



_____ The City of Factories _____

With his immaculately polished shoes, carefully preened suit and even more carefully preened moustache, Jaime Milton was the last person one would expect in the sooty factory city of Midgard. His father, Lord Milton, Sr., a great wobbly man with fat flapping fingers like purple bananas, was a close second.

It was a brilliant June morning and the Floating City of Midgard was alight with life. Jaime walked through the weathered cobblestone streets and watched as houses flung their windows and doors open, lapping in the sunlight. Jaime had not been here for two years and yet Midgard, the City of Factories, was exactly as he had remembered. There were rows of cosy homes huddled together, tightly packed into the little street as high rising billows of smoke sailed into the sky. The cobblestones of rose-tinged granite underfoot were boisterous and uneven and Jaime had to be extra careful so as not to fall over as racing children zoomed past, chasing one another furiously through the street. Some were covered in soot whilst others were rosy clean; however, he noted, all were breathless.

Jaime Milton couldn't help but smile.

"What are you smirking about?" barked Lord Milton, Sr. as

his son pushed him through the streets in a beautiful silvery wheelchair.

“Just thinking about the first time I came to Midgard,” replied Jaime. “It was a...”

“I didn’t ask!” announced Lord Milton, Sr., brandishing his polished walking cane. “Always answering questions I didn’t ask! And stop your smiling! There’s no reason to smile!”

“But there’s always a reason to smile,” said Jaime as they made their way down the bustling street. Children chasing one another stopped suddenly in front of Lord Milton, Sr. and grinned at the frail old man. In response, Lord Milton, Sr. roared and attempted to beat them back with his fine walking cane, causing the children to flee, quite terrified as Lord Milton, Sr. made a sound not unlike that of a charging elephant.

“Children! Everywhere! These are terrible times indeed when children run amok!” he wailed, flailing in his wheelchair. “No discipline! No sir! When did they allow children that small off their leashes?”

Jaime considered this. “I’m not sure there was a time when children were put on leashes.”

“And a terrible shame it is!” lamented Lord Milton, Sr. “Children! I tell you when I was a child, I knew discipline! Yes sir! My father beat me till I was a shade off death! And you know what I did after he was done? *I asked for more!* Yes! And what’s more I never dared leave the house without my leash! Wouldn’t dream of it!”

“Yes, father,” said Jaime as he wondered if his father had ever truly been put on a leash. It brought quite an absurd image of Lord Milton, Sr. as the prize pedigree at a dog show puffing out his chest and wagging his tail haughtily. This had the effect of making Jaime want to laugh and feel terribly guilty, all at the same time.

Jaime himself hailed from Gardarel, the realm of the Kingdom Lights—though that was half a world away. He had come to Midgard two years previously with some trepidation as an emissary from Gardarel and though he hadn’t been entirely

sure what to expect, what he had not expected was to fall in love.

They reached their destination at the end of the street, coming to a house that stood a little while away on a hillock. It was a small house that seemed slightly wonky, its chimney stack angled out as though one good gust of wind would send the whole thing toppling over. Jaime pushed open the small red gate and entered the garden, where a swing breezed gently, worn from years of use and yet as sturdy as the day it had been built. All was still. The children had disappeared, chasing one another elsewhere and only the billows of smoke that puffed from the chimney stack suggested anyone was at home. Jaime took a deep, contented breath.

“Well, don’t just stand there!” barked Lord Milton, Sr., his wobbly knees struggling as he heaved himself from his wheelchair and wrestled valiantly on to his walking cane. “Knock on the blasted thing!”

A bright red door greeted Jaime. He rapped upon it as Lord Milton, Sr. wobbled beside him impatiently. Moments later the door flew open and a tumble of dark hair greeted him.

“Jaime!” exclaimed his wife embracing him, whilst in one arm slept Jaime’s son, Sam.

“Cyra,” he said softly and without another word was led quickly inside.

“Oh, yes!” exclaimed Lord Milton, Sr. loudly. “I’m not here! Nobody help me! I’m not ninety years old after all!”

A small girl came to the door who was no older than nine with hair as dark as her Aunt Cyra. She gave Lord Milton, Sr. a toothy grin.

“Hello, Granddad!” said the little girl jollily, hugging the frail old man.

“How many times!” wailed Lord Milton, Sr. as he attempted to extricate himself from the little girl’s clutches. “Alexia, I am not your grandfather!”

