposal.

"It's settled, then. When shall we leave?"

"Tomorrow. We can get away for one day. The snow will complicate matters, but I'll bring you warm clothing and boots."

Cyrus thanked him, and they retired yet again to the concealment of their storage room in preparation for the next day's journey.

As the trio peered up at the towering dome, they gained a sense of the true immensity with which they were presented. To either side, the sweeping curve of its sides actually prevented them from seeing the bay to the west and the forest to the east. All that remained was the innumerable crystals of its walls, which glittered like stars in the morning sun and stretched up, up, impossibly high, arching well out of sight and at last coming together at the zenith somewhere far above. It was difficult for them to even comprehend its size in any normal terms, though they knew rationally that it had been measured at about one league square. Yet this size required an entirely different frame of reference than that normally used for structures; even the grandest manmade palaces could only claim a paltry fraction of its area.

"Try using your earth awareness. Make sure to not let it spread out too far!"

Pausing a moment to collect himself, Cyrus breathed deeply and let his thoughts slip into the heightened state. At once, he was bombarded by the profusion of energy circulating tumultuously inside the Garden. All the flowers within were like tiny luminous beacons, and the dazzling show they put on made it nearly impossible to focus on anything else. Nevertheless, he turned his attention away from their bright clouds, and quested with his will for a way to ascend to the dome's entrance.

He noticed a curious outpouring of energy close by, emanating from what seemed to be a mass of roots. But there was seemingly no plant on top of them. Breaking off the trance, he told the others and they went over to investigate.

The patch of ground which he had indicated seemed just like all the region surrounding the dome; but when they stood upon it, a slight rumbling could be felt underneath their feet. They barely had time to look around in alarm before the ground began to burst upwards underneath them.

Soon, the cause of their sudden movement was apparent; they were atop a giant leafy stem, which could be seen rapidly rising out of the ground far below. The ride was swift, if a little unsettling. So the Gardener had used an enchanted plant. Mystery solved.

Within a few short moments, the ersatz transport reached the appropriate level of crystals and halted its growth as abruptly as it had begun. This line of panels looked the same as all the others, but Cyrus cautiously extended his arm and found that it met with no resistance. Heartened, all three stepped off the plant, and it began its speedy retraction into the ground.

Entering through the false crystals made them feel particularly disconcerted, but the sight within caused all three to breathe a sigh of wonder.

The Garden was just as they had imagined it, and more. Crystal walk-

ways entwined with vines looped around and through the vast, shimmering space. Everywhere was a scintillating kaleidoscope of light, an almost blinding brilliance which made it difficult to see. And the flowers.

Every kind of flower imaginable was growing on one of the countless tiers of the Garden, held up by sheets of hexagonal tiles. Cyrus could identify roses, wisteria, violets, daisies, tulips... the diverse varieties were too many, and he soon abandoned trying to pick out individuals in the unending sea of colors. Far, far underneath them, a giant and unfathomably deep pool held the water flowers, while the desert flowers and those needing full sunlight were on levels closer to the top.

They stood still for a time upon the sizable hexagonal dais onto which they had entered, stupefied by the incomprehensible vastness which was before them. After drinking in the beautiful and astounding sights for a few minutes, they shook themselves and began seeking out their objective.

Unbelievably high up, at the apex of the dome, their goal was barely visible. A tiny, circular outpost, from which the Gardener must have surveyed his charges when he still resided within. It was there that Arturo lay, trapped in the snare of some devious enchantment. One of the pathways led directly to it, but it was far too long for them to even consider walking it. They approached it slowly, cautious of falling off the steep ledges on all sides.

Once they had neared the pathway, it became apparent that it was not in fact directly connected to the platform on which they stood. It was slightly underneath, and the vine wrapped around it seemed to be the only thing holding it in place. Ignatius realized that there was a single, conspicuously positioned leaf that was quite different from the others. He reached out and touched it, and suddenly the vine began to snake inward, pulling the extensive walkway backwards with it. After a brief time, the entire structure had been pulled downward to rest level with the platform. The trio stepped onto the path, and Cyrus flicked an identical leaf on the vine's opposite tip. They were moving.

As they drew closer to the circular observation post in the center, the boys held their breath in anticipation, while Ignatius watched the approaching structure with apprehension. They clambered onto the narrow path ringing around the room, and carefully began to walk around to the entrance.

Inside, just as Cyrus had seen, the prostrate body of an impressively regal man rested on a stone slab in the center of the room. Arturo's tall, imposing figure seemed stilled; not dead, but as if he merely slept.

"What now?" Cyrus asked.

Ignatius replied quietly, "We wake him up, of course."

"But how?"

"I will try, though my ability may not be enough for the task."

The butler moved to the side of the stone slab and raised his hands over the man. Concentrating on the man, he tried to fathom the enchantment

upon him.

"He has been dazed. It's a skill of the wind mages; they can send a person's spirit wandering, and the victim is unable to come back to himself without help. But I do not possess the power necessary to undo it. Still, we will succeed, somehow. Let us try to pool our strength together."

Cyrus joined hands with the old man, and they concentrated on redirecting the flows of earth energy. There was already an abundance of it due to the flowers, so it was a simple matter to collect it. The pair tried to send this energy to Arturo, in order to ground him in the here and now. Yet it was to no avail.

"I want to help," said Micael. He reached up and grabbed their hands, and both of them suddenly felt much more powerful than before. Almost as soon as he had done this, Arturo's eyes snapped open suddenly.

The pair of them stared back and forth between the boy and the awakened master. Neither was quite certain of what had just occurred, for it seemed to be unbelievable. Just what did this young boy have within him? But Arturo's deep voice called their attention.

"Ignatius? But who — where?"

The noble headmaster sat up and peered about him. His grave countenance took on a look of puzzlement. "Surely this is not —"

Ignatius took on a reverent tone. "The Garden, Master Arturo. And let me say, it's a pleasure to have you back with us."

"Back? What do you mean?"

"You were dazed, sir."

"I see... now things begin to become clear." His eyes narrowed to slits. "Kamril! I should have known he was not to be trusted. Tell me, what has he done while I was so ensorcelled?"

"He made himself headmaster, begging your pardon, sir. He told us you were dead, but I didn't believe a word of it. Still, I wasn't strong enough to face him myself, and so I bade my time and searched for you as best I could. But these two lads are the ones you should thank for finding you."

The headmaster smiled warmly at the boys. "Then I thank you, my young rescuers. And what are your names?"

They told him, and he nodded. "My cousin Elena had a little boy named Micael, too. A darling little child he was indeed, just like you."

"That is my mother, sir."

"Then you are he?! But you must be at least ten years... I have been trapped here for ten years!"

The butler nodded gravely.

"Please, Ignatius, tell me of Kamril's other doings. Ah, I was a fool to have allowed him anywhere near the Accademia! He was a wind mage, and few of them are known for loyalty."

"No fault of your own, sir, we were all taken in by him then. He was so capable and eager. But of course, after he had ensnared you, he stopped doing anything at all and showed his true colors. He turned this poor child

and his mother out! And I didn't have the courage to stop him," he said with downcast eyes.

"Poor Elena! Where is she now?"

"Living in a house in the city."

"We'll right all of this at once. What a fool I was! How do we get out of this place?"

Ignatius showed the way out, and they were soon back on the dais on which they had started. Cyrus tugged on a tiny green shoot of the fast-growing plant on which they had entered, and it soon conveyed them to the ground, after which they marched towards the Accademia with purpose in their steps. It seemed that the wicked Kamril would not rest easy this evening.

## Chapter 7

# School

They trudged through the snow towards the Accademia, and Arturo's eyes glinted with restrained anger with the thought of what Kamril had done. He grew more and more enraged as time went on, and once they had reached the gates he was practically furious considering his normally calm demeanor. Storming into the building, he brushed aside all the servants' cries of fear and disbelief, and went right up the central staircase to where his quarters had been.

Bursting through the doors, he found the unfaithful mage sullenly admiring himself in the mirror.

"Kamril," he intoned. "You must leave. Now." His deep blue eyes were stormy, and seemed to almost swirl about like the roiling sea in his anger.

The usurper whirled around in shock. It seemed that this face was the last he expected to see, and his haughty manner faltered in the face of this discovery. Realizing that all was over, he stood up stiffly and said, "Very well, I will leave. But this will not be the last you hear of Kamril!" With that, he walked towards the door slowly, trying to retain the semblance of dignity although all knew he was disgraced. He slunk off down the marble staircase and swept as grandly as his injured pride would let him out of the central entrance.

Once the four of them left the room, the servants who had been watching timorously from all around gave a cheer. "How?" was the cry that many of them gave.

Arturo waved his hand in order to quiet the crowd, and said "Do not fear, I will tell you all the tale of it soon. But for now, I have pressing business to attend to in the city. Would one of the fire mages care to accompany me?"

Two chefs, a maid, and three butlers yelled out their willingness eagerly.

"Giovanni, please, come with us. The rest of you, be merry! I shall right the wrongs which Kamril has committed in my absence." Turning to Micael and the others, he said tenderly, "Come. We shall go into the city and bring your mother back here forthwith."

The little boy's eyes lit up with delight. Though it had only been a short

while since he had seen his mother, it seemed like ages given all that had occurred.

As soon as Giovanni, a chef, had risen to meet them, Arturo started to discuss their plans.

"This little boy's mother has been cast out due to Kamril's cruelty. We must find her at once so that we can bring her back here, but the snow is almost impassable now. Can you melt it for us?"

Giovanni nodded vigorously. "I'd be honored, sir. Life under that traitorous wretch has been a trial, and your return is like a breath of fresh air to us all."

The regal Arturo smiled. "Now now, you must not be so quick to sing my praises! After all, I was deceived by his dissemblance to begin with."

In response, the chef merely shook his head. "It's no matter. I'm sure it'll be better now that you're back."

"That remains to be seen. Ah, the night is already upon us, but I have no wish to let my dear Elena spend another night languishing in the city's slums. Then let us go, ere there is no time left to search!"

Cyrus and Micael both accompanied the headmaster and the chef, while Ignatius remained behind citing the work he would have to do to make the master's quarters presentable again. They thanked for all the help he had rendered, and then went out into the cold night.

As soon as they were outside, the fire mage summoned up a dancing spark which preceded them as they walked, melting away the snow rapidly with its licking tongues of flame. He held another up in his hands and stood in the center of the other three, using it to warm the group and take off the biting chill of the night air. It was almost as if they were still inside by the heart, and they were all grateful for his presence.

Entering into the city, they walked for a long time to reach the slums to the north. The cobblestone streets and row after row of mismatched, shoddy buildings began to wear on their minds. Soon, however, they had passed into the Slums, and reached Micael's house within a few minutes. It was by this time very late in the evening, but Arturo went ahead and knocked on the door regardless, anxious to rescue his suffering cousin from this poor environment.

A rustling could be heard within, and an unfamiliar woman appeared at the door. Bleary eyed, she demanded "What do you mean, calling at this hour of the night!"

All of them were taken aback. "Does not Elena reside in this building?"

Looking a little more awake, she adopted a more sympathetic face. "You've come too late, sirs. She passed away last week."

Staring in disbelief, none of them quite realized what the woman had just said. Slowly, the significance began to sink in. Micael started to sob, and soon was bawling uncontrollably. Arturo's eyes brimmed with tears, but he said only, "We are sorry to have disturbed you."

"My condolences," the woman said gingerly. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

Cyrus took poor Micael's hands and tried to comfort him. "It'll be okay,

don't worry. She's gone to a better place now, and won't ever have to be sick again." But his tears continued unabated. Arturo to his side stood stock still, seemingly frozen into a statue by grief.

After a few moments, they slowly, leadenly began the journey home. All felt devastated that their trip had been for nought, and the poor woman's relations most of all. Yet there was nothing to be done.

"Kamril did this. I was too lenient! I should have kept him imprisoned and never let him see the light of day again. But it's too late, now. Too late," he said, choking on the words.

"It's not your fault, master," consoled the chef.

"But it is my fault! A thousand times over. Oh, how I curse you, deceiving wretch! I wish you had never come to our Academy!"

They walked on in silence for a time, until the large silhouette of the Academia in the moonlight filled their view. Going inside, they were greeted warmly by Ignatius.

"Welcome back! But where is..."

No one spoke, but their solemn faces told the tale of what had transpired.

"Such tragedy! Oh, foul Kamril! May he be thrice cursed, the scum!"

"There is nothing to be done. Come, let us retire for the evening. Ignatius, please give them proper quarters tonight. We will figure out what to do in the morning."

The party separated with heavy hearts. Nothing seemed to bring them consolation, and Cyrus saw that Micael was still crying softly. He hugged the poor child in sympathy.

"Don't worry, little one. It'll be alright," he said as he stroked the young boy's hair. If only he could believe it himself.

In the morning, the sun shone bright and cheerily through their room's small window, seeming almost a mockery of their grief. The boys arose slowly and tramped out into the hallway, only to find that they were in the midst of a long row of rooms. They had been so tired the night before that they barely realized where they had been put up. This must be the student dormitories in the east wing. Indeed, as they went out into the main hall, they found a number of students milling about, chatting and gossiping together. Some gave them quizzical looks as they passed by, but no one stopped to talk to them until they came close to leaving into the central hall. Then, a cheerful, round faced boy of about Cyrus' age accosted them unexpectedly.

"Hello there. New students, I see. I noticed no one was going to meet you, so I'll be the one to welcome you." He offered his hand in greeting, and both of them shook it. "My name's Kale. And yours?"

They introduced themselves, and the boy did a double take. "Then you're the fellows who've been hiding down in the cellars?! Blimey. It's an honor to meet you. I'd never have the courage to try a stunt like that myself."

"It wasn't so much courage as necessity, I can tell you."

But Kale waved aside their objections. "Modesty, just modesty." He grew solemn. "I'm sorry to hear what happened to your mother," he said to Micael.

"There wasn't anything to be done," the little boy declared bravely, though his eyes betrayed his true feelings.

The boy resumed his cheerful manner. "Cheer up. Come, let's get some breakfast, and we can talk about it."

Going into the central hall, the three boys ascended the stairwell and began to walk about on the second floor. In the commotion of the previous evening, Cyrus and Micael had failed to realize that the second floor had anything on it aside from the headmaster's quarters. They now discovered that it also extended southward into a dining hall, which apparently rested atop the classroom area below. After ordering their meals at the far end, they sat down at one of the enormous tables that seated 50 apiece, and the boys began to tell the tale of their journey so far. Kale looked by turns intrigued and incredulous.

"You mean you really went into the Garden?"

"Yes, of course. And then we rescued Arturo from the spell that Kamril cast, and..."

Once Cyrus had concluded, Kale gave a low whistle. "I wish I had done anything near so exciting. I've been a student here since I was 10, and nothing's ever happened to speak of until you came along."

"Oh, come on, there must have been something."

He shook his head. "The teachers here know a lot and all, but they're very dull. I've never known one to do much of anything besides read their tomes and lecture on the importance of concentration and focus. Ah well," he sighed. "But what are you going to do now?"

"I realize that I have a lot to learn, so I think I'll become a student for a little while, at least until I can get some hint of what happened to the Gardener. As for Micael..." he began to whisper conspiratorially, "we don't know what his flower is. But he's got a great deal of power in him, if we could only figure out what it is."

"What are you saying about me?!" the young boy demanded.

Cyrus laughed and tousled his hair. "Don't worry about it. Let's go find Master Arturo and tell him of our plans."

They bid goodbye to Kale and set off to locate the headmaster. He was downstairs, talking to several professors and directing the affairs of the school as if he had never been away.

Once he saw them, he smiled pleasantly. "Ah, my young friends. It seems quite a lot has been done in my absence, but it is proving quite simple to put right now that I know of it. So, what is it you wish?"

"We were wondering if we... might be taken on as students."

"Of course! What less could I offer, since you have both been the heroes responsible for my safe return? I have just been talking with the teachers about your situation. Here, Halbert, Westinia, these are the boys I was

telling you about."

The severe, brooding Halbert nodded somewhat curtly to both, while Westinia extended her hand warmly. "It's a pleasure to have you at our humble institution. I hope you'll like it here."

"Thank you." Turning to Arturo again, he asked "When shall we start?"

"Why, as soon as you wish! How does tomorrow suit you?"

"Very well."

"Excellent. In the meantime, why don't you go around and talk to some of the pupils? They've been anxious to meet you, since rumor travels fast among our students."

"We shall. Thank you, Master Arturo."

They decided to head through to the western side, where they had not yet been while the school was in session. This, it became apparent, was the girls' side of the academy. They attracted many stares, since they were the only males in the entire room, and were about to make a hasty retreat when they were met at the door by a girl who looked curiously like the female version of the boy who had greeted them earlier.

"Hello there. You two are new here, right?" She offered her hand. "I'm Kara."

Cyrus and Micael shook it, while exchanging a befuddled glance. This greeting was nearly exactly the same as the one that Kale had given them before!

"Uh, yes... you wouldn't happen to know a boy named Kale, would you?"

"Of course! He's my twin brother. Though he rarely comes to talk to me any more, except in classes and during meals. He's too shy to come over to the girls' commons, and he refuses to let me go to him. I think he's a little embarrassed; you see, he doesn't do as well as I with the classes here, and the teachers always make a big fuss by asking why he can't be as studious as his sister. I've offered to help him out, but he won't hear of it, and the others tease him mercilessly whenever I come over and try to tutor him."

The boy's failure to mention a sister became clearer now. He must feel as though he were in her shadow, and want to be known for his own merits. But refusing her help was just silly, after all.

"Maybe I'll talk to him about it. But why are there so few boys over here?"

"Oh, they all say it's too girly to be seen in here. But I'm glad you ignored all that foolishness."

Cyrus had merely not known, rather than desiring to break the tradition, but refrained from mentioning that he would have done the same had he heard beforehand.

"Well, classes start up again tomorrow, so I'd better be getting back to my studying. I must get ready, after all, since I want to begin the year with a head start. I'll see you later!" She waved cheerfully and turned back to go to the dormitories. Cyrus and Micael left to return to the boys' commons and

find a place to relax for a time until the call for dinner.

Kale was nowhere to be found, so the pair waited by themselves. The older boy wondered what the classes would be like. It seemed there were entire areas of knowledge which he missed out on due to terminating his training with Saltrio, and he felt eager to learn what other skills might be open to him. He worried, also, about what would become of Micael; they could not go to classes together, for he would in a younger group, and besides, what he was actually capable of remained a mystery. Still, the future looked brighter than it had, and at least they would not be stuck in the cellars worrying about whether or not they would be discovered.

At dinnertime, they went upstairs to find Kale and Kara already waiting for them. Kale exhorted them, "Come on, get something quick before the best of it is gone!" The pair hastened to pick up their meals, then rejoined the twins at a long oaken table.

Kara grinned. "You're becoming something of celebrities. People keep stealing glances over at you, like you were some sort of legends."