“Yes, Granddad,” said Alexia dutifully as she took the old man’s hand and led him inside.

The house Jaime's wife had grown up in was cluttered and with low ceilings and barely enough room to turn around. But even so, Jaime had always liked it here. He had always believed that there were deep and astounding secrets to be found just beneath every mountain of abandoned clutter and every pile of dirty socks.

Stooping as he did, Jaime entered the front room where, looking as though she were half-asleep, was Cyanna Vale, his wife Cyra's sister, reclining softly in a worn armchair. Jaime's sister-in-law was plainer of face than her sister but still she glowed even now despite her exhaustion. In her lap was little Marine, sleeping unaware and beside her was another baby, smaller and newer looking. His eyes were tightly closed and as it happened, this particular baby had yet to actually open them. By the fire his own son, only months old, was fast asleep in his mother's arms, with the four-year-old Manon looking up with wide, yearning eyes.

With one hand firmly in Alexia's and another on his fine walking cane, Lord Milton, Sr. came through the door and lumbered into a particularly squashy armchair beside the fire, plopping himself down so hard he disappeared into the furniture. After some struggling, Alexia managed to help Lord Milton, Sr. out of the armchair's kraken-like clutches. Never flustered, Lord Milton, Sr. shook his grizzly head and settled in comfortably.

"Where's my grandson!" he barked, scouring the room until his gaze fell upon Sam as sleepy Cyanna stirred.

"Jaime," she said smiling.

"Cyanna." Jaime's eyes trailed to the youngest of her children. His eyes were screwed tightly shut and there was a tuft of hair upon his head, black as ravens. "This is him?"

"This is him," agreed Cyanna shifting carefully, so as not to awaken her children. Cyra crept beside her sister and murmured a soft whisper. Cyra looked peeved though Cyanna's only answer was to wave her away, looking as exhausted as ever.

“Why’s his face all squashed like that?” asked Manon, making an odd expression. She raced forwards but Alexia grabbed her sister before she could make much progress, clutching at her tightly.

“That’s what all babies look like,” Alexia told her. “You looked just the same when you were born.”

“Have you thought of a name yet?” asked Jaime.

Everyone looked puzzled, which Jaime took to mean that they had not. Manon then had many suggestions but Jaime wasn’t sure that many of them were names. Or words. Or things to be said in polite company.

“Where did you learn to say that?!” asked Alexia but Manon was still struggling away and did not appear to have heard her elder sister.

After chiding her young daughter on her less than lady-like tongue, Cyanna looked pensive. After a moment she turned to her sister.

“I think you should name him,” she said. “After all, you are his favourite aunt.”

But Cyra Milton gave no sign that she had heard her sister. For a moment Jaime wondered if she would answer at all, but slowly and with a small reluctance she did.

“Celes,” said Cyra. “His name is Celes.”

“What a namby-pamby name!” dismissed Lord Milton, Sr. loudly, waving away the suggestion with a flap of his banana-like fingers.

Cyanna gazed at her son. “Celes?” she whispered.

“Celes,” stated Cyra again in a fiery sort of way.

“I think that’s a wonderful name!” said Alexia, forgetting to hold onto Manon who, seizing her opportunity at last, dashed forward.

The young daughters crowded around their mother and the rest of the family—except for Lord Milton, Sr. who was quite comfortable where he was. Manon touched the tip of Celes’s pink nose, Alexia quickly snatching her away while Marine still slept peacefully beside her brother. Lord Milton, Sr.

complained loudly that Celes was a girl's name, but no one was paying him much attention at that moment...not even Jaime, who as always was a most dutiful son.

Midnight fell. Celes slept soundly in a fine oaken crib, a gift from his Uncle Jaime. The crib was decorated beautifully with bounding magical creatures Celes had yet to know the names of carved onto it. He slept alone in the nursery that had once belonged to each of his sisters in turn, the walls decorated with grinning stars and wide-eyed moons that shone like pale protectors in the dark. There was no sound, no stirring, nothing but for the small breaths of the baby himself.

A low rattle sounded and then all was still. And then, once more, another faint rattle.

If Celes had been able to look up at that particular moment, had he been able to hold his head up at all, he would have seen the large wicker doors vibrating ever so slightly. He would have seen the handle begin to turn on the door and watch as the large wicker doors opened, inviting in the soft shimmering moonlight.

A man appeared as if from nowhere—if a man is indeed what he was. With his attire, this man was very odd looking indeed, dressed in a thick black cloak that draped him from head to toe. The man landed lightly—as he had been floating and from the looks of it he was quite good at this—in Celes's room, and with a small movement of his hand the wicker doors behind him closed gently. He took a step forward and bathed himself in the soft, shimmering moonlight. This man was old. He was so very old, in fact, it was a wonder he moved so sprightly at all. His face was traced with scars obscured behind wisps of white hair that he had allowed to grow into a small pointed beard of silvery whiskers. It gave him a somewhat majestic look, like a wizened old lion.

Treading lightly so as not to awaken the child, the old man moved forward, bending all the way down to the crib.

"Hello," he whispered. "My name is Arthur. I promise I mean you no harm," he raised his hands in a sign of peace. "This will only take a moment and then I shall leave you to your rest."

Arthur took the little baby's breaths as a reply and nodded. Carefully he laid a hand upon Celes's head. Arthur's hands were soft as new kittens, something that he greatly prided himself upon, and did not cause the child to stir in the slightest.

Arthur's eyes fluttered to a close and when he opened them again, they blazed crimson like dark rubies shining fiercely in the gloom of the nursery. And there he remained, immobile with one hand on Celes. He said not a word, nor did he move. In fact, to anyone watching this strange scene it would not appear as though Arthur were doing anything at all. But he *must* have been doing something, for after a few moments the sprightly old man had removed his hand from the newborn.

"Interesting," muttered Arthur to no one in particular, touching his silvery beard. "Well, no need to draw these things out." He stood himself up and with a small flick of his hand, the large wicker doors behind him were opened once more. Arthur stepped out onto the balcony and smoothed out his dark cloak.

"Goodbye, Celes Vale," he whispered. "I shall see you again." And with that Arthur faced the starlit night, his dark cloak shimmering and dancing like mercury behind him. Then the old man was gone, quite as suddenly as he had appeared.

The night air bristled against him cold and refreshing as Arthur flew through the skies, the few stars above illuminating his way through the expansive clouds that appeared before him like great ice-topped palaces. But he could not have travelled more than a few streets when he stopped with such a strange abruptness it was as though he had struck an invisible wall. His cloak continued to billow around him as he remained immobile in the skies. After perhaps a moment's pause, the old man began to slip from the skies sharp as a stone, graceful as a feather till his feet found the cobblestones of the street below.

A tabby cat sat sentinel upon a wall and eyed the strange new arrival beadily. Arthur regarded the cat politely who continued to watch him before deciding he was no threat at all and proceeded to slink back into the shadows to continue his hunt for the night.

Arthur cleared his throat, his fingers woven placidly before him.

"I am not accustomed to being followed," he said, his calm voice sailing in the stillness of the hour. The street was quite deserted. His brow furrowed. "You may reveal yourself, Cid. Come, we have more pressing issues than for you to play hide-and-seek."

A flat tile fell from the roof above and smashed resoundingly upon the cobblestones below. A second later a man bounded down, landing with a spring before getting up abashedly.

"I wanted to know where you were going," said the young man quickly, dusting himself off. His blue eyes shone palely in the moonlight and his auburn hair jostled in the wind. Despite the lateness of the hour the young man appeared quite alert.

"And now you know," replied Arthur. "I was on my way to see you in any case but it seems you have found me."

Cid looked nervous. Whether or not he wished to inquire more on Arthur's midnight travels, he quickly dismissed the issue. "What news from Gardarel?" he asked.

"I see you wish to get right to the heart of things." When Cid did not reply, Arthur continued. "The Senate has passed its judgment."

They looked an odd sight, the two men standing in the middle of the street. But the street was quite deserted aside for the tabby cat that prowled the alley behind them and the rather frightened mouse attempting to evade him.

Distantly, Arthur heard a cat screech. "Lord Lyons has been sentenced to life imprisonment in Prospekt."

Cid narrowed his eyes darkly. This did not appear to be welcome news.

“Lyons is too dangerous to remain alive!” said Cid furiously. “He brought Gardarel to its knees and would have brought ruin to us all had he not been stopped! He tore families apart, so many innocent lives...”

“And *many* more would have been lost had you and your remarkable friends not stopped him,” cut in Arthur, but not unkindly so. He placed a consoling hand on his friend. “Do not begin to think his fate is a welcome one. The prison at the roof of the world is surrounded by unforgiving ice, shearing blizzards and desolate wastes of snow that stretch for many leagues. No one has ever escaped Prospekt, not in seventy years.”