"We didn't really do all that much, honestly."

"Ah, rubbish. If nothing else, You brought us a different headmaster, and the old one always did seem rather tiresome. Neither of us were around when Master Arturo was here at first, but the old students remember him quite fondly."

"What do you think of the teachers here?"

"Eh, not much to say. Some are fun, some are boring as can be. Do you know who you'll be having?"

"Halbert and Westinia, I think."

"Oh, that's luck for you! He's the driest man you'll ever see, but she's very nice. I suppose it'll work out in time. Both of them work primarily with earth mages, so you must be one of them, right?"

Cyrus nodded.

"How about you, my little friend?"

Micael raised his pale face to peer into Kara's. "Dunno," he said quietly.

Kale whispered in Kara's ear, and she glanced at him in surprise. "Oh! You poor thing."

Micael stared mutely at his plate.

"Cheer up, you'll be working with old Master Arturo. The older students tell me the headmaster takes it upon himself to deal with... special cases."

The little boy nodded, somewhat heartened by this revelation.

"Anyway, it's getting late. Perhaps we should head back to our rooms."

Standing up from the table, the group parted ways and Cyrus and Micael were left alone in their small chamber to ponder the day's events. The older of the two had chaotic and indecipherable dreams; yet sometime in the night, he had heard something of ominous portent. "In Ilesia, you will find a clue toward what you seek," a voice had said.

The thought was quickly pushed out of his mind, however, by the beginning of courses. Unexpectedly, he was roused out of bed by the tolling of a bell, which had not previously been rung. It seemed that with the return to scholarship, the routines changed somewhat around the Accademia. Cyrus and Micael followed the tide of people to breakfast, where they met up with their friends Kale and Kara to eat.

"When will the classes start?"

"In about an hour. Don't worry, you'll have plenty of time to eat. You can see the schedule on the dining hall doors; I don't know what class you'll be considered, but you can ask any of the teachers if you're uncertain."

"I hope I can do better on my studies this year," said Kale wistfully.

"Well, if you'd only let me give you some help..."

"No! You know the boys always crack jokes about it."

It was clear that this was not the first time they had had this debate. Cyrus attempted to step in as a peacemaker.

"Come on, Kale, let her help you. You don't have to be obvious about it; do your studying here in the dining hall or in the library."

"Are you sure?"

"It'll be fine, trust me."

"Well, maybe. I think I can do better on my own, though. I just have to try harder this year."

Kara glanced at her brother sympathetically, and shook her head. She knew he had studied for long nights but just didn't grasp enough of the fundamentals to keep up. Still, there was nothing to be done about it for the present, and she simply sighed before returning to her meal.

The bell rang yet again, this time signaling that classes were about to begin. Cyrus started to go off to check the schedule, but he stopped and peered down at Micael.

"You're sure you'll be alright on your own?"

He nodded bravely. "I'm sure."

"Well, good luck. I'd better go then." Cyrus grinned. "Make sure you don't give Master Arturo a hard time!"

Looking at the schedule, he realized that if Halbert and Westinia were to be his teachers, he must be considered a student of the second year. Was that really all his eight years of training amounted to? But then, he realized that much of that time had been lost when the children of Norven had to help with the harvest or other chores, whereas these students stayed full-time, and often had as much previous experience as he did or more. If that were the case, it might indeed prove challenging enough for one of his knowledge and skills.

Cyrus went down the stairs and into the southern half of the Accademia, the portion set aside for classrooms. The ceilings here were more modest than those in the commons areas, since the dining hall was situated directly overhead. He traveled down the hall to the classroom, and arrived just before Halbert had begun his plodding lecture.

"The magic... which we all possess... comes from the four elements... and is channeled via the flowers. The four elements are fire, water, earth, and wind. Can any one of you name the four elements?"

"Fire, water, earth, and wind," the class repeated.

"Now, let's do it one at a time." He indicated the student at the rightmost end of the first row.

The man could surely not be serious. He was going to have *every* student in the class repeat this most basic fundamental? But indeed, so he did. When his turn came, Cyrus felt a rash urge to stand up and proclaim his boredom to the world, but suppressed it and answered just as all the others. This, he reflected, was a rather inauspicious start to the year.

After an eternity had passed with each person answering the question in turn, Halbert continued in his stultifyingly tedious fashion. "We are given the ability... to utilize the energy... by... the flowers. When the flowers... are in full bloom... one's abilities are strong. When they are... closed... as in the wintertime... one's abilities are diminished."

"The flowers are contained... within the Gardens. Each person has... their own flower..."

Though the professor's droning continued in the background, Cyrus took the opportunity to catch up on much needed sleep. As he dreamt idly, a sudden, solitary whisper penetrated his thoughts.

"Ilesia!"

Abruptly, he awakened to find that class was ending. He joined the ranks of students filing out of the classroom, and walked down to where Westinia's class was held. What was in Ilesia that was so important for him to find? But he had little time to think about it before he arrived in the classroom and the lesson began.

"Welcome, class! My name is Westinia, and I'll be your instructor in the practical arts of energy redirection. I think it'd be best to start off with a demonstration. Now, if I could have a volunteer..."

Cyrus and several others raised their hands eagerly. She pointed to him, and he traipsed down swiftly to the front of the hall.

"Now, this may be a little... startling, but don't be alarmed, I won't harm you. Now, stand as still as you can.

The woman made a curious gesture with her hand, and a flaming sphere appeared around Cyrus so that he was not visible through the flames. She made further gestures, and the sphere opened up and became a ring which rotated around him before flying upward and reshaping itself into a fiery replica of the boy's figure. The flame version of Cyrus faced towards the crowd and winked before dissipating into thin air, leaving behind only the very shaken original.

As the class applauded, Cyrus resumed his seat both impressed and quite terrified. It seemed that Westinia's performance had already made her popular among the students, but in his case he would think twice before volunteering for another of her 'demonstrations.'

While the class unfolded, it appeared that the majority of the real learning for Cyrus would be here; the other was intended for students below his level, and the professor's droning voice would likely not allow him to pay attention even if there had been new material. He could make use of Halbert's class, then, as naptime if nothing else. Satisfied, he followed Westinia's lecture attentively, and found that it was indeed as intriguing as he had originally perceived. They were going to cover all of the capabilities of controlling the direction of energy, and even as they begun it seemed to him that he had only known a tiny fraction of what was possible via the power of magic.

Just before class concluded, Westinia held up her elegant hand for a moment to quell the students. "Now, I know that you are all excited for the new year, but let me warn you; this is no class for the inexperienced. We study the practice of magic in a way that can be dangerous, and I want to make sure that no one is harmed in the process. I think that some of you will remember what happened last year, when one of my students ended up with a broken leg thanks to a failed experiment in levitation. Now, if any of you has any trouble with any aspect of the course, please, come to me straight away, and do *not* attempt to use your powers on friends – at least, friends you would prefer to keep. Thank you all! Have a good day."

Cyrus walked out with a spring in his step. It seemed that the year was already beginning to look up, and he rejoined Micael, Kale, and Kara at lunch. They had already procured their food, which today appeared to be a flavorful pasta, topped in tomato sauce and garnished with attractive herbs. He hastened to get his own before sitting down to eat.

"How were all your classes? Micael?"

"Master Arturo just talked to me for a while, but I didn't have a real lesson."

"Ah, be patient. What about you two?"

The twins shrugged in unison. Kale sighed, and responded "Same as usual. How were yours?"

"It's just like you thought, Kara. Halbert was a bore, Westinia was quite good."

The girl smiled at him, pausing a moment to sip her drink before responding. "I knew it. Of course, in the spring, they tend to leave you to a different set of teachers."

"Well, I'm not sure that I'll be remaining through the spring."

Kale stared at him in surprise. "But why not?"

"Coming here wasn't really my purpose. You see, I'm actually on a sort of... errand."

"But you've been here for at least a month! Surely you meant to stay if you've already been here this long."

"Well, this errand is a very complicated one, to say the least. Let me explain."

He told them the story of how he had overheard Saltrio talking about

the sun failing in strength, and had decided to travel to Rallia in order to look for one who might help to deal with it; namely, the Gardener. As he recounted the tale, the reasons why he might be leaving early became clear.

"And so, since no one has any idea where the Gardener seems to be, I'm at a loss for how to proceed. But it certainly seems that here is not the place to find out."

Kara nodded, still looking rather surprised over all the things which Cyrus had just described. "The entire thing is far beyond me. I can't imagine where you could find out something that nearly nobody knows."

"I've had... something of a hint, but I don't think it's really very reliable. For the last few nights, I keep dreaming that someone is talking about Ilesia, and that I can find 'what I seek' there. But I can't see who would be in Ilesia that would tell me what I need to know, or how that I would travel there since it's so far away."

Kale answered him. "The second problem is easy. There's boats leaving from the harbor all the time, and I'm sure Master Arturo would buy you a ticket for the help you've rendered him. As for what would be there...." he thought for a few seconds. "There's an Academy over there much like ours, except I think they call it 'L'Académie.' But there's no way to tell if they would know. Besides, to go there, you would need to speak Ilesian, unless you have the money to hire a translator for all that time."

"Why not just learn it? I'm sure it wouldn't be too difficult."

The boy stared at him strangely. "Are you mad? It could take years to learn it!"

Cyrus waved aside his objections. "It wouldn't be that bad, I'm sure. Besides, how many boys do you know that speak another language, outside of the scholars here?"

Kale acknowledged this; after all, gaining bragging rights was something he understood, even if the motivation was a little opaque. He acquiesced, saying "Very well, I suppose. Just don't say I didn't warn you it'd be hard."

"I wouldn't think of it. In any case, I'm glad to know that there might be some sense in looking into Ilesia. But why I dreamt it, I couldn't say..." He trailed off, noticing that some sort of argument appeared to be going on behind the twins. It seemed one of the boys at the nearby table was demanding something of another one more and more vehemently, and Cyrus started to walk over to see what was going on. By this time, their shouting could be heard throughout the dining hall, and all the students were observing the proceedings with interest.

"But it belongs to me! I bought it at the festival!"

"It's mine, I say! Give it here!"

The aggressor tackled the other boy and took him to the floor. The recipient of this violence was holding something, but the object was obscured by the scuffle. Cyrus stepped forward, his countenance fierce and his eyes dark and grim.

"That's enough!" he shouted, and the entire room rumbled as he spoke. He forced an energy current between them like a wedge, driving them apart but leaving both unharmed. He then stepped in between them, and more calmly asked, "Now, what precisely is the problem here?"

"I was just looking at the music box I bought while in town for the 'Fête des Fleurs' and he —" the boy stopped to point accusingly at the other — "he tried to take it from me!"

The would-be thief held up his hands in a gesture of submission. "Fine," he said sullenly. "Keep the stupid thing, it's not like it's worth anything anyway." Seeing that the tide had turned against him, he slunk off to return to the dormitories.

"Oh, thank you! I thought for sure I was going to get a beating. I'm Paul. And you are?"

"Cyrus."

Paul beamed at him. "Why don't you take it? As a gift for helping me."

"After you went through all that trouble to keep it?!"

"Ah, think nothing of it. I wasn't really that fond of it anyway, it was more the principle of the thing. I insist, take it." He took Cyrus' hand and placed the little box in it. "I really can't thank you enough."

"It's nothing. If you get any more trouble from him, you just tell me, alright?"

Paul nodded, and the watching crowd began to dissipate when it appeared that no more fighting was going to take place. Cyrus seated himself back at the table, where all three of the others were watching him with wide eyes.

"What?"

Micael was the first to speak. "You were so amazing!"

"It wasn't really that much of anything."

"Still, that was... impressive," said Kale with a hint of awe.

"Well, would you have had me just leave him?"

Kara shook her head vehemently. "But I agree with Kale. Impressive."

"In any event, I gained a music box out of the bargain. Let's see what tune it plays."

He wound up the delicate little box. It had an intricate interlaced design on its sides, and seemed to be quite old. Once it was fully wound, he opened up the lid and notes began to emerge from the mechanism.

After a few bars, he realized that he recognized it from somewhere. This was the song they had sung in the pub on one of his first nights in Rallia! How did it go, again? Something about a girl from Ilesia, but the specifics had escaped him. However, he remembered the last line particularly, for it had sparked the memory of his former attempt at learning Ilesian. "*Sans toi, ma chérie, je suis perdu.*" *Without you, my dear, I am lost.* Cyrus wondered that it should show up now, of all times, just as he was thinking about having to travel to Ilesia. But he put that thought aside, and closed the lid carefully before tucking the box away into his pocket.

That afternoon, he went to ask Master Arturo about taking lessons in the Ilesian language. The old mage was sitting in his chambers, having just been in conference with all of the professors to determine the direction that this year would take.

"Ah, Cyrus, my boy, come in! I have just been meeting with the teachers, and only now does it occur to me how many of them I've just met a few days ago. It's hard to believe that I was really trapped in the Garden for as long as that. But what did you want to see me about?"

"Well, sir, I was wanting to take lessons in Ilesian."

Arturo looked at him in confusion. "Why would you want to learn that?"

"I plan to go there, in order to continue my search for the Gardener, and I'll need to know the language in order to make my way there."

"I see. This is a very important matter indeed, then. To be honest, I would go to search for him myself, but both I and all of the staff seem to be needed here at the Accademia. But would you like for me to arrange you a tutor? Master Guillaume is an Ilesian himself, and I am sure he would be happy to take you under his tutelage. How does that sound?"

Cyrus looked at him gratefully. "That would be perfect. Thank you, sir."

"Think nothing of it. So, how have you enjoyed your classes so far?"

"Oh, quite good, sir."

"Really? Even Halbert's?" The headmaster raised his eyebrow quizzically.

The youth faltered. "Er, you see..."

Observing his expression, the old mage cut him off with a gentle gesture. "He is a good man, but even I can see he is a little less than... enthralling. Still, I beg you to give him a chance; you'll find that once he can be moved off the basics upon which he stubbornly insists, he has quite a bit to teach you."

"I will, sir. Thank you!"

After exiting the headmaster's chambers, Cyrus was pleased with the knowledge that his plans for Ilesia were set in motion. He had now only to apply himself for the remainder of his stay at the Accademia. It was too cold now to venture to Ilesia anyway; not until the spring would he be able to make the passage over the Locurian Sea, and that was still some months away. With this in mind, he decided to throw himself into his studies wholeheartedly, so as to be ready to leave at the earliest opportunity.

Cyrus returned to the dining hall and procured a cup of pacchiella, or tea flavored with jasmine flowers and a dash of honey and spices, a favored wintertime drink among the students. Sipping it, he thought about how his mother and Saltrio were doing back in Norven. The winters were always hard there, but both of them were strong enough to resist the chill. He began to remember a winter several years ago, when he had not been quite as lucky...

*He went to the door, sneaking out before the napping Fiella had a chance to no-*

tice. Clambering over the snow on the doorstep, he embarked on what was to be the biggest adventure he'd had all season, since he was rarely allowed to go outside during the wintry months. The crisp crunching of the snow underfoot was a welcome contrast to the unending and unendurable crackle of the hearth, and the starting of his trek was quite enjoyable indeed.

The young boy began to feel a little uneasy as he ventured farther out into the woods, as his mother had always warned him against straying too far from the house, but her warnings were never sufficient to quell his enthusiasm. Still, he was not entirely comfortable wandering around in the somewhat forbidding woods. All of the trees which were so familiar took on a different character in their snowy raiment, seeming almost sinister in the gradually waning afternoon.

The turbulent, cloudy sky sometimes concealed the sun's light, making the world gray for brief stretches of time. It was cold, and he shivered in the chill, but he was determined to continue his expedition in order to enjoy this momentary freedom. As the snow gently fell, swirling about him while he walked, he began to feel drowsy. Walking and walking, the terrain seemed to blur before his eyes, becoming dull and unchanging, and his steps slowed. Unexpectedly, the wind picked up, and the snow was whipped into a sudden frenzy, rendering all of his surroundings invisible; it was barely even possible to see his hands in front of his face. This added assault made it even colder, and his wits began to slow down as it seemed that he was starting to succumb to hypothermia. His dulled senses detected that all was not well, but he trudged on for a few more faltering steps before falling.

It was so peaceful. Sleep beckoned him compellingly, and it seemed that he might as well acquiesce, if there was nothing else to be done. His thoughts were sluggish, and he began to close his eyes in surrender. A persistent, irritating inner voice was trying to awaken him, but he ignored it and blissfully sank deeper into unconsciousness. Before he gave in, he half-realized that it was his mother's voice calling him, seemingly from very far away. "Cyrus! Cyrus!" The muted sound was not enough to rouse him from the approaching slumber, and though he tried to wave his arms and call out to her, his limbs were stiff and unresponsive. Why not just sleep, he thought? And so he nearly began to do.

He knew only darkness for a time, and then he slowly felt warmth returning to his body. He was lying on a low cot by the fireplace, and felt his mother's hand resting on his forehead, but still felt drowsy and unable to open his eyes.

"Don't leave me, Cyrus! Oh please, don't leave me. I couldn't bear to lose you... not like I lost your father."

Cyrus nearly sprang up in surprise. His father! She had always told him that his father was still alive, but couldn't come to see them because he was on a long trip. Despite being now fully awake, he pretended to sleep to see what she would say.

She caressed his head gently, and spoke in a half-whisper as if she were afraid someone else might hear. "He went out one day, just as usual, and never came back. For a time, I hoped he would return, and told you so. But I don't think I can believe it myself anymore. Oh, please wake up!"

The boy made a big show of opening his eyes and stretching. "What happened?"

*"Ah, thank goodness!" She embraced him, her face lit up with happiness. "You fell in the snow, darling. Promise me that you'll never go wandering off like that again! I've told you, it's too dangerous for you to go out by yourself!"*

*"Yes, Mother," he said dutifully.*

The memory receded as the bell struck 6 o'clock, bringing him back to the present. Time, he noted, was never plentiful enough when you needed it. He sighed and drained the last drops of his pacchiella before getting on with life.

## Chapter 8

# Prelude to Ilesia

Cyrus' first lesson with Master Guillaume was about to begin. He sat in the center of the room, waiting with no little anxiety for the arrival of his new teacher, presumably another of the many aged, respectable scholars that were the school's trademark.

When Guillaume finally showed up, all of the boy's expectations were defenestrated with shocking abruptness. Instead of the wise old master he had anticipated, the youthful, jolly man who appeared at the door had a dazed look on his face, and seemed to quite forget that there was anything in front of him, nearly tripping over the tables, chairs, and in fact his own feet on his way to the teacher's desk. Sitting down, he smiled at Cyrus and opened up a monstrous tome to the very first page.

"You must be ze Syroos, n'est-ce pas? Perfect! We will start at ze beginning." He glanced down at the text to remind him precisely what the beginning was. "Where is zat... ah, of course. Do you know the Ilesian for 'allo? It is 'bonjour.' Now, repeat it with me. 'Bonjour!'"

Cyrus greeted him with a stupefied stare, and after a moment remembered himself well enough to stutter out a feeble, "Bonjour." This man was going to teach him Ilesian? But he was a native speaker, in theory the best kind of teacher one could find.

"Very good. Now, we will start with a few of ze simple words, and after, ze little sentences. Are you ready?"

"Uh... oui?" he said hesitantly.

"Ah, très bien! C'est comme si tu parles déjà l'ilesie!" the young master exclaimed excitedly.

The youth creased his forehead in confusion. "I didn't quite follow that..."

"Do not worry. You will know zat soon enough, as I will teach you everything!"

And indeed, it was seemingly everything that he learned. Despite the teacher's distracted manner, his knowledge of Ilesian was nearly exhaustive. At the end of even this first lesson, he found that his mind could hardly

contain the amount of information that Guillaume had imparted. In reality, it appeared that Ilesian was so complicated, it was a wonder that they could speak to each other at all. Yet he had no choice but to learn it if he was to succeed in his search for clues.

"Merci beaucoup, Maître Guillaume. Au revoir!"

"A demain, Syroos!"

He went away from the lesson satisfied, if slightly overwhelmed by the new knowledge he had gained. Since it was growing late, he decided to retire a little earlier than usual, but encountered Master Arturo unexpectedly on his way to the dormitories.

"Cyrus! How did you find Master Guillaume?"

"Quite excellent, sir."

The headmaster beamed. "I knew you would. In any case, Micael is feeling a little better, I think, though we still cannot guess what power he possesses. We'll continue testing him. But it certainly seems that there may be more to him than meets the eye. Keep it in mind, my young friend. And now, I must go. Have a good night!"

Cyrus bid him farewell, and entered his and Micael's bedroom, which was illuminated only by the silver light of the moon. He promptly went to sleep in order to prepare for the next day.

In his dreams, a curious scene was visible. He stood upon the coarse cobbles of an old street in a place he had never been. Everything was surrounded by fog which seemed inviting despite its concealing nature. Along the sides of the road, there were beautifully shaped street lamps which cast wavery beams of light in four directions, by which he could just barely see the path below. The buildings, too, were old, but all of them had a careworn, comforting feel to them. He wandered around the streets, looking for people to give him direction, but there was no one to be found. This was not alarming, however; he felt almost liberated by the absence of demands. He spent a long time there, searching about for something that was at the same time incredibly important and completely unnecessary.

He awoke to the sound of bells declaring the arrival of morning in their sonorous voices. Time once again to go through the devastating boredom of Halbert and the interesting excitement of Westinia, to be followed by the edifying lessons provided by Guillaume. Life at the Accademia was proving amenable, if not entirely perfect.

The boy walked to the dining hall as usual, but it turned out that the twins were not there. Curious, he returned to the commons, to find Kale sitting on one of the chairs by the wall, looking uncharacteristically glum,

"What's wrong?"

"Haven't you heard? They're going to have individual evaluations today, to see where our skills are. I never do well on this sort of thing."

"Cheer up, I'm sure it'll go fine. When are they scheduled for?"

"They're sending down messengers every so often to call for the next group, organized by element. My sister and I are earth affinities too, you

know. It doesn't matter when they call us, anyway, since I won't be ready no matter which one I'm in," he said gloomily.

"Come on, don't worry about it! We're all here to learn, right?"

"Well... I suppose. Anyway, there's no class today, so why don't we play a game of joccia while we wait?"

Joccia was a popular game among the students of the Accademia. The game was played on a board with alternating squares on it, upon which one placed a set of identical tokens. The rules were rather esoteric, and the more advanced players could be heard debating complex technical points well into the evening; still the basic object was relatively understandable. Each of the players would choose white or black squares to fill, and whoever covered the most spaces of their color won. Neither Cyrus nor Kale were very well versed in the game, but they still had a diverting time attempting to prevent the other from cheating, although when precisely this was occurring was something quite difficult to tell.

An older student entered from the main hall and announced that the first group of evaluations was coming up.

"First, the water mages, please."

A fair number of students detached themselves from their present occupations and trooped off behind the messenger to go to the examination room. In recognition of the special requirements of a magical university, the Accademia was equipped with several rooms designed to have especially strong resistance to all forms of damage, magical or physical. It was into one of these that the students to be tested went, one at a time; the purpose was as much to keep the performance private as to prevent others from being harmed by the errant magical forces which might well severely injure those students not accustomed to protecting themselves from such onslaughts. Many a time, a pupil had inadvertently directed their energies towards the judges, who fortunately had the strength and speed to safely divert most accidents of this kind.

The order of testing was randomly selected, but Cyrus had a feeling that the earth mages would be next. As it turned out, the messenger came down shortly thereafter, followed by the previous set of mages, and called for the boys to come in.

Cyrus came before Kale in the line-up, and as he was preparing to go in, the anxious boy bid him good luck while looking more nervous than he had previously believed possible over such a thing. He thanked him and strode through the door into the exam room.

It was rather larger than the outside had led him to expect. Presumably, the interior was made so to accommodate the more extravagant uses of magic practiced by the advanced students. In the back of the room, three masters whom Cyrus did not recognize looked on solemnly.

"What is it that I must do?"

One of the judges gestured, and Cyrus suddenly noticed a giant stone which he was sure had not been there when he entered the room. "Break

that rock," the master said, before settling back to observe.

The youth took a long, deep breath, and exhaled slowly, clearing his mind of all thought. He began to concentrate the ambient energy into a tight blade-like extension, and thrust it towards the rock. Immediately, it split into two parts and fell apart upon the floor.

Far to the rear, the three judges looked to each other and nodded slowly. The second one gestured and spoke. "See what is in the center of the room."

Caught by the simplicity of his request, Cyrus looked into the center and realized that was not what was meant. He must look with his awareness, taking care not to let it expand unchecked. He cautiously, delicately drifted into the trance state which was necessary to sense such things. Slowly, an image began to form.

"The letter A?"

As soon as he said it, it vanished from his vision. Opening his eyes, he looked again at the trio of judges. As before, they all nodded to one another slowly. The final judge spoke, saying "Be on your guard. If you do not defend, you could be injured slightly. Get ready!"

He stood up, and swirling energy coalesced over his outstretched palms. He did not move, yet the energy began to fly rapidly towards the boy. Now he was in a tight spot indeed, for he was not familiar with the techniques of defense against magic. Still, he did the best he could, spreading the earth's energies in front of him like a shield. As he watched them draw closer, his confidence wavered and he nearly jumped out of the way, but once they hit the shield he had made with his mind, they bounced off harmlessly and faded into nothing.

"Thank you, that is all." The judges simply looked at him without any further comment as he walked out of the door.

"How did it go?" said Kale, who was by this point nearly shaking with anxiety.

"Fine, fine. Don't worry about it, it'll be easy. You have to break a rock, sense the shape in the middle of the room, and defend yourself against a light attack. You'll do fine."

"But I can't do any of those things! And if I can defend, what will happen to me?"

"Oh, the attack's hardly dangerous. Even if it hit you, you'd just be a little shaken for a bit, but not harmed in the slightest. It'll be fine! Just go."

"You're sure?"

"Of course." At the door, the messenger indicated for the boy to enter. "Best of luck to you!"

He waited around outside for what seemed like ages while his friend was being tested. When the boy finally came out, the look on his face was one of utter horror.

"I failed completely!"

"Surely you didn't —"

"The most I could do to the rock was nudge it a little, I made up the

symbol in the center, and the attack hit me dead on! Gave me a nasty bruise, too," he said, as he rubbed his forearm.

Cyrus sighed. "I'm sorry. Hey, look, it's not a big deal, right? So you don't do so well on the test. You can learn all of that stuff! It'll work out."

"I doubt it," he said, sounding more despondent than ever.

"Why don't you take Kara up on her offer of tutoring you? She could teach you the practical stuff just as well as the theory."

"I guess you're right. I don't want to have to be embarrassed like that again."

"Your reason isn't too great, but at least you'll do it now. Isn't that a load off your mind?"

"I suppose. Come on, let's go get lunch."

The pair walked quickly to the dining hall, where Kara was waiting for them with a beaming smile.

"Your exam went well, I assume?"

"Spectacular! How about you two?"

"Alright," Cyrus replied, while at the same time Kale said "I don't want to talk about it."

"Kale, you know I can help you with this sort of thing," Kara chided him gently.

"I know, I know. I guess I'll take you up on it."

"Finally! I'm glad you've gotten some sense at last."

"Thank Cyrus, not me."

"Well then, thank you for changing his mind."

He nodded. "Where's Micael?"

"Instead of taking exams, he's following around Master Arturo and watching them. He even sat in for some of them, although he was safely behind the judges — of course."

"I should hope so! Anyway, that's good. What shall we do for the rest of the day?"

"Relax, of course; what else are examination days for?"

They spent a leisurely day around the commons, and Cyrus did little until the time for his lesson with Guillaume came around.

"Bonjour, Syroos!"

"Bonjour, Maître Guillaume. Qu'est-ce que je vais apprendre aujourd'hui?" *What am I going to learn today?*

"Beaucoup de choses. Es-tu préparé?" *A great many things. Are you prepared?*

"Bien sûr. Allons-y!" *Of course. Let's go!*

The young teacher's methods were unusually effective. After only one lesson with the Ilesian, he had already been given a sound foundation for the language, and they primarily worked on expanding his vocabulary this time. Once seeming impossible, it appeared that he might learn the language to a usable degree before the spring, and thus be able to leave at the earliest opportunity. The dark wintry months would soon come to an end

in any case, and he would at last be able to continue the quest upon which Saltrio had sent him.

The months passed much the same as they had before, and Cyrus and Micael enjoyed their time at the Accademia, but the former began to feel a certain wanderlust rising up within himself. As spring finally began to approach, Cyrus' long-awaited release finally came, though not perhaps in the manner that he had anticipated.

"So, you'll be leave soon.

"Yes, I must be departing. I haven't told you, but Micael, you'll have to stay here."

"But I want to go with you!"

"You know I can't take you with me to Ilesia. It'd be too dangerous for you to attempt the sea voyage, and besides, Master Arturo has grown rather fond of you. It'd be cruel to take you away just now."

The little boy sighed in disappointment, but said nothing more.

"Well... I'm off, I suppose. I'll miss you! Don't worry, I'll be back someday!"

Kara gave him a little hug and Kale shook his hand sorrowfully. "Come back safely, and as soon as you can!"

He nodded, and smiled wistfully. "Farewell!" He walked a little bit, then turned back and waved before setting off on the next leg of his long journey.

Cyrus had only been in the city of Rallia a few times since he first arrived at the Accademia, but it was familiar as ever once he returned to its ill-repaired streets and uneven houses. He worked his way swiftly towards the west, where the docks stood. Once he reached them, he was distracted yet again by the infinite variety of the scintillating waters, for the bay of Rallia was almost peerless in terms of beauty. Soon, though, he recovered his senses, and went to find a boat which was traveling to Ilesia, far to the northwest.

The first boat he found that was traveling there proved too expensive, but the second was captained by a kindly fellow named Jacques, for whom the trip was a voyage home.

"Ah, you can ride for less than the usual price. I haven't the heart to refuse you, since you're so young, and besides, money is scarce around here, and I need all the business I can get. Come aboard, and we'll find you a cabin."

Jacques' ship was reasonably roomy, with several cabins, a galley, a cargo hold full of fabrics, and a sizable deck. Cyrus was soon tucked away in a surprisingly spacious cabin, considering the size of the ship they were on. He speculated that it might be intended for upper class passengers, but the captain didn't seem to have any other passengers.

"I must confess, the business has been slim as of late. Few people want to travel to Ilesia, for the trade is starting to sour. Ilesian wine has been surprisingly poor this year, and so it's hard to make a profit. I lament the loss of our wine, truly, for there are none better in the world than ours. But

c'est la vie."

"Oui, je suis d'accord." *Yes, I agree.*

"Oh, tu parles l'ilesie?" *Oh, you speak Ilesian?*

"Oui, plus ou moins." *Yes, more or less.*

"Il n'y a pas beaucoup d'étrangers qui le parlent." *There aren't many foreigners who speak it.*

"Je l'ai étudié pour faire mes devoirs là sans traducteur." *I have studied it in order to do my tasks there without a translator.*

"Et quels sont tes devoirs?" *And what are your tasks?*

"Je ne peux pas te le dire." *I can't tell you.*

"Ah, c'est un secret? Ça alors!" *Oh, it's a secret? How about that,* he said with amusement.

"Vraiment! Il est trop important, je ne peux pas le dire." *Really! It's too important, I can't say.*

"Bon, garde tes secrets. Il n'importe pas." *Fine, keep your secrets. It matters not.*

"I have to prepare for the boat's departure now. You must excuse me," he said, nodding courteously before tending to the ship. Cyrus walked about on the deck, looking at the dense collection of ships that dotted the harbor. This might be the last view he had of Rallia for some time, and he wanted to remember the moment.

Accompanied by the shouts of the hands on deck, the ship slowly began to move away from the crowded dock and carve a path through the water. They were underway.

At first, Cyrus was rather unimpressed with the boat's travel. It seemed that they were moving very slowly, and that he might as well have tried to walk the whole way across the Locurian. But soon the wind picked up, and the pace quickened tremendously.

The motion of the ship through the water was swift and steady, and the surroundings could be seen with great clarity. All around, nothing but the sea and the sky was visible, although to the southeast the dome of the Garden was still plainly in sight, for nothing so large was that easily left behind. Since the weather was fair, Cyrus remained on the deck to admire the view. There was nothing for a long ways in front, and the ride took on a calming character.

"How do you like your first sea voyage?" asked the captain.

"Oh, it's wonderful!"

"Then you should be warned, it is unlikely that we will get through this passage without a storm. And that is something you will find less than wonderful."

Wondering at his dark words, Cyrus leaned on the side of the deck to relax and enjoy the trip.

As if in response to Jacques' ominous portent, a storm rolled in more suddenly than the boy had thought possible. Roiling clouds appeared in the sky, and the initial rains were deceptively light. They grew to a torrential

downpour in minutes, and the first unsettling rumbles of thunder could be heard. The boy felt a prickling sensation on the back of his neck, and without warning the first strike of lightning could be seen off the starboard bow. For the first time during the voyage, Cyrus was truly afraid of what might happen on this trip.

The waves started to get higher and choppier, and the boat began to toss up and down in the tumultuous waters. For a moment, it seemed as if the entire ship, crew and all, was going to overturn and sink into the ocean depths, but it passed and the ride was merely nerve-wracking rather than truly terrifying.

Rumbling could still be heard, but it seemed that the worst was already over. The disturbance passed almost as soon as it had come.

Jacques informed him of the situation's comparative lightness. "That was nothing, my friend. It was a little one, just for practice. No, this sea, she does not rest with just a little bit of clouds. You will see."

The boy was less inclined to doubt his words, now that he had seen the first demonstration of the water's power. He fervently hoped that he would not have the opportunity to experience the sea's full uproar. But the waters seemed to be quiescent, for the moment at least. Relaxing slightly, Cyrus returned to exploring the ship's many quarters, and while it was by no means expansive, he still enjoyed seeking out its various nooks and crannies as the boat sailed on smoothly across the surface.

Noting the captain unoccupied, he decided to indulge his curiosity by making inquiries about the man's past.

"Jacques, why did you become a sailor?"

"My father was always a man of the sea. It was the natural thing to do. You know, in Ilesia, we do only what our fathers have done; some regret it, but I have never truly want a change. Sometimes, for a moment or two, I long for the life on land, with its stability and calm. But I would never be able to give up the adventure. The sea and I, we have known each other a long time. I do not think either of us would be willing to part from the other."

"But you've never seriously thought about settling down?"

"In truth, not for very long. The sea, she calls to a sailor's heart; I cannot imagine living on dry land for all my days. It is something that you are born with, and it will never go away, just as many people in the cities never go on the ships if they can help it. In any case, it is not unpleasant, to be sure. I love life here, when you can see the waves and the sky and there is no one to tell you how to live. There is nothing better."

Cyrus returned to his cabin for a small rest, and reflected on Jacques' words. Thinking about how easy his own life would be if no one ever told him to do anything, he realized that this was precisely what he did not want. Back at home, he had been growing bored with life in general before the chance had come along for adventure. If no one had given him the idea, he would have remained at home, being involved in nothing more

important than walks through the forest and the occasional tumble in the pathways outside his sleepy village. Instead, he was on the way to a foreign country, and on the most important mission he could imagine; to find the Gardener, and hopefully restore the ailing sun with the intent of saving the entire world thereby. He had learned more magical skills in his brief sojourn at the Accademia than he had in the past 8 years of his life, and now knew an entire new language in his attempt to accomplish the quest on which Saltrio had sent him. Though the old mage might not have known the extent of the efforts he would have to make, the boy suspected that he knew more than he had let on, as demonstrated by his conversation with the goddess Verbena. Indeed, his own death had been discussed at that time, a prospect which, now that he remembered it, was distinctly unnerving. He had not been in any such pressing danger so far. Wherein, then, lay the reason for the sage's dire words?

His reverie was cut short by another disconcerting rumble. Another storm? Yet this time, once he had returned to the deck, the weather was infinitely worse. Sweeping towards them on the horizon were waves so large they could easily engulf the boat in a deluge of saltwater, and the lightning began to strike almost continuously as the storm front drew nigh.

Much more than before, the boy began to feel real fear. He gulped, and looked to Jacques for reassurance. But the captain was busy shouting orders to his men, and had a worried expression that was the double of his own. If even the cavalier Jacques was fazed by the oncoming storm, there was cause for concern indeed. He decided to go down into the holds out of the way of the scrambling deck-hands, and wait out the weather's fury there.

Once removed from harm's way, Cyrus sat there huddled on the ship's floor, feeling slightly queasy due to the constant rocking. The swaying and creaking became so alarming that he had to venture back on deck to determine just how much danger they were in. When he reemerged, the situation appeared to have only worsened. Monstrous and towering, the waves which he had seen earlier were nearly upon the prow of the ship. All around him were chaotic shouts and a general feverish anxiety which had infused all the crew with nervous energy.

At last, the waves had come. With the first barrage, the ship rode up the swell and barely crested the wave rather than falling backwards into oblivion. Everyone lurched sickeningly in the process of this first assault, but the next wave was coming soon after, and they had to brace themselves as best they could. Once again, they were tossed up like a tiny dinghy in the tumult.

The violent motion had grown too much for Cyrus, and he rushed to the side to empty the contents of his stomach. A foul taste remained in his mouth, but there was nothing to be done, and he shuddered slightly before returning to hide himself in the holds, no longer able to stand the psychic onslaught of the endless waves.