“Then he shall be the first,” announced Cid sharply. “When he does, you know as well as I, the Wardens are still out there. They will rally to him.” His voice grew quiet, but sure. “And war shall swiftly follow. No one will be able to stop him.”

A chilly breeze blew. Or perhaps Arthur was just imagining it. “Then let us hope,” he said with an unmistakable finality, “that Lord Lyons does not escape.”

He turned to leave, but Cid quickly stepped before him.

“What were you doing?” he asked. “Who was this boy you saw tonight?”

Arthur saw the intrigue plainly on the younger man’s face. It made him feel even more ancient that he was—and he was quite old, to be sure.

“His name is Celes.”

“And why were you looking for him?”

“That,” said Arthur after a shrewd pause, “is a complicated question to answer.”

“Couldn’t you try to uncomplicate it? For me?”

“Hmmm.” Arthur glanced to the skies, then back the way he had come, to the little house on the hillock with the old swing and the tidy vegetable patch. “Let us simply say that the boy might be...interesting.”

“Interesting?”

“He might be...different.”

“Different?”

“Yes, even dare I say...*special*.”

Over the horizon, the sky was awash with a flurry of pinks and ambers; dawn had begun its approach. The old man took a step away from Cid and faced the swirling flushed skies.

“Alas, I must bid you farewell,” announced Arthur. “Till next we meet, my young friend.” And with a single bound that never truly ended, Arthur leapt to the skies, careening away until he was the merest speck—and then finally nothing. Without waiting for a farewell or an acknowledgement of understanding, the mysterious old man was gone, leaving Cid quite alone and very thoroughly mystified.

Celes himself slept on contentedly. He was quite unaware of his midnight visitor, or the strange way the man’s eyes had glowed. He was unaware that he might be interesting, or different or special. In fact, to Celes Vale at that particular moment, nothing mattered at all.



_____ The Boy who Dreamed _____

The morning was cool, the peeping sunlight chancing and testing as it sought a way through the cream draperies into the Midgardian house. Eleven years had passed since Jaime Milton's visit, but the front room remained as it ever was with the same squashy armchairs, velvet duvets and burnt cinders scattered amongst the fireplace. Only the top of the fireplace was different, where a number of framed photographs were placed, telling the tale of the lives that had been led here.

In one was an eighteen-year-old Alexia draped in a thick blue robe, a scroll clutched in her hand, beaming as her mother embraced her with fierce pride. A second photo showed a ten-year-old Manon stood scappily with one foot over a squealing boy, a smug expression on her face and a small wooden sword clasped firmly in hand. In another, the Vale family posed to have their pictures taken, all of them smiling brightly. The photograph did not, however, show Marine fussing over her hair or Manon running off every few minutes. Nor did it show the youngest Vale attempting to free himself from a beleaguered Alexia, though certainly all of these things had occurred on that warm, sticky day.

The milky dawn had only just begun its transition to morning but even so there was only one Vale who still yet slumbered. His room was much the same as it had ever been, except for the fine oaken crib that had been put aside and replaced with a bed. This bed was currently covered with what appeared to be a thick furry mound, although upon closer inspection it was actually a collection of clothes, soft duvets and sheets piled impressively high. It made for a snug lair and beneath all that, sleeping rather soundly, was Celes Vale himself.

“Wake up!” boomed a shrill voice, awakening the boy with a fumbling start. He peered blurrily, but all he could see was darkness. He blinked again and pushed back some of the covers till his eyes found soft sunlight, only to rumble feebly and pull the covers more tightly around himself.

“Oh no you don’t!” came the voice again as more and more sheets were ripped away. A chilly draft began to settle into his increasingly sparse fortress.

“I’m up,” said Celes unconvincingly. He lay back, closing his eyes, wishing he was back in the dream he’d been having. He couldn’t remember exactly what it had been about, but he knew it had contained magic. Most of Celes’s dreams were about magic.

“Up! Up!”

Finally, his snug fortress gone, Celes emerged bleary-eyed, to see his sister looking at him rather sharply. *That’s not good*, he thought. *She only looks at me like that when she wants me to do something.*

Marine Vale looked far older than her twelve years. She was tall for her age, with deep brown eyes and long dark hair that Celes had often seen her brushing meticulously—and sometimes Celes could even hear her *counting* the strokes. Many said she was pretty and that she looked just like their Aunt Cyra, though Celes had not seen his aunt in years and couldn’t properly remember what she looked like.