Cowering in the bowels of the ship, he felt somewhat ashamed of himself

but had not the courage to go and face the storm as all of the shipmates were forced to. Yet then, he realized something. Even if he remained hidden, his ultimate fate would be the same. Being down below would make no difference if he were going to die, and if not, it would be better to face it together with the others. He steeled himself against his fears, and climbed out of the hold back onto the still rocking deck.

Almost immediately, another set of waves buffeted the already imperiled ship. It was difficult to stand up due to the bombardment, but the boy struggled on deck, and stared his fear down. The sea was no longer his enemy, but his own weakness, and it was time to be stronger for the other challenges he would have to face. Surely, he would prove that Saltrio's faith was not misplaced, and outright refused to die in such an ignominious fashion. He raised his head into the wind and rain in defiance. As though it were cowed by his new-found courage, the weather began to calm, until it was as if the storm had never been.

All of the wet and bedraggled sailors looked at each other and clapped themselves on the back for their successful weathering of the sea's attempt to destroy them. They were so relieved to be alive that the distant sighting of land almost went unnoticed until they were closer in to shore. Marais, the grand city of Ilesia, was visible on the horizon, its graceful spires and curving architecture standing against the bright, clear sky.

A thought flitted through Cyrus' mind. Was not the sun just a little dimmer? Despite the coming of spring, the light had not returned to its normal brightness, and seemed somehow sickly, not quite as strong as before. He was reminded once again of the reasons for undertaking this voyage, and hoped that he would come soon to a successful conclusion.

Within what seemed like minutes, they were disembarking from the ship, and Cyrus bid farewell to the captain. "Jacques, I must thank you as much as I can. You have given me passage for next to nothing on such a dangerous voyage, and I cannot tell you how grateful I am."

"Ah, it was nothing. I always want to help those who need it, and you need it as much as any. Why not make something easier for a change, no?"

"True, true. Well, I am going now. Good bye! Thank you!"

"Au revoir, mon ami, and good luck!"

## Chapter 9

# Marais

The youth immediately set about finding L'Académie, for he would have no lodging if he did not. As he walked, however, his steps became lightened with the realization that he truly was in a whole different country. The entire city seemed somehow more beautiful, more vibrant than the shabbiness of Rallia. All of the buildings were not the dirty, dilapidated residences of that city; age had been kinder to these structures, and they were careworn rather than merely broken down. Florists, bakeries, and wine shops seemed to be innumerable in this new surrounding. He had no foreknowledge of the city's layout, but was hesitant to try out his Ilesian for fear that his tongue would trip over the foreign words and he would be misunderstood. Wandering here, however, was by no means onerous. The streets wove about and seemed to dance around in his mind, until he no longer had any idea where the water lay in relation to his present site. Regardless, he was decidedly in love with Marais, something he had never felt on the run-down streets of Rallia.

All around, people were calling to each other merrily and having a good time. In Rallia, most people had always been too busy to bother addressing each other in the streets; only in the slums had the people seemed alive. But here, everyone was just as lively, and it seemed as though there was no poor or rich section of town to be found. Indeed, the city had the same high level of designs throughout; they were varied widely and made for a stimulating visual palette to entice the eyes. As far as he knew, Ilesia had always been slightly less successful in the trade between their two states. But with his own eyes, he could see that they were the happier of the two. It only went to show that money was by no means the way to happiness.

There were a profusion of cafés around the streets of Marais, and it was into one of these he entered for a time in order to collect himself. He purchased a modestly sized sandwich and a coffee, enjoying the cosmopolitan feel of dining in a streetside café. While there, he decided to indulge in a little people watching. It seemed that the florist's girlfriend across the street had been unfaithful, and he watched with interest as they carried out a

protracted argument while avoiding attracting the attention of the former's mother, who was apparently staying in the apartment above the shop. He learned the best place to buy olives, how to check a cantaloupe for rotting, and that the city's mayor enjoyed eating the substandard imported cheese that was becoming so common these days. One of the two companions discussing this felt it was a pity, but the other's response was lost in the rise and fall of conversations all around him that was the hallmark of Ilesian life. These were a sociable people, to be sure.

Upon finishing his meal, he got up again to walk around and gain his bearings. His directionless wanderings extended into the late afternoon; all thought of finding the academy had gone out of his mind. As evening drew near, however, he began to wonder where it was with more urgency. The people were mostly starting to head home, and a thick fog had begun to descend over the city. Once he saw the curiously familiar street lamps shining, he realized then that he had dreamed of Ilesia, what seemed like lifetimes ago in the bedchambers at the Accademia di Fiori; did that mean, then, that seeking out L'Académie was not what needed to be done? So it seemed. He walked on a little further, until he found a little niche between two small shops. Fearing somewhat for his safety, but having no other recourse, he simply lay down on the side of the building and went to sleep.

When he woke up, he first checked to make sure that all his possessions remained. To his relief, everything remained undisturbed, just as before. Marais was evidently even safer than he had felt it to be, for in Rallia he would have been stripped of all his belongings had he tried something foolhardy. In fact, he felt still that it might have been unwise to try it even here, but it was already done at this point, and no harm had come to him. Standing up and dusting himself off, he went back into the streets to find them just as bustling as before. He received a friendly "Bonjour!" from several passersby, and asked the first person he saw in scholarly garments in Ilesian for the location of the academy.

"Ah, L'Académie! I have just come from there. You go down this street here, then to the right, you cannot miss it. But are you from here? You are attired so strangely."

"No, I'm from Norven, a few fortnights' journey from Rallia."

"What?! I would have sworn you were from our very own provinces! Your Ilesian is impeccable, young man."

He blushed slightly. "Thank you."

"Anyway, I must be getting on. But good luck, whatever your quest may be."

"Thank you, sir. Farewell!"

Emboldened by this encounter, Cyrus strode with purpose towards L'Académie, hoping that the people there would be as helpful as this first representative of their scholars. He came quickly to the place where he had been directed, and was quite surprised. In place of the imposing edifice he had anticipated, the university was low to the ground, a number of small buildings

separated by delightful gardens and open-air courtyards, wherein the students and professors could be seen chatting and enjoying the fine weather. He walked towards the central building, which was attractively designed with curved edges and what could only be described as a distinctly Ilesian sensibility; he passed under an arch decorated with curlicues and a metal vine worked around its center, which proclaimed the institution's full name with curving, spidery letters: "L'Académie des Fleurs."

Inside, he saw at once just how truly different the Accademia and this academy were. The interior was nothing short of beautiful. It aimed not to impress and intimidate, but make those who entered feel comfortable, and provide a feast for their eyes with its tasteful splendor. There was only one level, yet it was as spacious as might be desired: to the left and right, there were salon type areas with comfortable chairs and tables for holding tea or other beverages; in the center, a large circular desk where a white-haired scholar was sipping from a cup of coffee and sighing contently.

Feeling elated due to the wonderful ambience, Cyrus greeted him with a cheery "Bonjour, Monsieur!" The man glanced up in surprise, and smiled warmly when he saw the youth. "Ah, a visitor! I'm sorry, I didn't notice you come in. Please, what can I do for you?"

"I wondered if I might speak to the head of the school."

"But of course! She's in the garden just behind this building."

She? He had not realized the school had a headmistress and not a headmaster. Thanking him, he went around to the back, where a magnificently regal lady was enjoying a cup of tea while talking to what he presumed was one of the professors.

"Ah, excuse me, Madame. You are the headmistress here?"

"Why yes, I am Hélène. And who might you be, young sir?"

"I am Cyrus, of Norven. Pleased to meet you," he said. She extended her hand for a handshake, but he knelt and kissed it instead.

"Oh!" She arched a quizzical eyebrow, smiling with slight amusement nevertheless. "I am not used to such formality. Is it not the custom in your country to shake hands upon meeting a person?"

"Yes. Is it not the custom to kiss a lady's hand in yours?"

She laughed slightly. "Yes, but a foreigner who is aware of the custom is quite a rare find indeed. But tell me, what is it you came here for?"

"I wish to find the Gardener who has gone missing from Rallia, and I dreamed that I would find the answer here."

"You traveled all the way here on the basis of a dream? That is even rarer, to be sure. But I am pleased that you've come. Do sit down, and we will discuss this search of yours."

At length, he told the tale of how he had come to seek the Gardener, and when he concluded both the headmistress and the professor who had been chatting with her were intensely curious about this unusual youth.

"Well, your tale is certainly an interesting one. By the way, it may interest you to learn that our astrologers are also aware of the sun's waning as you

describe it."

"What have you learned about it?"

"Very little, I'm afraid. We know that there has been a marked decrease in the sun's brightness, but no one has any indication as to why this is happening. Ah yes; by the way, we did not know that the Gardener from Rallia was missing. Our contact with that city through the Accademia ceased quite a few years ago, though we never had the opportunity to learn why they had stopped."

He told them of the usurper, Kamril, and how the legitimate headmaster had been captured. He was hesitant to reveal that he had been a part of the rescue, fearing being seen as immodest, but their questions gave him no choice but to explain his own role. When he had finished again, they were even more surprised, but turned their discussion back to the sun.

"So, you think the Gardener would have some solution to this problem. I hate to disappoint you, but we have nothing to tell you on that subject."

The professor spoke up. "I know someone who might, however. Outside of the city, in the forest nearby, there lives a man named Robert who is very knowledgeable indeed. He came here from Rallia, just like you, though quite a long time ago. He stayed here for a time, but grew impatient and went off to live on his own. That one was always very curious, but he would never tell us much of his past. More or less, the only thing we know about him is just that, his name and his former residence. But if anyone here would know anything, it would be him."

"Ah! Which way is it, and how far?"

"Well, it's to the east, no more than a few hours' journey out of the city."

"But not so hasty!" the headmistress interjected. "I insist that you stay here for a few nights first. We haven't had a visitor from Rallia in quite a long time, and I'm sure the students would love to hear what you have to say about the city. Besides, you must be exhausted from your long journey. Come, let us find you some quarters, and you can seek out the hermit another time."

The trio walked through the university grounds, and were cordially hailed by all who they passed. Cyrus attracted quite a few glances for his noticeably Rallian clothing, and resolved to procure a different costume so as to be less conspicuous. They soon came to one among a series of little cabin-like dwellings on the outer edge of the roughly rectangular area, and the headmistress knocked on the door. She was greeted by a drowsy-looking boy about Cyrus' age.

"Pierre!" She chided him gently. "Were you going to sleep away the whole day?"

"No, Madame Hélène," he said sheepishly.

"Ah, no matter. Cyrus, this is Pierre. You can stay here as his bunkmate."

They shook hands, and Cyrus stepped in briefly to drop off his pack before emerging again. "Thank you for all your help, Madame."

"Think nothing of it. Come, Monsieur Delacroix, we must be going."

The professor and the headmistress departed, leaving the two youths together.

"Have you eaten?" Cyrus shook his head. "Then come, let us get lunch. We can go into one of the cafés in the city, I've no classes today."

He was amenable to this plan, and they went back into the busy streets of Marais to seek out a meal. There were seemingly an endless number of cafés, but Pierre guided him to one that was clearly a favorite among the young people. They sat down at one of the tables outdoors, and once again enjoyed the popular occupation of people-watching while they waited on the arrival of their food. To be sure, the passersby did not disappoint, and they observed with amusement and interest the menagerie of poodles, excessively large hats, and all the other parts of the slice of life which could be glimpsed, as it were, from the sidelines.

"How did you come to be here, anyway?" Pierre asked once their sandwiches had been brought by the waiter. Cyrus once again told the entire lengthy tale, this time abbreviating it significantly for the sake of brevity. He wolfed down the sandwich hungrily, realizing that this was his first real meal after a long period of the practically inedible dried biscuits onboard the ship.

"Let's get back to L'Académie, they're having a celebration tonight. There is probably going to be something in your honor." Pierre grinned. "Sometimes, I think the headmistress finds an excuse to celebrate anything just so we can enjoy ourselves. To be truthful, it's not a bad idea at all."

Standing up from their table in the crowded cafe, the two youths made it back to the campus grounds just in time for the start of the festivities. It seemed that there was going to be a feast, to be held in the central garden, where Madame Hélène could be seen bustling about and talking to the servers. Upon their arrival, the headmistress practically seized Cyrus and marched him to the head of the incredibly long dining table, where she tapped against the beautiful crystal glass for everyone's attention. The clear sound somehow rang out across its entire length, hushing everyone quickly as she prepared to speak.

"My dear friends, we have with us a special guest tonight. He has come all the way from the Accademia di Fiori in Rallia to visit our humble academy. Will you all welcome Cyrus of Norven!"

The assembly applauded uproariously and settled down to wait for a speech. Feeling particularly put on the spot, the boy nevertheless sought for some fitting words to say for the occasion.

"Er..." He cleared his throat and began afresh. "I thank you all for your gracious welcome. I have come here, to your beautiful Académie des Fleurs, in search of the learning that only your scholars possess. You have greeted me with the greatest hospitality, and I hope that I may in some small way repay this favor which I have been granted. Again, thank you."

They gave another hearty round of applause. It did not take much to satisfy this crowd, Cyrus thought to himself gratefully, as he took the seat

to which the headmistress directed him. After a moment, he realized that he had been given the seat of honor, and that Pierre was forced to sit a fair distance down the table. Quite embarrassed, he regretted that they had not thought to enter less conspicuously, and thus have been able to sit together and avoid the attention.

Upon reflection, he also hoped fervently that he would not be called upon to make any more speeches, but as the evening proceeded it became evident that there was little danger of that. If there was one thing the Ilesians enjoyed more than anything, it was food, and large amounts of it. Very little could restrain them once they had started, and he realized that this was the reason why they favored brief speeches; it left more time for eating.

The evening was quite pleasant, and he was able to enjoy a wide sampling of the world-renown Ilesian cuisine. Rallia's sole claim to culinary fame, the maritelli, simply could not compete with the immense variety of dishes which the nation's best chefs had dreamed up for generations. He ended the night considerably more stuffed than he had been in most of recent memory. Well contented, he and Pierre went back to their shared cabin, and fell into bed, drowsy from all the delicious food had enjoyed.

In the morning, Cyrus awakened first, and decided to seek out the headmistress and ask how he might help out.

"Ah, Cyrus. I'm glad you've come. I was just about to ask you if you might tell Monsieur Delacroix's students about your voyage. They would be most gratified if you would grant them a few minutes. They're over there, in that building with the courtyard," she said, gesturing towards another of the low-set edifices which were spread around the grounds. He agreed, and walked quickly over the building, pausing a moment to collect his thoughts before entering.

The class was being held in the courtyard, which was as beautiful as any other part of the academy. The students were mostly seated on the grass, reclining comfortably on a set of chairs while the professor stood and delivered his lecture.

"...And so, we see that the potency of magic is influenced by the time of year, as well as the individual's state of health at the time." Glancing over to the door, he noticed Cyrus standing in the entrance, and called to him. "Oh! Cyrus, please come in. Class, I believe you'll remember Cyrus from last night's feast."

The students smiled and waved familiarly at him. He stepped to the professor's side, and the man yielded the floor to him. "Well, where shall I begin. I come from the small village of Norven, but I expect you'll be more interested to hear about Rallia."

He began to give a description of the history and geography of the city, but quickly detected that the students were growing tired of the subject. He cut himself off, and decided to take another route.

"Say, would you like to hear about how I rescued the headmaster of the Accademia di Fiori from a wicked magician's evil spell?"

The students voiced their approval, and he gave a somewhat embellished account of how Master Arturo had come to be free. With this, the students were most satisfied, and their faces were raptly attentive, while the professor, who had already heard the more accurate tale previously, looked more than a little incredulous at the mention of how the boy had fought off the fierce attacking vines surrounding the chamber, and how his great power had been integral in undoing the enchantment, although his conscience forced him to make mention of Ignatius' and Micael's role in the counterspell. At the conclusion, they clapped and cheered, and the professor stood up.

"Thank you, Cyrus, for that... imaginatively related tale. Let's have another round of applause for our visitor!"

Another cheer arose from the crowd, and he thanked them before exiting through the elegant doorway. He had decided to leave that very afternoon, and went to the cabin to gather his things and say goodbye to Pierre before seeking out the headmistress again.

"Pierre, it's been fun, but I have to be moving on now."

"Ah, no problem. Now I can tell everyone I have influential friends in the Accademia di Fiori!"

They laughed, and bid an amiable farewell. Cyrus continued to the garden behind the main building which Madame H  l  ne often frequented, and walked over to talk to her.

"The presentation went very well, but I'm afraid I really ought to be leaving now."

"Are you sure I can't tempt you to a few more days with us? We so like having guests."

"I fear not, Madame."

"What a shame." She sighed. "But very well, I suppose it's for the best. Well, good luck on your journey!"

"Thank you, Madame, for everything. Farewell!"

He walked out through the richly decorated gate with a small bit of regret. He had indeed enjoyed his brief stay at L'Acad  mie, but it really was time to get on with his mission.

He walked along the path out of town, and neared the forest quite quickly. Drawing closer and closer to the place where the man was said to dwell, the trees of the approaching forest were exceptionally tall, and seemed more vibrant in a way than most other places he had been. He felt drawn to them, inexplicably. Once he had reached the edge of the forest, he realized that the trees formed an arch. He stood before it a moment, curious as to what might lay within.

As he hesitated on the boundary, his mind wandered back to the Accademia di Fiori. He wondered how Micael was getting along. The boy had probably been quite frustrated, he knew, and he worried how he was faring in his absence. He felt quite guilty indeed about having left him so abruptly, but he knew that the boy would have strongly resisted had he told him ear-

lier. He was no longer sure what the right path would have been, but hoped that everything had turned out alright.

## Chapter 10

# Micael's Search

Micael arose stiffly from the bed in his lonely chamber in the east wing of the Accademia and stretched, preparing to start another fruitless day learning anew that he would never be able to use magic like other children. He was sullen, and had sunken further into his silence since Cyrus had left. Though he would never admit it, he felt almost as if he had been abandoned, doubly compounded by his mother's death. Times beyond number, he had cried himself to sleep at night, only to wake up again to find everything was the same as before.

It was not that he didn't have the abilities, it was simply that he didn't know how to utilize them. So Master Arturo perpetually tried to tell him. Though the man was kind enough, he certainly did not have the knack of comforting children in distress. The boy could see nothing positive about his situation, and the endless exercises which he attempted day after day failed to reveal even a trace of his supposed powers. He felt disconnected; unable to control anything, trapped forever within the same state.

Spring had arrived in full force. Outside, the flourishing green which spread over the Accademia's grounds seemed a mockery of his own failure to thrive. Micael lamented that his tongue was so stilled. Whenever he spoke, the words always came out jumbled and not at all what he truly wished to say. When would people stop treating him as a child! Caught within his prison of silence, he was bitter towards everyone around him, all of them flaunting their magical skills at him. He vowed to show them that he, too, was capable of such feats. He had redoubled his efforts, but still, nothing availed.

Many people had very little magical talent. Why then was it so important that he possess it? It was of course because of his heredity. In her past, his mother had even trained at the Accademia, before the cruel Kamril had sent her away. He only knew of this from her tales, of course, but he hated him as much as if he had known the man himself. If not for him, she might even be alive today! He wept again at the thought of his poor mother. She had never been very well, since his earliest memories; there was no question

in his mind that Kamril had killed her when he sent her away, whether she died then or years later.

In the past, he had always wanted magic just to prove that he was worthwhile. But now he had another reason. Revenge. He had sworn to himself that the wicked mage would suffer for the way they had been destroyed by him. And with this oath had come the desire to be strong, even more vigorous than before. Yet still, nothing.

His mere desire was not enough; there was also the requirement for the base ability upon which training could build. But he had yet to be able to influence the currents of energy in the slightest way. He could not even sense what an energy current was, and the complicated explanations they gave him helped not at all in learning the practice of magic.

Having nothing better to do, he decided to go up and get breakfast as per usual. He sat by himself at the table. The twins had moved up a class, and they were so busy now that they were forced to go to meals at odd hours, leaving Micael all alone in the cafeteria. Of course, he ate in silence, since there was no one to talk to, and even if there had been, there would be nothing to talk about. In his mind, there was no kinship between such folk and people like himself.

Cyrus, in contrast to all the others, had always been like a brother to him. Of all the people he had ever known, only his mother and the older youth had accepted him as he was, and never made fun of his difficulty in using magic. Though he was unable to express his thanks, it now seemed impossible to express, for the boy had left with unexpected suddenness. Just like that, he had been set adrift, his sole support disappearing into the void.

Not knowing quite how to articulate his feelings to anyone, he had merely continued on in his normal pattern of dull despair. Today, just as every day, would be full of despair.

After he finished his morning meal, he walked leadenly towards Master Arturo's chambers. The man had taken personal charge of his training, and had tried time and time again to discover wherein his power lay. As the headmaster had told him, having someone's flower appear outside the Gardens was rare, but not a sign of magical inability, and that everyone who had ever lived possessed some form of magic power. It was, he had claimed, only a matter of time before Micael's powers were discovered. If only he could bring himself to believe it.

Arturo greeted him with a warm smile. Despite the boy's silence, the headmaster had taken him under his wing, and tried as best he could to draw the boy out. But it seemed that he would have none of it, only speaking when directly asked a question. The man was sure beyond any doubt that the boy would be able to express himself in time.

He suspected, though, that this self-expression was prevented by the poor child's feelings of weakness and low self-esteem. His own efforts were futile; the only way that the boy would be able to move on in his own mind was to accomplish some feat of magic to prove that he was just as good as

anyone else. And this had yet to materialize. Still, there was no question that the boy had some sort of ability. But what could it be?

"Micael, let's try something a little different today. Come with me to the examination room so I can show you."

They went into the specially strengthened rooms made for the purposes of demonstrations, and the old mage led young Micael over the small bridge. This particular room was rather large, and was composed of a low tower in the center of a small moat, designed for the purpose of utilizing water magic. The boy had been taken for such demonstrations often enough, but they had mostly been conducted by younger magicians who were capable of collecting energy faster than he. In truth, Master Arturo had begun feeling his age, and while his power had not deteriorated, it took quite a bit more effort to use it than it had in his youth. Despite this increased effort, among the academy's scholars, he remained the most powerful, and perhaps putting the effort into it to make a greater show would be of use to the young lad.

"Now, try to feel as I collect water energy. I empty my mind, and merely accept the flow into myself. Don't be shy, come by my side to see if it helps any." He began to concentrate. As the boy walked over to join him in the center, he tripped and began to fall onto Arturo, instinctively grasping at whatever he could reach.

Suddenly, the headmaster felt an influx of power so strong that the waters were whipped into a frenzied cyclone. He almost could not believe his eyes, as the entire room was flooded in an instant by the moat which had somehow flown straight upwards and began to whirl around. He looked at the boy in astonishment, and he tried to stop the flow of energy. Almost as quickly as it had begun, the water lay placid at the bottom of the chamber just as it had before.

"Micael... do you know what you've just done?"

He stared mutely towards the ground. "I'm sorry. When I fell, I made you distracted and —"

"No, no, no, my child! You have just shown me what your magic is!"

His face lit up in delight, but it was soon tempered by the realization that the old man was only trying to comfort him. "I don't have any."

"Your magic, my dear Micael, is changing the strength of other people's magic. When Cyrus and Ignatius were telling me about how you had rescued me, they said that when you had touched them, their power increased more than they could imagine. We all assumed it was just that your faith in them had reassured them, but now I understand that it was much more than that. Don't you see? Your magic is the most powerful of all, for it can either aid your allies immensely or stop your foes in their tracks."

Still disbelieving, the boy said, "But everyone knows that there are only the four types of magic. Besides, what could I do with that kind of magic if it were real?"

"Well, that's as may be, but you are definitely the exception. Can't you

see how great a power this is? You are the only one I've ever known with such an ability. It's much greater even than mine. You, my young friend, may be the greatest magician that this school has ever had!"

He hesitated. Master Arturo was not so cruel as to joke like this. But still, he had difficulty in swallowing that he was the only boy in all the world with a special type of power that no one had ever heard of before. But still...

"Is it really true?"

"I'm sure. But if you don't believe me, let's make a test. You decide whether you want me to be able to gather energy or not, then hold on to my arm. Don't tell me what you decided. Now, I will try my hardest to stir up the waters, and whichever you chose will become apparent. Ready to test it?"

The boy nodded. He decided that he would first try to increase the mage's power. After all, if he claimed to be trying but really wasn't, there would be no way to tell.

"Alright, I'm going to start now." He focused, and felt the surge of energy once again, causing the same drastic effect on the water as before.

"Satisfied?"

"Let me try it again." This time, he would keep the mage's level the same at what it was.

The water swirled around in the moat, but did nothing like what it had before. Micael was intrigued, and tried reducing the power slightly and increasing it again. Perfectly in tune with his thoughts, the water responded to exactly the level that he wanted it to. Quite impressed, he let go of the mage's arm. So it was true! He felt elated all of a sudden. His past dejection was quite forgotten, and he looked up at Arturo with bright, cheery eyes, shouting excitedly, "I did it! I did it!"

Master Arturo smiled down towards him with pleasure. The mystery was solved at last. He had a feeling that Micael would be much happier with himself from now on.

Though the pair did not know it, a sinister figure was concealing himself just outside of the building, peering inside with his magically enhanced senses. It was Kamril. He thought idly of how very useful the boy's talents could be, before going away again to return to his hiding place in the woods.

The foolish man, he thought. Had Arturo really been so naive as to believe that he would have left completely? Indeed, it had merely freed him from having to conceal his frequent visits to various other locales in his search for one particularly desirable prize; the conquest of one of his major enemies. But now, he realized that there was another one, and so much closer to being within his grasp. He smiled with the scheme which formulated itself, and stalked off into the concealed dwelling which he had constructed nearby underneath a tree. It pained him to be in such an unrefined abode, but the price was well worth the benefit of being so conveniently near to the Accademia, from which all of his plans might at last come to fruition. He only regretted that he had not paid closer attention to the two

brats sooner, when it might have been possible to win both of them to his side, or control them in some other fashion. Yet it mattered not, for his desire would be achieved one way or another.

## Chapter 11

# The Hermit

A spell-bound silence had fallen upon the wood. Cyrus cautiously entered via the arch of trees, looking about him in wonder. Gentle dew rested upon the grass of the forest floor, while the enormous trees which rose up above the path and came to meet at their distant canopies created the impression that he had entered into a cathedral painted with vivid green and brown, the colors of spring. He walked on quietly for a time, drinking in the ambience of the forest with no particular destination.

Shaking off the wonder with which he had become pleasantly distracted, he remembered his purpose: to locate the reclusive wise man who was said to inhabit it. Anyone who lived in this place, he reflected, could not help but grow wise; it was as if thoughts flowed more freely within its confines than out of them. In any case, he must seek out this man, and ask him how to find the Gardener missing from Rallia, or the goddess Iris, or both.

Walking farther into the beautifully dazzling wood, with the cool scent of a soft rain rising out of the grass, it became clear that the man's dwelling could not be on the forest floor. The trees here were simply packed too close together; passing through was difficult enough, but building a house between them would be impossible. True, he could have felled a number of them to do it, but if this was the kind of wise man who was willing to take down so many trees for any arbitrary reason, he was perhaps not the type with which Cyrus desired to associate.

If the house was not on the forest floor, what then? The boy was absolutely sure that his guide at L'Académie had said that the man lived somewhere within. He sat for a few moments to think about it while he rested, leaning against the base of one of the towering trees. Light and shadow played across his face as he peered into the depths of the woods extending far on either side of him. Looking up at the covering of leaves so far above, he had an idea. What if the man lived in a house suspended in the treetops? He would not have to hurt the trees which were so magnificent, and would also be able to avoid being disturbed by other travellers in the wood. This would explain it. The question, then, was how he could ascend to such a

height. The hermit himself surely had a way, but the possible locations of such a passage were opaque to him.

The youth wandered farther into the woods, seeking from the path some way up to the top. As he traveled along, he eventually realized that a series of ropes which were barely visible from his current position crisscrossed along the treetops. Perhaps it was some form of transportation! He decided to trace one of the lines to its terminus, to see where it might lead. Walking along on the ground, it was difficult to follow the rope's precise angle, for there were many lesser trunks and little drops on the way through the forest. Little streams trickled across the path as he tried to keep the rope in sight, and crickets chirped at him as if spurring him on to find where it ended up.

At the ending of the line, what seemed to be a central hub was visible, connected to an ingeniously simple contraption composed of a pair of handles and a portion of the center with a wheel. With it, Cyrus imagined, it would be possible to swing along the multitudes of ropes without having to execute any uncertain acrobatics in order to reach one's destination. Unfortunately, it seemed that this spot was not the way up to the top. Just before he was about to give up, he rounded the tree and realized that there was a rope ladder on the other side. Rejoicing, he hastened to climb the ladder and soon stood upon the platform above looking out across the expanse of trees with a ceiling of vibrant, lively green.

Searching around from his elevated post, he could see a handful of similar platforms, but one in particular caught his eye. Firstly, by its size, and secondly, by its vastly different shape. Cyrus took the wheeled apparatus in both hands, fastened to the appropriate rope, and began his sliding journey to the other locale.

Riding on the rope proved both swift and enjoyable. He nearly flew to the other side, and had to be careful not to bang his legs upon arrival; the ride had evidently been intended for someone a little shorter than he was, but fortunately his weight was still well within its safety margins.

The house, now that he was much closer to it, appeared to be rather conventional in construction, at least in terms of a tree-house. It was a simple chamber with two windows, full of a bed, several surprising bookshelves, and a chest resting against the side of the wall. There was a ladder on its side that led up to the roof, where he could see another set of ropes, presumably for the return journey. No one seemed to be in, so he crept inside after a few moments.

Even upon closer inspection, the interior was just as he had observed; of course, there was not much room for surprises in a house this sparse. This life seemed rather too uncomfortable for Cyrus; sleeping even in the winter upon the barely covered bed and having to travel down such a great distance merely to procure any food for the day.

After he was finished perusing the bare dwelling, he returned to the outside and decided to explore the roof in order to see about getting down to another platform and searching there. As he ascended the last rung of the

ladder, what he saw almost made him fall off to the forest floor far below.

A gray-bearded man nearly half-again Cyrus' height was sitting there cross-legged with his eyes firmly shut. He appeared to be totally oblivious to the happenings of the outside world, which would explain why he did not investigate his arrival earlier. In fact, the man was concentrating so intently that he did not take notice of any of the boy's feeble attempts to be acknowledged without seeming disrespectful.

"Ah... pardon me? Robert, sir? Sir?!"

The man's eyes slid open dreamily. "No need to shout, I've heard you all along."

Cyrus looked at him in disbelief. "But then why —"

He smiled. "Don't worry, it'll all become clear shortly. Let us go to the boundary of my forest domain, and then perhaps you will be able to see what I mean."

"But I wanted merely to ask —"

Holding up his hand with an insurmountable air of dignity, the hermit arose from his sitting position and proceeded towards the maze of ropes behind him, choosing one whose endpoint was not visible.

"I'm something of an inventor, you know. I designed and built these devices myself, and constructed all of the platforms and connections with my own two hands. One certainly has a lot of free time when one lives in a forest," he said, chuckling gently.

The pair traveled along the rope at a fast pace, but the path was long indeed. Once they had arrived at the lonely outpost of the forest, the old man walked to the other side and beckoned Cyrus to come and see. He walked around the tree trunk to discover that shortly beyond where he stood, the land dropped off sharply, craggy cliffs leading straight to the sea below. The water was relatively calm that day, with the gentle waves picking up speed in a liquid crescendo before crashing against the rocks and falling back into inertness.

"What did you want me to see here?"

The hermit smiled enigmatically and merely pointed towards the water. "Do you perceive as the water rises and falls?"

"Yes."

"So it is with the future."

Bemused, the boy turned towards the sage with a quizzical expression. "But what do you mean?"

"It is tumultuous, and vast, and never does quite what one expects. You see there, the bird looking for fish? You are that bird. Will you find what you seek?"

"I was hoping that you could lead me to find it."

"You already know the answer to your query. It is not for one such as me to tell you how to find the Gardener or Iris."

"How did you know what I wished to ask about?"

He grinned. "I know a great many things about you, Cyrus. Not least

of which that you already possess a great deal more than you realize. That is so often the problem in these times; people become dissatisfied when all you truly need is always at hand. The Gardener, you know, was unhappy for just such a reason."

"But what happened to him?"

"Now, that would be telling."

The boy was confused by his refusal to answer the questions about what had happened to these people. He wondered briefly if this man himself might have been the Gardener, but he soon dismissed that thought; no one remembered him as being thin and wiry. Yet there was no explanation for how he could have known these things, since no one would have had time to tell him since Cyrus had left to seek him out. If nothing else, he was an exceptionally perceptive man.

"In any case, what did you mean when you said I already knew?"

"Well, of course you know! You've been carrying the means to find them for a long, long time."

"What would that be?"

"Your music box, young man. Come, take it out."

The music box! He hadn't thought of it for a long time, but of course it had remained among his possessions ever since he had acquired it what seemed now to be so long ago. He pulled it out of his pocket, and examined it with renewed acuteness.

"You know the song from which it came, do you not?"

He nodded. "Yes, but I assumed it was just rubbish."

"You recall the last line: *Without you, my dear, I am lost?*"

"Of course. But how will this let me find what I seek?"

"You have merely to use it properly. Let me demonstrate."

Cyrus placed the device in the man's hands. "First," he said, "you wind it up as usual. Once you do, concentrate on the place or person you wish to find. I will choose you. Now, you simply open the lid."

Instead of playing out its song as it normally did, it repeated a single note, which was very quiet. As the old man rotated it, it became louder and louder, until it was pointed towards Cyrus and it began to sound like a loud chime. He closed the lid.

"You see? It is very simple. Now you try it, first with me."

He accepted the box back, then proceeded to wind it again, and focused on the hermit before him before opening the lid. Sure enough, it played loudly while pointed at him.

"Then all I have to do is think of the Gardener and it will tell me where he is?"

"Precisely."

Concentrating intently, he imagined the figure of the Gardener in his mind. Of course, he had never seen him, but he made his best attempt. He carefully opened the lid, and started turning around with it gradually. Toward the west, where L'Académie was? No. To the south? The barest of

responses made him jump, but it seemed that it was nowhere near strong enough to indicate presence. He turned further, starting on the way towards the east, when the box began to make a tremendous racket. Southeast! Then he was all the way back in Rallia? But how could it be that no one in that city would have discovered his presence, if he had been there the whole time?

"The Gardener is in Rallia?"

The old man slyly smiled. "He may not be the type of man you expect. He has... changed, shall we say, quite a bit from his former nature. Indeed, I do not know that he will help you at all. But that is as it may be."

"If he won't help, maybe I should try to find Iris myself... but I have no idea what she's like!"

He chuckled, as if having some private joke. "Concentrate on the general idea of her, then. The result will be the same."

Cyrus did his best to envision the goddess. Having nothing else to fix on, he focused on the idea of irises, and picked out the most beautiful one he could imagine. It was perfectly formed and moist with dew in his mind. With only a slight hesitation, he opened the box while pointing towards the west.

The tone was faint, but audible. He turned around slowly, stopping at each of the cardinal directions especially, to see if there was any increase. But strangely, once he had completed the rotation, no direction was any stronger than the other. He looked askance at the old hermit, who by this time was almost beside himself with laughter.

"What's going on here!" the boy demanded.

He had been laughing so hard, he was forced to gasp for breath as he spoke. "Well — you see — one cannot really locate Iris by that means. In fact, she cannot be located by any means."

"You mean she's hidden from the world?"

"To all except the other Flower Maidens, yes. Even I do not know how to reach her. But, in a sense, I do know where she is."

"You do?! Where?"

He smiled to himself, and said only, "It will do no good for me to tell you. I think you will find out yourself in time. In any case, would you care to dine with me this evening? I do not often receive visitors, and I would be most honored to have you as a guest."

A little indignant about the man's refusal to tell him Iris' location, he had no better idea of how to proceed, and so he acquiesced to enjoy the hermit's hospitality for the evening. They went together back to his home, and from there traveled down a rope that he had not used before. Once their trip had ended, he was led into another tree-house of nearly equal size to the previous one.

"This is my humble storehouse. I do not have much, but the forest does provide. There are mostly fruits and nuts, but there is some delicious cider if you would care to partake."

"You made it yourself?"

"Of course. Where else would I get such a thing from? I seldom go down onto the forest floor, and I have not left this wood once since I entered it. Ah, how long ago that seems, now... but this place clears the mind in a way like no other I have known. You know, I traveled widely in my youth. I thirsted for knowledge, and wandered about endlessly looking for new experiences. Until one day, I fell in love... I have said too much. Forgive an old man for rambling."

"Please, tell me what happened."

"...I am ashamed. You see, I loved the woman for a long time, and we were truly happy together. But in secret, I grew discontent. Settling down was not the path I wished to take. I ran away then, seeking to further my own selfish interest in knowledge, and left the poor woman without so much as saying goodbye. My ignoble deed was so abhorrent to me, I fled as far as I could, leaving the country and resuming my wanderings; yet I could not regain the same comfort in learning new things, and was plagued by restlessness. Until at last I ended up stumbling upon this forest. The serenity I found here was without equal in all the places I had been. Thus, though my shame remained, I was no longer able to leave. Indeed, the outside world has much less appeal than it had before. Haven't you noticed how clear things become as you peer up into the leaves?"

The boy nodded mutely. He knew not why it should so affect him, but thought took on strange and fascinating paths in the solemn halls of arching trees.

"At any rate, all of that is in the past now. You and I are here, so why not enjoy the pleasure of a meal while we are together? Let us dine."