Celes himself was eleven and not nearly as tall as his sister.

He was skinny too and seemed to be made entirely of elbows and knees. He had deep brown eyes and his hair was still as black as ravens although always scruffy because he generally forgot to brush it.

“Have you forgotten what today is?” asked Marine impatiently. Celes thought for a moment, but his mind wasn’t fully awake yet...it was still back in that dream though even that was fading now.

“Uncle Jaime and Aunt Cyra are coming to visit today!”

“Oh yeah.” He hadn’t actually forgotten; he just hadn’t been sure what day it was that they were to arrive. Celes wondered how long it had been since he had seen them, but in the end he gave up when he couldn’t remember.

“I have to get this house clean,” continued Marine with a look around Celes’s room. “That means you have to help Mum make deliveries.”

Celes brightened at that; it would give him an excuse to go exploring.

“So make sure you get up!” came Marine’s voice, as she zoomed out the door, her long dark hair trailing, “Mum needs you now!”

Suddenly Celes felt very awake.

The young Vale padded out the front door and zoomed along the cobblestone streets. It was breezy and warm right now, but it was the height of summer and Celes knew the temperature would soon soar.

He knew his way well, and headed down the tightly packed street till he reached the market square. It wasn’t yet midday but the market looked as though it had been opened for hours, with feverish vendors selling their wares from tightly packed stalls. Carts trundled past, splashing through the light puddles of last night’s summer rains as scores of people bustled through clutching heaving bags or eyeing goods longingly with one hand on their coin purse. The air was filled with the clamor of dozens of vendors as they fought for patronage, and the aroma of foods from all over the Floating Cities wafting enticingly. Celes

loved the bustle of the market, and it took all of his willpower to walk past all of them to his mother's stall. There were fine clothes from Gardarel, enchanted books from Pulse, magical crystals from Alexandria and many more.

Celes found his mother at the stall she owned. It was laden with smoked hams, garlic sausages, roasted chickens and a thick spit where the meats were roasting, sizzling and crackling as the juices ran off. Celes's mouth watered when he saw it—he hadn't had breakfast yet.

"Celes!" called his mother, as she cut and packed a side of ham for a customer. She wiped her brow and smiled prettily as the customer left before quickly diving beneath her stall.

"You need me to help with deliveries?" asked Celes eagerly, eyeing the chicken. His mother reappeared from beneath the stall, planting a brown satchel into his outstretched arms.

"This is to go to Mr. Oswell in Spinner's Walk, Mr. Noye at the Forges and old Mrs. Leary in Hadley Street. I've written it down here," she continued giving her son a quick kiss and handing him a crisp note, "in case you forget. Got all that?"

"Yep!"

She smiled and crinkled her nose warmly. "And don't spend too long," she went on in a tone that suggested she was well aware of Celes's love of exploring. "I want you home by sundown, washed and rosy-cheeked to greet your aunt and uncle."

"There and back. Got it," he replied without looking up from the note. Cyanna Vale narrowed her eyes at her youngest child but said no more.

The afternoon passed quickly as the clouds drifted lazily overhead like great roaming herds passing before the pale shine of the sun. Celes decided to make two of his deliveries quickly, and leave the Forge delivery till last. From the market he had walked all along the banks of the outer city, where a promenade of stone surrounded Midgard, protected by high walls to stop the unwary from plunging through sky and heaven

to the Surface World below. The thick walls were often patrolled by the City Watch, though the walls were vast and the Watch too few and far between. The wall could be treacherous as there were places where the stone had become so weathered and cracked that there was nothing but air separating the ground from the sky. Celes knew of one such place where a sliver of a crack had been formed, like a great grey tributary. When the weather was fine and it wasn't too dark, he would come and peer down through what looked to be a great nothingness and wonder what sort of people lived down there.

But not this day. The young Vale was determined to do as he was told and be home by sundown, making his first two deliveries quickly before heading to the Forge.

He came to a huge brown warehouse, making out great plumes of smokes rising from towering granite funnels. There was no one at the open door so he slipped inside quietly where the air was thick and smoky with pumps and hisses sounding from within the murk. There were large vats connected to long pipes in the background, whirring away and everywhere he looked glimmering ruby red crystals winked in the gloom, like pinprick stars. People bustled, wearing dark aprons, but they didn't seem to notice the young boy at all. He checked his note and asked the first man he saw where he could find Mr. Noye. The man pointed vaguely to the back of the factory without taking his eyes off his instrument. Celes frowned but headed through the smoke all the same, trying very hard not to rub his eyes.