He set out coarsely crafted wooden plates and goblets, laying them out upon a crude table and taking various foodstuffs down from his many shelves. "Shall we?"

Not having realized how hungry he was until the food was laid out upon the table, Cyrus acquiesced eagerly and sat down to enjoy the meal. As they ate, the old hermit continued to talk about what path he would have to take.

"Since the Maidens are the only ones who know where Iris is, you will have to seek them out."

"Are their temples not spread far and wide across the world?"

"Yes, but there is no other choice. Although I do not know how exactly it is done, I know also that all of the Maidens' powers must be used in tandem in order to reach Iris. They are aware of your quest, but cannot seek you out themselves. Instead, you must go to them. You have now the means to find them, but reaching their domains is another matter. What you must do is find a boat."

"A boat?"

"Yes. Find a boat; a small one, mind you, for there is no captain who would be willing to take you to all of those places without an outrageous fee. You must sail it yourself."

"But I don't know how!"

"Fear not. You will learn soon enough how to do so. In any case, once you arrive, each of them will challenge you to make sure you are worthy, and then grant each of their powers in turn."

"You mean I'll gain the strength of the goddesses?"

"Assuming you can meet their challenges, yes."

"And what then?"

"I do not know. As I said, they will tell no one how to reach Iris, except that they can only reach her if all four are present — or, presumably, a reasonable facsimile thereof. Perhaps someone who possessed their powers. In other words, you."

The prospect was rather intimidating, but it seemed that this was the only course. "Very well, I shall do it."

"I would expect no less." He arose from the table. "It grows late. If you wish to return to L'Académie before nightfall, you must go now."

Not desiring to leave the wood, the youth almost tried to argue with him, but then realized the unavoidable truth of his words. "Thank you for all you have told me."

Half to himself, the man muttered, "If only it were nearly enough."

"What?"

"It is of no consequence. It is time." The hermit appeared to be struggling with something more that he wished to say, but shook his head slightly. "I wish you good luck on your journeys from here on, and farewell."

Cyrus looked at him wonderingly for a moment, curious what it was that he was about to say, but responded only, "Farewell." He returned via the system of ropes to the tree where he had first ascended up into the platforms. Climbing down the ladder, the enchanted silence returned to his hearing, and as he walked through the long pathways of trees, the sun's rays glimmered gently through the thick coverings of leaves. Once again, he came to the boundary between the wood and the outside world. Almost, though he could not explain why, he was tempted to run back, and ask the man's permission to stay in the forest and not have to go on this arduous journey, but soon got ahold of himself and dismissed such foolishness. Fate was what it was, and he would see his task through until the end.

## Chapter 12

### Fire

Despite the waning day, he wanted to begin the next leg of his quest as soon as possible, and hastened back to the docks as quick as he could. The trip was not long, but his mind went back to a time many years ago as he walked, when he had been in a forest not unlike the one he had just exited.

*It was cool and breezy in the woods that he had entered. This section of the woods was a special place to him; it had always contained the tallest trees in all the forest around his home. It was silent, mysterious, a place for sitting and contemplating, a place for dreaming. He went there often, although it was in theory farther away from the village than he was allowed to go. On this particular day, he had come from a scathing scolding by his mother, and needed a place to calm himself down.*

*He walked into the beautiful wood, and found the thicket in which he liked to sit. Sunlight streamed down into it filtered only by the green of the leaves overhead, and it was a wonderful place to be by one's self. Sitting there for a time, he slipped into a daydream, and imagined that he was a bird, looking down on himself resting in the thicket, then that he was a cloud looking down on the bird, and then the sun looking down on the cloud. It was very pleasant, and he might well have stayed there forever if not for the waning of the day and the coming chill of evening. Nights like this alone made him feel distinctly free, a feeling which both pleased and frightened him.*

Returning to the present, he finally walked in through the city gates, and there were still a few vestiges of sunlight on his arrival. Asking about, he soon found a man who was willing to sell him a boat for just one silver piece.

It was a rather unassuming vessel; room enough for just one, and a small sail. He had a few misgivings about using such a boat; it was of course theoretically possible to traverse the Locurian Sea in it, but the waves which they had met on the long passage from Rallia were certainly more than enough to utterly consume the tiny ship. But the hermit's assurances had encouraged him, and he was determined to make the voyage in whatever way possible. He purchased the boat with no further qualms, and went about buying provisions for the journey ahead. Once everything was together, he realized that leaving that night would be impossible in any case, for it was too late.

The boy briefly considered going back to L'Académie, but he had already said his farewells, and besides, the city of Marais had proven safe even in its unfrequented alleyways. With this thought in mind, he elected to sleep in the boat, and cast off as soon as he woke up.

The day dawned over the sleepy landscape of the Ilesian city, and its inhabitants took up again their sprightly step through its multitudinous streets. Bidding one last farewell to the whole place, he unfurled the sail and began his slow progress.

Sailing did indeed prove fairly intuitive. Once he had worked out the idea of tacking, he moved along at a fair clip. He turned back in close to the coast and tried to figure out which Maiden he would visit first. Thinking back, he realized that he knew little of where the four lesser Maidens dwelled; their associated elements were all that he could remember. But, he must visit one of them first, and the decision remained. After a few moments of drifting along the coastline, he settled upon Rose, the Fire Maiden. It was as good a choice as any, and he pulled out the music box to find her location. To the northwest, according to its loud tones. The youth peered down in that direction, but could not see any land for quite some ways. Yet there was no help for it. He turned the rudder and set off on the way to the land of Fire.

Surprisingly, the voyage picked up when an unexpected gale blew directly in the way he wanted to go. He simply let the sail do its work, and relaxed as his miniscule vessel bounded over the waves towards the Fire Maiden's domain. The wind did not seem to portend any bad weather, either; the skies remained as clear as ever, and the sun warmed him, cutting off the chill of the brisk wind.

Far in the distance, he began to see the first indications of land. Her home was evidently a small island. A curious gleaming could be seen from it, but he could not make out its source. As he drew nearer, it became apparent that it was a sizable temple, with giant white pillars and a golden roof, rising from the island's center. The island was largely covered in a plethora of bright orange and red, and he guessed that they were flowers, but the individual blooms could not be discerned from this vantage. The boy brought the boat in fairly close, then leaped out and grounded it on the sandy beach before wading onto the shore himself.

Noting the broad road directly before him, Cyrus began to walk down the long pathway lined with the blazing flowers with which Rose associated herself. Marigolds and poppies leered at him from all directions. The walkway itself appeared to be no more than ordinary soil, though curiously uncovered with the flowers which encroached upon its boundaries, but the sides were defined with rigid regularity, stretching out far into the distance and leading straight to the entrance of the goddess' enormous residence.

The temple ahead loomed up before him in its vastness; a high atrium, supported by alabaster pillars ascending impossibly high until reaching the edge of the ceiling, which was a brilliant golden hue and made out of some

material which could not be identified. Her signature, the red roses, managed to twine all the way up the pillars, with a massive entanglement of bushes directly blocking his path. Their needle-sharp thorns stuck out as a warning to all who might try to come inside, but after some hesitation, he walked to them, and they retreated as if commanded.

Stepping inside, the thorns snapped back together without warning. He whirled around, but the exit was blocked. Having no other course, he ventured farther into the atrium, noticing that the very center of the roof was an open circle, shining sunlight directly onto a spot in the middle of the chamber. The boy watched this spot intently, and a slight, imperceptible shimmering began to occur there.

Suddenly, a female voice gave a cry and the entire room burst into flame. The pillars glowed a dull red, while the roses surrounding them crackled and sputtered in the fire. Cyrus nearly sprang forward in alarm, but realized that he was at least for the moment out of the fire's range, and so merely waited.

In the spot where sunlight was visible, what appeared to be a woman on fire appeared, and she demanded angrily in a booming voice, "We are the Priestess and the Goddess Rose. What are you doing in our domain?" The figure rushed at him with unbelievable speed, stopping just before running him over. Small flames remained where she had passed, but they soon flickered out. It was only now that Cyrus was able to see the woman herself.

Her entire body was composed of flame. On the perfectly regular surface of soil on which they stood, her feet were strangely root-like, but at the same time were licks of flame extending out from the central figure. Her legs were slender, and gave the curious impression that they were actually green stems instead of the fiery appendages that they were. The woman's long hair tumbled down over her shoulders, and her eyes gleamed even brighter than the rest of her, two brilliant jewels set in her luminous face.

"Answer!"

"I have come to ask your aid in locating Iris."

"And why should we help you?" She whirled on her heel, crossing her arms in rejection.

The boy started to despair. Was that really going to be it? No, surely not.

"But I must find her!"

"Then you must first prove your worth." Rose gestured, and all of the flames went out at once. Only she remained, burning as brightly as ever. "We shall set you a test, to see that you are the one we need. Come," she said, turning briefly and returning to the sunlit spot, moving yet again impossibly fast.

Considerably slower, Cyrus walked over to where the Maiden was waiting for him. He was uneasy about the idea of this test, but did not know what precise form it would take. After arriving, she began making elaborate, graceful movements with her fiery arms, but did not speak.

At the completion of her gestures, she clapped both hands together,

shouted, "Dragon, come forth!" and made another scorching exit to the side of the atrium. An unusual sound began to emerge from the entrance behind him, and Cyrus turned to see a gigantic creature lumbering into the chamber.

He was held stiff in terror for a moment, as the creature roared and issued forth jets of fire from its nostrils. The monster was a tremendous lizard standing upright, which would have been bad enough by itself, had it not also been composed entirely of flames. After it had come in through the entrance, the roses ignited yet again, preventing any escape from the arena.

The dragon regarded the pitiful-looking youth dispassionately for a few moments, and inhaled in preparation for a blast which had so far completely annihilated any opponent who dared to challenge the goddess' might. But as it began to exhale, it realized that Cyrus was no longer where he had been. It roared again in anger, and stomped about searching for the miniscule youth.

Cyrus, having no conception of how to defeat the monster, had acted swiftly when there seemed to be no way out. Using earth energy, he had created a small bubble of air, and had burrowed into the ground in order to avoid the raging beast. He had only a few minutes left before the air would run out, but the trick would buy him enough time to strategize. Meanwhile, the dragon above was starting to sniff around for its prey, but fortunately the soil above him protected him from detection.

Attacking it head on would surely be futile, but the creature must have some form of weakness. The obvious one was dousing its flames with water, but even if that would work, he had no way to call upon water for the purpose. He might be able put it out by covering it with earth. Yet that presumed again that its fire could actually be extinguished by such means. His time underground was running out, and he needed to make a decision fast. With abrupt decisiveness, he erupted forth from the soil and started barraging the enemy with energy bursts as fast as he could summon them up.

It roared, but his attacks seemed to have little effect other than annoying the creature. Apparently, direct force was useless against such a beast. Cleverness, then, would have to prevail. Yet another plan of attack formulated in his mind; he would raise up just enough earth to encase its feet, either extinguishing them and thus rendering it incapable of movement, or trapping it from further attack while he devised some way of injuring it.

Loud stomps made the ground shudder as the lumbering monster moved in closer to take a bite out of the youth. While it was moving would be the easiest to unbalance it. Just as it was in mid-step, its hind leg firmly planted on the ground, he summoned up a mound of dirt which rapidly enveloped the fiery rear appendage.

Dreadful noises issued forth from the dragon as it lost its balance and slowly, inexorably began to fall. It thrashed its tail in a feeble attempt to regain its footing, but this exertion was futile as it was already on the way

down. It collapsed, and the ground gave a tremendous shudder under its weight.

Now, while it was incapacitated, was the time to strike. Cyrus prepared another burst of energy, and directed the soil upon which the creature had fallen to engulf it completely. After it had been completely covered, its struggles slowed slightly, until finally it lay quiescent for a few moments before vanishing altogether, causing the collected earth to collapse inward and cover the spot where the creature had been.

The Fire Maiden reappeared without warning, and planted a firm, passionate kiss on the astonished Cyrus' lips. Despite her seemingly fiery composition, he somehow survived unscathed — at least in body, though he would never be quite rid of the memory.

She exclaimed enthusiastically, "You have proven more than worthy. Take this."

Between her hands appeared a rose of unimaginable beauty. Still a little shaken from the Maiden's unforeseen kiss, he stood dazed for a few seconds before returning to his senses and accepting the gift.

Once he had taken it into his hands, he was assailed by a curious sensation, as though his entire being were somehow altered by the flower. As soon as it had come upon him, it was gone, and he was unable to make out what precisely had occurred. He noticed that the flower he had held was nowhere to be found.

"Now, you have absorbed the powers of the rose, and have strength equal to ours. We wish you luck, brave youth." The Maiden gave him a more demure kiss on the cheek before embracing him warmly and accompanying him to the flower-lined entranceway. Bewildered, he stepped out, and turned back in time to watch the smiling woman whirl about and disappear altogether.

So, he had gained the powers of fire? He decided to make a test of this theory. Unsure quite how to make the abilities manifest, Cyrus decided to merely think up a flame and see what resulted; concentrating his energy, he willed for fire to appear.

A fiery plume extended 40 feet into the air, almost incinerating a passing bird that was nearly as astounded as the youth was. Future experimentation would have to be a little more cautious, evidently. But he was now the possessor of abilities in the manipulation of both earth and fire; there were no others that he knew of who could lay claim to such dual capabilities. Immensely satisfied with this first accomplishment, he hurried back to the boat to continue his adventure.

## Chapter 13

# Water

It was time to seek out the next goddess. He would go next to the domain of the Water Maiden; the old hermit had said he would find her beneath the waves, but how he would get down to her, he did not know. He reached the water again, and used the music box again. Southwest, it told him. Then that was where he would go.

The trip across the water seemed even briefer than the last, and he soon arrived at the island upon which Water-lily should be. Yet it seemed that it was completely bare. Searching around, he finally noticed an anomaly around the island's coastline. There was a spot where the water seemed strangely absent. Walking closer, he realized that it was the opening of a tunnel underwater. But the tunnel was not made of any material he recognized. He was mystified, and stood directly before it in wonder before heading in.

The wavering tunnel which he was entering defied reality, but even after he blinked in disbelief, it refused to go away. The entrance to the Water Maiden's palace was, indeed, made of water that somehow allowed him to walk upon it and breathe despite the tremendous depths to which he would descend. With no small amount of trepidation, he gingerly moved forward onto the first step of the underwater staircase, and reassured of its solidity, started the long trek down into the sea.

Around his surreal tunnel of air, passing fish glanced at him and expressed as much shock as their faces would let them. Far above, the surface of the water was visible as a shifting array of beautiful light filtering through the water, which slowly played across the path, illuminating at times certain steps and making visible the impossible surface upon which he walked. Deeper and deeper into the sea he went, noting that the cerulean waters above gave way to darker regions, full of startled creatures glowing by their own light, and finally the boundary between sea and air seemed too distant to clearly see. The glowing fish circled around the path, peering curiously at the strange being inside, and lit Cyrus' descent to the ocean floor.

Once he arrived, the staircase flattened out, producing a flat pathway on

the bottom. Ahead, an indescribable wavering marked out the perimeter of Water-lily's temple. After he entered the grand hall, he could see the roof above as if he were inside a giant bubble. At the zenith, he could see a vortex which seemed to be sucking down the air needed to maintain this magical structure under the waves. Slowly, a shimmering figure began to coalesce in the center of the hall.

"Welcome to our domain, little one. We have marked your progress well," Water-lily said, with a musical lilt in her voice. From what he could see, the maiden's body was a continually flowing mass of water. Her form was elegant; yet one could look right through her to the ocean beyond. Only the woman's eyes could be seen clearly; they were slowly swirling sapphires, full of the profound blue of the ocean's depths.

"You know that we must present you with a challenge before granting you the water's power. It pains us, but our sisters assure us it is necessary. Please, prepare yourself." She gave a nod, and floated gradually back outside the bubble to observe.

Unexpectedly, the bubble began to fill rapidly with water. Before Cyrus had a chance to cry out, he was completely submerged. Yet when he involuntarily tried to breathe, he found that he had no difficulty in doing so, and discovered shortly thereafter that his movements were unaffected by the water's presence.

The maiden must have granted him the ability to survive underwater. But surely, this could not be the challenge of which she had spoken. That was approaching even as he pondered the matter.

Gliding silently through the water, a giant octopus made entirely of water appeared in front of him. Its quavering figure was revealed by the slow circling of the luminescent fish, but Cyrus could not see it directly, only its rough form as outlined by the shimmering of the fish. His mind was racing as he searched for ways to combat what Water-lily had summoned to challenge him. The fire powers which he had gained were of no use in this underwater locale. In addition, he could not hide underneath the ocean floor, for beneath a thin layer of sediment there was only bedrock.

Just then, an idea occurred to him, and he stood perfectly still as the creature approached. As it was about to come upon him, he used his earth energies to stir up the bottom, obscuring the area with a billowing cloud of silt. The octopus screeched in rage, but was unable to locate him, its enormous eyes whirling about madly in the darkness. Now, he could not see it, just as before, but it could not see him, either. Taking full advantage of the opportunity, the boy ran as fast as he could to the left, and paused a moment to utilize his awareness to locate the creature.

As soon as he did so, he realized that while the earth awareness made the silt cloud appear as a mere haze, the octopus was still nowhere to be seen. It dawned on him that since it was solely a creature of water, it did not enter affect the currents of the earth, and was thus nearly impossible locate via this method. Still, as he focused further, it became evident that it

could be found by looking where the sand and dirt were blocked by some form of barrier, surely the many limbs of the menacing creature. Hoping that his surmise was corrected, he collected energy, and shaped it into the form of a blade, then sending it at the junction between tentacle and body. The piercing cry he received in response assured him that he had indeed made a direct hit. Emboldened by this success, he scrambled about some more, aiming carefully at another tentacle and sending an energy blade in its direction. Again, the watery limb was severed without any resistance.

Once the cloud had completely cleared, the boy looked as best he could at the giant creature to ascertain the damage it had sustained. There was a strange swirling surrounding it, and he peered more carefully to see. Suddenly, he realized that it was forming new arms! Then his strategy had been useless. What could be done against an enemy that could regenerate at will?

It began its slow approach yet again. He swirled up the silt once more, but this time, the monster was ready. Spinning about, waving its tentacles strongly outward, it expelled the cloud in all directions, buffeting Cyrus with waves as it did so. After it was finished, all of the boy's protection had vanished, and the circumstances looked grim.

His mind raced even faster than before, thinking of what possible weaknesses such an entity could have. Perhaps he could merely dice it up further? But that would be of no use, since he did not have sufficient speed to counteract its regenerative capabilities. Maybe, then, he could destroy just the head. Yet if the arms were any indication, the creature did not need to retain all of its body in order to regenerate, but only any small part of it. Then he must somehow eliminate the whole thing at once.