"Now you'll be working with me up here and...hey you listening, laddie?" An impressive bull of a man loomed up, broad of chest with thick muscular arms, a dirty apron thrown roughly over his clothes. The young lad to whom he was talking seemed much alarmed at being addressed and jumped when the smith spoke. The towering man frowned. "Hmmm, well we won't have you working just yet; you'll be shadowing me. Flare crystals are dangerous things and...ah who's this then?" he broke off when he noticed Celes.

"I'm making a delivery for Mr. Noye," he said, checking the note again to be sure. He handed the crumpled scrap of paper to the towering man who peered at it.

"Well then, you're in the right place. I'm Mr. Noye. And this is my 'prentice, Peter. Say hello now, laddie. Don't be rude."

"Hello," mumbled Peter.

"Hello," said Celes, placing the last of his goods on the workbench beside them, and being extra careful so as not to knock off any of the delicate looking instruments. "Um, I think it's all here. The bread is still warm, too."

"Good, good. I was gettin' hungry, though I suppose I'm always hungry!" boomed Mr. Noye, laughing heartily. "Didn't you hear me, laddie?" he added glancing at Peter and slapping him on the back. This seemed to only frighten the apprentice even more. "It was only a joke and...oh, never mind," he sighed. Celes grinned.

Celes left, and after a while the sounds of the Forge had echoed away and the crowded streets began to thin. True to his predictions, a warm summer's rain had begun its soft descent, pattering the weathered cobblestones in light smatters and then heavy falls; before long Celes found himself drenched in the drizzle. With a glance up and a quick but sure decision, he began to sprint along the cobblestone street. *It's not that far from home now. I'll just take a few shortcuts and I'll be there in no time*, he thought to himself assuredly.

He held the satchel above his head, trying to keep the worst of the rain off as he scrambled through alleys and streets. Every time he looked up, he was sure he could see a familiar sign or building. The rain was only getting harder and Celes was desperate to get back. He charged on.

But as the shower began to cede, Celes padded to a worried stop. He was lost. *I should have checked the map*, he thought, annoyed at himself. He pulled out the tattered fraying thing, but it was too late: he had no idea where he was. *I have to be home soon to see Uncle Jaime and Aunt Cyra. I have to find my way back somehow...*

Celes was so busy feeling frustrated that at first he didn't notice the soft hum. It was a delicate sound, like crystals swirling in a glass and rather pleasing to the ear. He wondered where it was coming from. There was no one in the street, though, and the houses had their doors and windows firmly shut.

It was coming from the alley and as he moved closer, the sound became a little louder too. Celes frowned. He knew he should get home but he decided he would take a quick look and then he would leave immediately. With a little nod, he headed down the darkened alley.

And it *was* dark—too dark. It was still the middle of the afternoon, but it was as though the light was too nervous to shine here at all. He could hear his own footfalls sounding unnaturally loud in the small space, and in no time at all it was so dark he could see nothing at all. That's when he walked straight into it.

But what was it? Now Celes *knew* he should go back, but his curiosity was getting the better of him, as it so often did. The thing was thick and scraping and when he tried to push it, his hands simply slipped through. He realized it must be some sort of bush, but that was very odd indeed, for a bush to grow here in the dark in the middle of an alley. He pulled his hands back. They were unharmed.

He frowned again. *Okay, I'll just take a quick look on the other side and then I'll go home, definitely*, he promised himself before doing something very rash indeed. The young Vale plunged headfirst into the bush. To be sure, this was a foolish thing to do, but it couldn't have been very thick and he was terribly curious as to what was on the other side.

He had expected there to be resistance, but strangely enough he seemed to simply fall through, like gliding through silken sheets. He went crashing forwards till he found himself upon soft grass lying in a crumpled heap. *Where am I?* thought Celes as his senses were overcome with the sweet scent of a meadow and a strangely warm mist clouding the air.

"Oh," said a voice. "Have you come to keep me company? It's very nice here, but it does get rather lonely."



_____ The Spirit and the Grove _____

The ground beneath him was carelessly soft, the blades of grass silken, the great mist in the air swirling, warming his lungs. As he got to his feet, Celes heard the babble of a stream and even the skies had cleared, turning from a dreary grey to a deep sapphire blue. *But how did I get here, thought Celes, and where is 'here' anyway?*

"This," offered a voice, "is an ancient grove; an old place of magic."