Another thought came to him, although this one seemed considerably more difficult. He would open up a rift in the ocean floor, and somehow drag the creature down into it. Hoping that his powers of controlling earth energy were sufficient for the task, since it was a daunting one indeed, he readied himself and sought out the weakest point within his sphere of awareness. It was fortunately nearby. Then, as the octopus approached, he would build up energy, and when it was nearly upon him, he would open the bedrock like a vault and it would slip inside without any fuss.

The plan set, he prepared himself for the exertion as the creature drew ever nearer, closer and closer to the moment of truth. It was time! He wrenched with the entirety of the energy which he had accumulated while waiting, and a strong shuddering indicated that he was indeed moving. But was it fast enough? The distance between where he had been before and his present location seemed to have increase, but in the commotion he had momentarily lost track of the octopus.

Cyrus felt a tentacle curl about his leg. Not fast enough, he thought with an almost absurd sense of regret as he was being pulled backwards, presumably into the creature's transparent but nevertheless deadly maw.

Just as suddenly as he had been pulled back, the movement stopped and the octopus' screech could be heard. He turned around, in time to view

the creature dissolving rapidly from the heat of the magma which had been revealed in the youth's incredible effort. So the idea had worked after all, though not in the manner which he had intended. Still, his life was saved, and he was certainly not about to complain of his good fortune.

"So then, you have succeeded. We were confident that you would do it. Now, you shall be granted the power of water. Please, come here." The Maiden flashed her brilliant translucent smile and beckoned him forward. "Come!"

He walked towards the waiting goddess, and she held her hands out in a gesture of offering. A single water-lily, of such perfection it was hard to believe it was a real object. Carefully, he took the flower from her hands, and felt infused with invigorating energy as he had before. The flower disappeared, leaving him with the curious sense that once again an entire new world had opened before him. Without thinking about it, he began inadvertently to float upwards, and hastened to return to the bottom before he realized that he now had complete control over his movements. The temporary power granted him in order to breathe and walk along the bottom had evidently been made permanent.

"Many thanks, my lady!"

She nodded graciously. "You ought not to overtax yourself. Please, return to the surface with our blessing. It has been a pleasure to assist you."

Cyrus cheerfully waved and shot through the water like a dolphin, feeling exuberant with his newfound strength. Returning to the boat, he went on to the next task that was set him.

## Chapter 14

# Wind

After some deliberation, he chose to travel to the Wind Goddess next. The music box directed him east, but found that the winds traveled out from her island rather than towards it. As he tried to steer towards the island, he found himself constantly blown away by the fierce gales which surrounded the place. Despairing, he decided to beach his boat on a nearby isle, and instead use his newfound water capabilities to make the journey to her island.

He waded out a little ways, and proceeded to walk steadfastly into the water until it had gone over his head. Rather than waste time walking along the bottom, he intended to speed through the water as he had done before, but found his efforts hindered by the reef which lay just slightly beneath the surface of the water. Beautifully colored corals surrounded him, and tiny fish as well as eels peered quizzically at the large intruder before going on their way.

The entire way to the island was not obstructed by the reef, but once he got into the deeper waters another hindrance appeared to stymie his progress. This was evidently the hunting ground of a varied menagerie of giant sea creatures. Enormous whales passed by slowly, as giant squid glanced at him with their enormous eyes before jetting on their way. Suddenly, one of the cephalopods attempted to attack a docile whale, and the gargantuan creature grew enraged and attempted to fight back against its questing tentacles. Intrigued, Cyrus stopped to observe the creatures before continuing onward towards the island. The squid appeared to be taking the upper hand, but just as all seemed lost for the whale, it managed to score a critical bite on the attacking creature, causing it to scuttled off in order to nurse its wounds as the whale made a less hurried exit.

At last, he had reached the territory of the Wind Maiden. Her island was rather larger than the previous ones, and was dominated by a towering temple which extended far into the sky. Wading up onto the shore, Cyrus walked through a high wooden gate covered in a beautiful red lacquer into Cherry Blossom's domain. The trees for who she was named spread a refreshing fragrance and a profusion of gentle pink petals scattering in the

wind. Sparkling streams intersected with the path, and were covered over with low bridges of the same attractive wood as the entrance. The trees began to crowd more densely as he neared the Maiden's home.

The temple of the Wind Maiden was not easily traversed. It rose up high above the ground, constructed of elegant curving tiers, one of top of the other. As far as he could tell, the sweep of the vast temple ought to be impossible, as it was unsupported at the far end, where a wide, flat square platform rested in a marvelous feat of balance upon the lower levels. He began the slow climb up the extensive structure, mounting each level gradually and feeling particularly small due to the lengthy nature of the ascent.

Higher and higher on the temple, the boy began to feel more and more of the wind blowing past with greater force than before. He shivered slightly in the cold, but continued rising. After a time, the terminal platform was visibly approaching, and he at last found himself on top of the entire structure, looking out over the giant platform which appeared to be empty.

A slight gust of wind blew over the surface, and a few petals fluttered by as he peered about looking for some sign of the goddess. As he looked about, it began to impress upon him that it was unlikely that the petals would have reached all the way up here on their own, and there were no trees from which they could have fallen. Suddenly, he heard a tinkling laughter on the breeze. He looked about in surprise, and the slight swirl began to pick up and turned into a whirlwind of flowers. They flew outward in all directions to reveal the Wind Maiden, smiling obliquely.

"Well come." Her translucent, smoky form was nearly insubstantial; as with all the others, though, her eyes were of crystal, luminous and chilling in their brilliance. She walked with fleet, graceful steps over to him. "Our sisters told us you would arrive. Are you prepared for the challenge?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Very well. Come out! The time has come for you to earn your keep."

In answer, a raucous squawk was heard seemingly from nowhere. Rising into view, a bird made of the same cloudy material as the Maiden came flapping up the side of the temple and perched on top of the platform. It squawked again at Cherry Blossom, who gave it a nod of approval, and then turned to Cyrus, saying an airy "Good luck, dear child!" before slipping backwards to watch.

The nearly insubstantial bird focused its attention to the boy, and made a bounding leap to become airborne before gliding straight towards the hapless youth. He ran to the side of its path, reasoning that it could not turn fast enough to catch him, and considered his options. He now possessed the abilities of earth, fire, and water. Which would be most effective? Since there was no earth readily available to use, he decided to try fire first.

As the bird wheeled around in the sky for another charge, Cyrus readied a store of flame, and just before it was upon him, released a fiery blast directly towards it. The flames lashed out towards it, but as soon as they reached its cloud-like body they were harmlessly blown to the sides or ex-

tinguished altogether. It seemed that fire was not the answer to this challenge.

He started to run to the left, but realized that the bird had caught on and was already turning in that direction. In an unexpected move, he scrambled directly towards it, causing its angle of flight to pass straight over him. Realizing it had been tricked, it screeched in annoyance and circled around slowly for a third attempt. How was he to combat this menace if there were no other elements to be taken advantage of? But just as he was about to despair, a droplet of water landed on his head, and he looked up to realize that it was starting to rain. Therein lay his solution.

Closing the distance fast, the bird was preparing for a final strike. This time, it was entering at a low angle, and would change direction on Cyrus' slightest move. It was now or never. Praying that his idea would indeed work, he forced a torrent of rain directly towards it. It slowed down, unable to make headway against the powerful water, and was held still for a few critical moments. He now directed the fire underneath the creature while the remainder of the water held back its approach, and just as he had hoped, it was heated from below and began to expand outward, becoming more and more diffuse until it scattered on the winds.

Cherry Blossom's laughter returned once again. "Congratulations! You have succeeded yet again, just as we had hoped. Here." She summoned up a complete flower between her hands, and blew its petals gently towards him. He felt infused with a lightness in his step, and when he made a move to walk he was swept upward by an unexpected gust of wind, and flailed frantically for a moment before he realized that he was flying.

Filled with delight, he let out a cry and looped through the air, reveling in his newfound abilities. He was so excited that he almost forgot to land again.

"Thank you! Oh, thank you!"

She smiled. "Think nothing of it. I wish you luck in your travels."

"Goodbye!" Laughing, he swept down off the temple, traveling swiftly through the air. Soon, however, he began to tire. Clearly, though he possessed the goddess' power, he did not have her limitless stamina. There was, he supposed, a limit to how much of one's abilities one could use during the day. More sedately, he walked back towards where the small vessel awaited his arrival. It was time now to seek out the fourth and final Maiden, goddess of Earth.

## Chapter 15

# Earth

Stepping off of the boat, Cyrus saw at once the cave which led to the Earth Maiden's underground dwelling. It seemed rather forbidding, and he had more than a little trepidation about entering the darkened opening, but it was necessary in order to proceed. After all, he would be unable to reach Iris without gaining the goddess' boost of powers, and her advice was needed to discover precisely how he might seek out the mysterious fifth Maiden.

He crept into the cavern gingerly, and began to descend into the subterranean depths of Verbena's domain. Luminescent fungi provided an eerie bluish light which barely illuminated the steps carved out of the rock, and the endless dripping of stalactites was the only sound aside from the echoing of his footsteps that could be heard as he traveled deeper into the cave. The air grew stale and dank as he went down, and the walls seemed to close in slightly, though it was probably merely his imagination.

The light-giving fungi began to thin out, and the stairs were only just visible in front of him. It came to the point beyond which he could see nothing in front of him. He hesitated, but seeing no alternative, continued downward, now feeling truly cut off. Soon, a loud, echoing drip could be heard in front of him. What was this? His pace slowed, and after he descended a few more steps he realized that the path had leveled out. In utter darkness now, he walked just a little bit further, and came suddenly into a wide open space.

Feeling exposed in the absence of the walls, he shrank back into the tunnel, but soon forced himself to reenter the large chamber. He could not guess its exact size, but given the echoes he heard, it must be immense. The youth worried about angering the goddess unduly; yet seeing no other recourse, he summoned up a small amount of fire energy, and created a ball of it in between his hands.

At once, the vastness of the cavern hit him like a blow. It was incredibly huge, approaching the Garden's dome in size. The other Maidens had not possessed abodes that were nearly so impressive by comparison. He was lost in the imposing vista, when his attention was abruptly called to a figure

approaching from the center.

Without any preamble, the earth goddess had risen up out of the solid rock in the middle, her angular form being minimalist but still as beautiful as those of the others. She strode over to Cyrus with thunderous steps and stopped directly before him.

"We will be frank. We and our sisters have run out of time for this folly, so we will dispense with the challenge and come straight to the point. Iris has become doubly pained, and has started draining the sun's strength at an increased rate." Cyrus gasped. "Yes, she is indeed the cause of its weakness. We speculate that she will destroy it utterly within days if she is not stopped. Her power, though few mortals know it, is limitless. That is, Iris has all of our abilities and infinitely more. She is, in fact, a part of everything in the entire world."

She paused a moment to let this sink in before continuing. "Our sisters have not been completely honest with you. Our challenges were considerably reduced in difficulty, because we feared that our sole candidate for bringing Iris out of her nightmare might be damaged if our full powers were brought to bear. You performed admirably regardless, but the truth is that you would have remained our choice whether you had passed the tests or not. The only way you would have been rejected is if you succeeded with a little too much ease."

"You see, we still do not know what became of the Gardener, though we know that Iris' pain is in some way connected to him. Our suspicion is that he has turned renegade, and none of us know what form he might assume if this were the case; perhaps he might try to steal our power under the guise of one who sought our help. But your battles with our beasts have shown that you were still challenged by them, whereas the Gardener would have had no trouble in dispatching them at once."

"The fact remains that we have run out of time for any more concealment. Iris is lost in a world of pain, which we cannot enter despite our best attempts. We know only that her priestess was somehow wrenched from her, resulting in the mortal half's demise, and that the Gardener may have been involved in this. We have never known such an anguish; if our floral component were forced to go on alone, there would be no end to the sorrow. This is the situation which faces Iris at present."

"What you must do is travel into her world. She is beyond our reach, for none of us can leave our mortal aspect to voyage apart from ourselves. However, you, as a mortal, will be able to venture into her nightmare, and try to resolve it in whatever way you can. Since we do not know what in fact happened, we cannot say what the solution will be, but we trust that you will be able to solve the problem if it is at all possible."

"This, however, is a part of the two dangers you face. The Gardener, part one, remains an unknown factor. If he was responsible for killing Iris' priestess, he is certainly capable of causing great harm. Even if he is gone completely, the second problem lies in the perilous journey into Iris' being,

from which your mind may never return if you do not take care to retain your own mind within hers."

"We felt it necessary to reveal all of this to you now; for now is the point beyond which there is no turning back. If you have commit yourself to this course by accepting my added powers, you will be in grave danger, of losing your life or perhaps even your whole being. The choice lies with you. Will you take on this challenge?"

A single flower lay in her outstretched hand. So, this was the moment of decision. At long last, the culmination of all that he had worked for since he left his cottage in Norven what seemed like years ago, though it had only been months. Without a moment's hesitation, he grasped the bloom, feeling the surge of added strength once more.

"There is no challenge which I would more greatly desire to undertake."

"Though we fear for you, we are... pleased. Here, then, is what you must do."

As Verbena explained, the temple of Iris was located far to the north, at the very tip of the world. The voyage there would be long, even if Cyrus used his wind powers to give his vessel a boost. Therefore, she would open a tunnel for him straight through the ground to the site. He would need to travel along it as quickly as he could, using his powers when he was able, and then come out on the other side on top of the ice. While the priestess of Iris had resided there, there had been perpetual spring, but in her absence, ice had formed over the top of it which would need to be thawed. Once inside, he would have to use his power on a set of four altars which lay inside. Finally, the way into Iris' mind would become evident.

She prepared the passageway almost instantaneously after she had finished explaining, carving it into the side of her vast cavern. "It is time, young Cyrus. You must go through the tunnel. We do not know how this will turn out, but we have high hopes that you will be successful. Go, quickly! We wish you the best of luck."

Cyrus nodded gravely. "Farewell, my lady." He gathered his wind energies before starting to propel himself through the tunnel as rapidly as possible, and thought of what faced him as he speeded through the uniform smoothness of Verbena's creation. There would be a challenge beyond any he had yet experienced. Yet he was ready. The fate of the world would depend on his success here, and there was no way he would permit himself to fail. For Fiella, his mother; for Saltrio, his mentor; for Micael, his young companion; for everyone, there was no choice but to win. Thusly convinced, he went even faster through the passageway, driven by the desire to save all the people he held dear.

## Chapter 16

### Iris

Cyrus had arrived at last at the temple of Iris. He could see its pillars vaguely through the thick sheet of ice which covered the top of it. Pausing a moment to recuperate after all the effort he had expended in reaching the place, he blasted it with a tremendous barrage of fire energy. The ice melted away in seconds, and the edifice was restored to its former state.

It was utterly unoccupied, just as Verbenia had described. He stepped into the rotunda in between the columns which rounded its circumference. In four directions, he could see altars to each of the four other goddesses; they were simple stone triangles with an iconic representation of their associated element.

It was time.

Walking forward onto the dais in the center of the temple, he focused all four of the goddesses' energies at once. The balancing act was a complicated one, but he managed to concentrate all four, and sent off a blast of each towards the appropriate altar. All of them retracted into the ground, and a curious thing began to happen. Just above the dais where he was standing, a circle of some unrecognizable material coalesced into existence and began to descend. Hurriedly, he stepped off of the platform, and the disc completed its descent at a foot above the dais' level. The boy inquisitively stuck his hand out to touch it, and it felt incredibly solid despite its nearly insubstantial appearance. Clambering onto it, he suddenly realized what it was to be used for. It was upon this that he would dream.

Since Iris was in a nightmare of sorts, it was only logical that the entrance to her dreamworld would be to start dreaming himself. This disc must have served as her resting place, where she could connect with all that she was a part of, for not even a mortal infused with the being of the goddess could constantly assimilate the entire world and remain sane. Preparing himself mentally, Cyrus began to gather up as much courage as he had, and lay down onto the surface. Almost instantly, he was whisked away into the void.

Here was no mere absence of things, but a negativity the likes of which

the boy had never experienced. A keening arose in the directionless infinity, the agonized cry nearly splitting his head in half. Everything was dark and cold, and his only awareness was of pain. This must be what the goddess had experienced for so long.

Slowly, the continuous anguish began to give way to a jumbled, incomprehensible series of emotions. He found himself with the inexplicable urge to burst into flower, but stopped once he realized the futility of his effort. Where had the desire come from? Iris, in the absence of her human counterpart, must have reverted to the alien mode of thinking which was common to all plants. He had never before, of course, been so intimately able to experience the sensation, and it was almost certainly one that he did not enjoy.

Iris, as far as he could tell, was now aware of his presence, and was making an effort to communicate. The sensory bursts which he received from her were meaningless to him; the feeling of the sun on the leaves, the sound of a plant's growth, the smell of pollen on the air. At one point, it seemed to him that he heard the clear note of a melody sounding out among the noise, and he frantically cried out "Stop! Wait!" before realizing his folly and attempting to project a clear mental picture of the sentiment.

In response, Iris signaled acquiescence with a nameless feeling of acceptance. *Water on the roots*. Despite the strange terms, he had been understood and she was able to reply. She began to expand upon the single note which he had heard, playing back the entire melody with a few odd-sounding notes, as if it were something said in a foreign language that she had heard and could just barely repeat, though not exactly as it had been. However, as the mental connection between them strengthened, her communication ability increased.

"Again," he thought. The goddess obliged by repeating the melody, this time closer to what Cyrus imagined was the original. "What?" he inquired. Confounded by this abstract concept, she attempted to show him via a series of pictures, which grew in clarity and definition until it was as if he were watching the scene unfold before him.

A woman, who he assumed was the mortal counterpart which she had lost, was walking in a forest somewhere, singing to herself. The world seemed in balance, and she was taking the time to enjoy the world of which her floral self was an integral part. In her mortal component, she was moved to sing by the beauty that surrounded her, and she had sung for quite some time when she realized that a man was standing there listening to her.

Though Iris' thought-picture was unclear, he realized at once who it was. Saltrio, years younger! But how was it possible? He had no time to speculate, for events continued to pass as he watched.

Enraptured, the man merely stared at her for a time, and she was curious, but did not break off her song. She began to make her way towards him. Her melody was nearing the end of its phrase in any case, and she soon stopped, though the spell was not broken.

Suddenly, as she approached, she became aware of his intense love for

her. It was a new experience, and she was unsure how to react for a moment. He took away her doubts by simply kissing her, and she returned it without any further hesitation. They remained there like that for an eternity, and the melody of before had turned into a duet taken up by all of the world, seemingly singing along with their newfound joy.

There was an unexpected discord in the harmony, as shouting could be heard from behind them. The goddess could not provide the words, but the sentiment was beyond any doubt. They turned to look at him, proving to be the man that Iris recognized as the Gardener. Her memories of him before that point had been quite positive; he had always tended his Garden well, and , but now he seemed to have changed without any explanation. Cyrus concentrated on the pattern of disorganized impressions, and they began to resolve into a mental picture. The Gardener was the man he had known as Kamril! But why had he become so hateful?

His hatred towards Saltrio was a palpable thing, the abject fury of his anger being the only thing that the goddess could perceive. He began to gather wind energy, but she was so confused and lost that she did nothing. The human aspect, however, realized that he was preparing to attack with a blast of cutting air. Without the slightest thought, she hurled herself in front of the oncoming strike, and the goddess was unable to control her movements for a fatal instant in which the blow struck her mortal half's unprotected body.

A roaring flooded Cyrus' ears, and there was nothing. Then, he felt the beginning of unrestrained grief, pouring out of the goddess and directly into him. Sensing his intense pain in response, she remembered herself and reduced the intensity of her projection until all that was remained was a muted sobbing.

After a few moments of subdued anguish, she resumed the tale, though it was now considerably vaguer since she was interpreting events without a human perspective to provide the necessary understanding.

The Gardener had held his head in his hands, and cried out in remorse. Saltrio remained stunned by what had just transpired, and her only impression was one of shock. He stumbled over to

Iris broke off her picture-narrative abruptly. She was full of alarm, and begged Cyrus to leave her for the moment, for something disastrous was occurring outside. Suddenly afraid, he made an effort to wake himself, and return to the Maiden's temple. When he woke up, the reason for her distress was instantly apparent, and he leapt off the suspended circle to the temple floor below.

Kamril, his eyes burning with twisted delight, was gripping the unconscious Micael by his arm and walking towards Cyrus with a slow, purposeful step. "So, you thought you would save Iris from her own little hell, did you? I have to thank you, really. I would never have been able to gain access to her temple without your timely assistance. And now, I believe your part is finished. But mine... mine is only now beginning!"

"What have you done to him?!"

"Ah, your young friend here." The mage jerked the boy forward, redoubling his grip on the child's arm; his inert body hung limply like a rag doll, and Kamril smirked. "I've just made him sleep for a while. He is really quite useful, you know. His powers of amplification will soon prove immensely helpful, for I intend to take on the oh-so-mighty Iris myself, and destroy her utterly for what she has done!"

Cyrus took a few steps backward instinctively, but realized that he would upset the disc, which was his only way to communicate with Iris. He stopped and waited for what the wicked magician had to say.

"It was her, her and Saltrio that stole my love away from me. They snatched her away before my very eyes!" He choked off, his face a grotesque mask of pain. "I always believed he was my friend. My precious love... he tried to take her... and the goddess was there, encouraging her!" The terrible light returned to his eyes. "I knew then that I had to destroy Iris. She was keeping my love from me, sucking up all of her uniqueness. I loved the woman, not the amalgam! And so it is that Saltrio, too, must suffer for his role in capturing her."

"I thought that he was my friend, can you believe it? I trusted him implicitly. At the time, I even felt guilty for trying to kill him. Instead, my death blow hit my dearest and took her life." He looked utterly dispirited for a moment, then broke out in uproarious laughter. "But it was not her I meant to kill! It was the hateful possession which I wished to destroy. Imagine, that I should feel remorse for trying to kill the monster that had invaded my beloved's body, and drawn her away from my embrace."

"You are wrong! Only you are responsible for her death. Can you even fathom the damage you've caused? Your jealousy will be the destruction of the entire world!"

Kamril laughed again, this time with a vicious bent. "Then let it be so! I care not for the sufferings of others, for mine have been without equal! Why should everyone not feel my pain?"

"You won't escape the consequences of Iris' death! If you destroy the goddess, everything, even your own existence, will end!"

"What matters such a trifle to me? My existence has already ended!" He sobbed briefly. "I failed to uphold my oath as a Gardener, failed to accomplish the task I had been set to... and I was utterly cast out from the first day I set eyes upon the poor woman Iris chose as her priestess!"

"She was beautiful, you know... so beautiful. Her eyes were of every hue I could imagine, and she peered out with the most joyful expression, as if the entire world were her delight. Her form was so slender, so delicate. I watched her for a long time, always from afar, never being able to come near, for a Gardener did not dally in that way with mortals. I knew a few of the Accademians, but no one else. I thought until then that only the wise men were suitable to associate with. But how wrong I was."

"She sang — oh how she sang, such a melody as would make your heart

burst with happiness. It was that kind of song that she sang that day. It belonged to everyone, for it was made of everything, but in my mind I knew that she meant it only for me."

"Yet then, Saltrio, my dearest friend, the one who would never betray me, came into our special place. He listened to her song, and had the audacity to fall in love with her! He profaned her with his foul lips, in the most gruesome way possible! I had no alternative. You understand, don't you?" he asked, almost pleading. Cyrus made no reply.

His manner turned harsh once again. "I need no justification. I was right! I have always been right. Now," he said, hoisting Micael's prone form onto his shoulder, "it's time for me to rectify this little injustice." He went the remainder of the way to the disc in rapid strides, slinging the child to the ground again like a sack. "Move, boy! I have business with your dear little Flower Maiden."

Cyrus assumed a defensive posture. "I won't allow you to go any further!"

"It's far too late for you to stop me. No one can come to your aid now. I've... taken care of Saltrio. It was quite a simple matter to daze him, in fact; the people in your little Norven had no idea how to break the spell. What a shame that no one tried to contact him from the Accademia. Why, they might even have been able to restore him! But he has remained trapped there for months, and all the while you never even suspected that not all was well."

Saltrio incapacitated! This devious wretch had conquered even Master Saltrio in his underhanded fashion. The boy had to try very hard to restrain his anger and prevent himself from lashing out in a blind rage.

"In any case, there is no way that you could best me, even if you used all the powers at your disposal. For I possess the boy Micael, and he will be powerless to resist me once I wake him from this slumber. You see, I have the power to muddle men's minds, and the limit of my power is only set by their strength. Arturo did not succumb to the more insidious of my control, but no one has ever resisted my daze. In any case, the little brat's confidence has only recently been boosted. He's lived all his life as a forgotten little boy; one little success won't be enough to give him the power to resist."

"It can't be!"

"Ah, but it is. Observe!" He waved a hand over the child's head, and he stood up slowly, his eyes the same as when they had first met; forlorn and despairing as ever. His movements were stiff and jerky, as if he were a puppet. "He is mine, now. Come, Micael. It is time for you to give me the power for which I have waited so long. Do it now!"

The little boy looked blankly at Cyrus, making no movement. It seemed that some memory was struggling to resurface in the poor child's mind, but he was still incapable of breaking out of the trance.

"Don't listen to him, Micael! You've got to break free of his trap, I know you can do it. Don't let yourself be taken in by his deceitful tricks! You are

not Kamril's thrall."

Slowly, the youth began to speak. "But... Mother..."

"That's right," Kamril said in an irresistibly compelling voice. It was hard to doubt the owner of the voice, but Cyrus was not taken in for an instant. In a hypnotic monotone, he whispered, "You killed her, you were too weak to take care of her, you never gave her what she needed..."

A tear slipped from the boy's eye. "Mother..."

"He's lying, Micael! Kamril killed her, not you! He was responsible for putting you out, you weren't at fault at all! You mustn't listen to him any more!"

"Don't pay him any attention, little one. Your mother died because of you, and it won't be alright ever again unless you give me more power. If you do, she'll come back to life for you! Can't you just see her standing before you? She's calling you now, telling you to help me, and then she'll come back. She's waiting," he whispered in a voice smooth as silk.

Cyrus spoke, and his words slashed through Kamril's murmurings like a knife. "Your mother would have wanted you to stand up for yourself, not give yourself over to the treacherous scheming of such an evil man. You're not just a tool to be used, you're a person of your own! Now stop this madness and do what Elena told you to: be strong!"

Suddenly, it was as if a chain had snapped. At the mention of his mother's name, Micael had started to look up and travel out of the haze into which the mage had placed him. Now, he had regained full control of his body. He ran over to Cyrus and hugged him fiercely. The older boy patted him on the back, and stood up to face Kamril directly.

The wicked magician spat at his feet. "Curse you! It makes no difference. I will defeat you here and now, and the little boy will be helpless but to obey me in your absence. Prepare to die!"

He began to concentrate a massive blast of wind energy, intending to slice him in the same way that he had Iris' lamented priestess. Cyrus wasted no time, however, and directed as much power as he could into hurling him backwards by the force of the earth. Unexpectedly, he redirected the wind into creating a shield around him, deflecting the earth blast harmlessly.

"Did you really believe that I would be so weak as to be destroyed by what little you can harness of the Maidens' powers?" he asked tauntingly. "Try again, boy. If you can!"

Kamril directed the cutting wind towards the youth, and it was now Cyrus' turn to defend himself against the oncoming thrust. He emulated the wicked mage's method, blocking the wind with a wind shield of his own.

"I'm not so weak as you would care to think!"

"It doesn't matter. My wind barrier can deflect anything you send at it, and your power is much less than mine in any case, though you may have a few more tricks to perform than I do. This fight is already decided, my young friend."

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?"

"Micael's on my side."

The boy grasped his arm, and willed for him to have as much power as possible. He began to feel the current of it surging through him, and he was imbued with tremendous energy in an instant. The boy fainted from the exertion, unable to deal with any more challenge that day.

"Micael!" Yet seeing the boy sleeping peacefully, he could not bring himself to wake him up the poor child, and tucked him safely away into a niche by one of the temple's pillars, before returning to the matter at hand. Now, the playing field had been leveled quite nicely, and he prepared to take on the wicked mage.

"It's time to fight in earnest. Get ready!"

He soared towards the wicked mage, tackling him in a blow whose strength was increased tenfold by the application of earth energy into his fists. Kamril was knocked backwards onto the temple's steps. and struggled to his feet with no small difficulty. He wiped a bit of blood off his chin and smiled.

"So you want to be serious, eh? Well, come and have a taste of what a real battle is!"

The mage rose up into the air on a gust of wind, and assumed a fighting stance. Cyrus did the same, and they rushed at each other with immense speed and force, each trying to knock the other into submission. After several passes which were misses on both sides, they faced each other in the air, breathing heavily from exertion and watching their breath like fog before their faces.

"So, you can match me at that game. But will you be able to counter against this?"

Kamril made a series of intricate gestures, and a sphere of wind began to collect around him and close in to crush him. This was the kind of technique that Westinia had taught him during his stay at the Accademia, and he knew precisely how to counter it. Seeking out the pathways of energy which the man was manipulating to create the crushing sphere, he made a few deft alterations in their flow and all of the slowly collecting energies were spread out uselessly in all directions. The mage cursed him before retreating slightly to reconsider his strategy.

Cyrus did not grant him the reprieve that he desired. Coming forward to close the distance between them, he prepared another strike, this time utilizing his water energy. The massive ocean and ice floes which surrounded them due to the polar location provided plenty of raw material for him to draw on, and he had soon collected a sizeable quantity of water. His plan was simple; distract the mage by throwing ice needles at him, then hitting from behind with a fire blast.

He put the first part into action, hurling the frozen droplets at his front in a torrential gust. This had little effect, however, for the mage had extended

his shield forward and blocked all of them well before they had a chance to reach him. The fire behind him similarly failed to penetrate the wind shield.

If he could not defeat Kamril with physical contact or diversionary tactics, it was time to return to his roots. Earth magic was irresistible, and could easily penetrate through any form of protective barrier. But how to get him to return to the ground? He thought feverishly while the mage taunted him.

"What's this, boy? Your little plan failed? How sad. A pity you couldn't put up more of a fight than that."

Feigning rage, the boy rushed at him, but instead of striking from the side he flew above and forced the mage downward with a powerful wind blast, which took him by surprise enough to knock him down momentarily. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Cyrus summoned up a tremendous quantity of earth energy, and directed it in one forceful blow towards the downed magician in the form of a seismic disturbance. The earthquake smote Kamril's body like a collision with a brick wall, and he was for the first time in the battle injured by the boy's efforts. He attempted to stand up, but fell again and laughed hysterically.

"Is that it, then? How ridiculous. I've been bested by a mere child. But I'll still have my revenge!"

The boy walked over to where the magician lay, and regarded him gravely for a few moments as he continued ranting incoherently. It would be so easy now to end his life and make him pay for all the suffering he had caused. But no. In a way, his entire life had been suffering since he had made the fatal mistake of falling in love with the wrong woman. There was no hatred in his heart towards the man, only pity. He made restraints using his earth powers, and ensured that he would remain stationary while he tended to Micael.

Walking over to where he had placed the boy, he attempted to rouse him gently. "Micael, wake up, please." Opening his eyes, Micael smiled gratefully at Cyrus standing over him.

"Thank you, Cyrus. It's because of you that I was able to realize my true strength."

"I thank you more than all, because you taught me something important. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes, but all that we can do is try to make them right. I never told you, but I knew a boy like you when I was younger. I never did anything to help him, and I could never stop feeling guilty for letting him stay so alone like that. I guess you were my second chance... but there's one more thing we need to do. Iris is still in trouble. Will you help me? It could be dangerous."

Micael nodded emphatically, grinning. "And what you just did wasn't?"

They both laughed, but grew serious as he explained the situation with Iris to Micael.

"So you want me to go into her dream, and see if I might be able to help her?"

"Yes. I did it before, but she'll need someone to join with permanently."

I... I can't ask you to do this. It's too much."

"You want me to join with her?"

"I wanted to, but it's not something that I have any right to decide. It comes down to you."

"Can I talk to her?"

"Just lie on the disc there, and try to sleep. You'll be connected with her. But listen, if you get scared or decide you want to stop, just wake yourself up. I'm sure she'll understand."

He nodded, and clambered up onto the disc, closing his eyes.

"Good luck," Cyrus said softly.

Everything around him was darkness. Yet within it he could sense the movements of a vast, mysterious being, her many thought-pictures flickering at him through the void.

*Iris?* he asked wordlessly, in a manner as natural as thinking to himself.

*Yes, she replied. Why is it that I can understand you so easily? Everything has become clear to me again. With the other, it was very confused.*

*I think I know how you feel more, is all. Cyrus hasn't really lost anyone before.*

*Ah... I am sorry about your mother.*

*Don't worry about it. I think she'd be happy to see me as I am now.*

*Would you be... agreeable to... but I suppose it is highly irregular...*

*Become your counterpart? Sure.*

*It would be the first male to join with one of the flowers.*

*There's a first time for everything. Besides, you can see how easy it is for us to talk. It's like how it was with Maria.*

*You know, that is the first time I have been able to think of her without suffering. Perhaps we both need each other. Am I to be your Elena, and you my Maria?*

*Why not?*

Cyrus was growing anxious, wondering what precisely was occurring in Iris' vast dreamworld. Unexpectedly, Micael arose from the disc looking curiously different. Cyrus peered at his eyes, and realized that they had turned into fantastic gems of infinite colors. He cried out in wonder upon seeing how the boy had been transformed.

"How can this be?"

"Both of us decided that we'd be better off together. We are now Iris. Ah, it is so wonderful to be together at last! It seems now that neither of us were really complete without the other." The youth who was no longer a youth stepped down off the disc with an air of regality, and it descended swiftly into the dais below it.

"Now, it's time to put right all the damage we have caused."

Closing his/her eyes, the dual entity focused intently on the entire world at once, reverting to the primeval awareness which Iris favored for such efforts.

*Gently drifting clouds overlooked the green, vibrant and thriving earth. All of the energies that Iris had blindly consumed in her lost state, she now restored to the globe in the form of a soft sparkling mist which came from everywhere and*

*infused itself with all life on the planet. The immense quantities of sunlight that she had drawn away from her grandmother, she now returned, and the bright flow of a starry river flowed outward from the planet towards the glowing globe of the sun, restoring her to her former potency and brilliance. Relieved at last of the terrible sapping of her energies, the mother resumed her part in the dance with even greater delight than before, and everything felt overjoyed at this new event.*

Returning to the present, Cyrus gawked as he could actually see the sun regaining its former strength. He was immensely gratified that at long last, the mission which he had worked so hard to accomplish was achieved, with the help of all those he had met along the way.

Noting a new presence approaching, the new Iris peered with his/her marvelous eyes towards the south, and remarked, "Someone is coming to see you," smiling mysteriously.

"Who?" he asked in bemusement.

"You'll see," he/she said with a grin.

Anxious to see who was arriving, Cyrus rushed outside to look on. Approaching through the maze of ice floes, he saw the hermit from the Ilesian forest who had revealed the secret of his music box. He hailed the man down, and met him at the edge of the frigid waters.

"Cyrus! Oh, Cyrus. I was coming to help you, but it seems that I am already too late," he chuckled. "Your friend has merged with Iris, I see. Then all the tasks have been completed, it seems. Except for one, which is my own."

"I... you remember how I told you of the woman I left so cruelly? After I met you, I decided that the time for cowardice was over, and returned to apologize to her as best I could. I arrived to her village to find that one of the Accademians had been stricken with some kind of strange enchantment, from which I freed him. But later, when I met her, she told me that she had borne a son. My shame doubled again, but she forgave me immediately, glad that I had at last come back. But my guilt remains, for the one person whose forgiveness was even more important wasn't there to judge."

"The forgiveness of that son... you. My son," he said, savoring the taste of the words he had never before uttered.

Cyrus was completely stunned. He was at a loss for words. His father? He had been without one for all the time he could remember. His eyes were stung with joyful tears.

"I forgive you, Father. Oh, you are pardoned a thousand times!" he exclaimed, embracing him tightly.

"I think that, at last, it is time for both of us to go home."

Cyrus went back one last time to hug the child who was not a child, and bid farewell to him properly.

"You're happy this way, both of you?"

He/she smiled. "Of course. It is an experience which has already made both of us greater in stature. We thank you for all that you have done to bring us together."

"It was the least I could do. But I almost forgot! What will you do with Kamril?"

Iris regarded him where he lay unconscious on the ground with a compassionate expression. "We will make him forget all the suffering he has undergone. In time, he will be suitable to become the Gardener for Rallia once again. In the meantime, go! Be with your family. All will be well from now on."

"You know how much it's meant to me. Farewell!"

"You'll have to visit sometime," Iris said slyly. "Or, perhaps we will visit you. We are, after all, everywhere."

"Good bye!"

He boarded the boat, and the two set off on the long trip home. But it would not nearly be as long as the trip they had taken going out. Any adventure, it seemed, was always much longer than one intended it to be.

Upon his arrival back in the village of Norven, Fiella was in the yard of their cottage stringing up the washing to dry in the summer sun. The sweet scent of the air reminded him of the very different day in autumn when he wanted so desperately to leave. Now, however, there was no place he would rather be in the whole of the world. His mother turned and saw the pair of them, dropping her bundle and rushing towards them with joy. He thought he heard a child's voice singing high and sweetly upon the wind; it was gone in an instant, yet there was no regret in its passing. As the sun shone merrily upon their embrace, Cyrus was at last glad to be home.