"Who said that?" questioned Celes, warily. He took a step back, his eyes darting from side to side, but no one was there, not another living soul: only trees, grass and that lazy mist hanging in the air.

"Oh, you can't see me," replied the voice. "I'm just a magical spirit, you see."

"A magical spirit?" said Celes. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I did have a body many years ago, but it was taken from me," explained the magical spirit. "I've been here ever since."

Celes wasn't too sure he understood, but since the magical spirit seemed so down, he thought it would be wrong of him to ask.

“That sounds...really awful,” said Celes, thinking he might try to cheer the spirit up. “Why was your body taken away?”

“Oh, they thought I was dangerous,” the magical spirit went on sadly. “I wasn’t, though, truly. And when they couldn’t destroy me, they locked my spirit here. Was a really rotten thing, but I suppose this place isn’t too bad.”

“This is the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen,” agreed Celes truthfully, “and right here in the middle of Midgard! I never knew. My name is Celes by the way, Celes Vale,” he added so as not to be rude.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you Celes, Celes Vale,” said the magical spirit. “It is good to talk to someone again after all this time.” He still sounded rather down.

“How long have you been here?” Celes asked, politely as he could.

“To someone as young as you,” answered the magical spirit replied kindly, “it would seem like a very long time indeed.”

Celes was not sure how to respond to this at all.

“Might I ask how you came upon my grove?” the magical spirit went on. “You must be exceptionally gifted magically to have found me.”

That caught him by surprise. “Well, I was delivering at the Forge, then it was raining and I got lost and...” he realized he wasn’t making sense. “To tell you the truth, I’m not sure exactly. But I...I think you are mistaken; I have no magic at all.”

There was a pause and Celes thought the magical spirit might have been puzzled. He peered into the pearly stream beside him and to his astonishment saw several purple crystals sparkling and shimmering, catching the sunlight in their deep edges.

“There is no mistake, my young friend. You are gifted magically. Though,” continued the magical spirit thoughtfully, “perhaps you are yet to discover this for yourself. How intriguing.”

Celes sat down beside the stream on the long breezy grass and ran his fingers through the crystal waters. “How do you know I have magic?” he asked.

"I'm a magical spirit; I can see it there within you," explained the voice. "Hmm, you really don't know, do you? How strange."

"It's not that strange. Don't you think I'd know if I had magic? It's not something you wouldn't notice now, is it?" He shook his head, splashing the water as he did. "I think you must've made a mistake."

"There is no mistake," said the magical spirit. "Only someone with true magic such as you could have discovered this ancient grove."

"But neither of my parents were magical," insisted Celes, standing up. "I've never shown any kind of magic either. You've made a *mistake*."

There was a long pause. *I've got him there*, thought Celes. *He doesn't know what to say*. Then when he thought the magical spirit had been truly stumped...

"I could show you."

Celes hesitated. "Show me what?"

"I still have power left in me," said the magical spirit. "I could reach into you; I could unlock your powers. You have only to ask and I will show you exactly what you are capable of."

The sentence seemed to linger in the air and Celes shivered. He felt afraid, though he wasn't quite sure why. The sky seemed to darken and the stream grew quieter beside him. He suddenly wondered how much time had passed and remembered where he had been hurrying off to in the first place.

"I...I...thanks, but I have to go," said Celes. "I was supposed to be home ages ago. My Mum will be mad, my Uncle and Aunt are coming, you see, all the way from Gardarel and..."

"I understand," said the magical spirit. "Thank you for visiting me Celes, Celes Vale. I hope to see you again. If you should ever wish to reconsider, you will always be able to find me. I can promise that. It would be easy you know, easier than taking one deep breath."

Celes hurried to find the bush he had pushed through into

the ancient grove. “Thank you, Mr. Spirit. I’ll visit again,” he said. “It was...it was pleasant to meet you,” and with that he stumbled forwards, once more falling through silken nothingness.

With a sharp thud he found himself falling on damp cobblestones. The skies were overcast and the sun had long since fallen. *It’s my own fault*, thought Celes, clambering to his feet. *I’m always exploring and losing track of time. I promised Mum I’d be back before sundown.*

He had expected to find himself back in that alley, but to his surprise he was only a short distance from home. He was so relieved to no longer be lost that he didn’t even wonder how this came to be. But as the exhausted young boy pushed through the bright red door into his homestead, a cloak moved in the darkness.

A man stepped forth, appearing as if from nowhere. Though Celes never saw him, Arthur watched the young boy with a kindly expression. He lingered only for a moment, touching his silvery whiskers before stepping back into the fade of shadows. And moments later as exhausted smiths trudged past on their way home from the Forge, the mysterious figure had disappeared, leaving not a trace of his having been there.

Celes entered his home, his head filled with worries and half-thought-out excuses. To his relief, however, he discovered that his aunt and uncle had not yet come but were instead due to arrive the next day. And when he explained how he’d gotten lost—and it wasn’t *really* lying, because he *had* gotten lost—his mother had given him one of those soft expressions that made him feel queasy and immensely guilty, all at the same time.

After dinner he washed and scrubbed and slipped into bed as gentle notes of music fluttered from the sitting room. The wicker doors were flung wide open and the breeze felt wondrously refreshing, cooling him after his scalding hot scrub. But he couldn’t sleep. His thoughts kept turning back to the magical spirit and his strange remarks. When he came to think of it, he’d never heard of a magical grove or a magical spirit.

From across the hall he saw a light. He hopped from his bed and rapped gently upon the door.

"Come in," said Marine who had changed into striped pajamas. She was brushing her hair the way she always did, with her head tilted to one side and a quiet look of concentration on her face that told Celes his sister was counting the strokes. He sat on her bed and before long his sister had joined him with very straight, very shiny hair.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Have you ever heard of a magical grove or a magical spirit?" he said, jumping straight in.

"No," she replied. "Why?"

"It doesn't...forget it." He shook his head, feeling foolish at once. His sister narrowed her eyes in a way that was reminiscent of their mother and put an arm around her scrawny younger brother.

"I know what this is about. You're nervous about tomorrow, aren't you?"

"I am?" said Celes.

"You're nervous about seeing Sam. You two have never gotten along, even when you were little," she said mussing his hair.

"Oh," said Celes, "*him*." He hadn't even thought about his cousin but now that he did, a small sense of foreboding appeared in the pit of his stomach. Sam Milton was only older than Celes by a few months, but even so they'd never really gotten along.

"He's twelve now; I'm sure he's more grown up," reassured Marine.

"Yeah, you're right," said Celes. It was better she thought that Sam was the thing on his mind rather than...well, he still wasn't quite sure what *had* happened today.

"Who knows, maybe Aunt Cyra will take us to Gardarel," said Marine wistfully. "But now let's go to sleep, put it out of your mind." And she gave him a pat and sent him on his way.

"Night, Sis."

“Good night little brother,” replied Marine as the light flickered off and all he could see was the glimmer of her large brown eyes, before they too disappeared.

He settled into bed, putting the thing out of his mind. *It didn't make any sense*, Celes tried to reassure himself for the hundredth time as he pulled the covers over his head. *I'm just Celes. He was wrong, I don't have magic. I'm just an ordinary boy, just Celes.*

But as the music drifted to a silken quiet and the warmth of the bed overpowered his curious thoughts, he found himself once more falling to dreams of magic and wonder and the possibilities of what could be.



The next morning, the Vale family waited at the foot of the stairs, ready for the new arrivals.

“Stop fidgeting with your collar,” said Marine.

“But it's so tight,” complained Celes, trying to loosen it once more.

“I've told you, it's supposed to be like that. Come on, they're here now,” said Marine, smoothing her hair nervously.

The door swung wide and Celes was caught in a brilliant light, blinding him for a moment as he was hoisted up and clasped heartily on the shoulder.

“Is that my little nephew all grown up?” exclaimed Uncle Jaime. Except for the few greys streaking his bushy brown hair, his uncle was just as he remembered, though Celes was sure he had been taller the last time they had met.

“Hello Uncle Jaime!” he said, smiling brightly. His uncle clasped his hand firmly and when he pulled away, Celes saw two gleaming golden coins in the palm of his hand. Celes was about to say something, but his uncle winked at him and made a shushing motion, so he quickly pocketed them before his mother could see.

Behind his uncle came Aunt Cyra. The first thing Celes realized was that she did indeed look remarkably like Marine and it seemed his sister had realized this too, her eyes growing wide at the sight of her. He had never seen anyone look quite as resplendent as Aunt Cyra, her long hair tied up into an elegant bun.

“Cyanna,” greeted Aunt Cyra, kissing his mother on both cheeks. “It has been far too long, the house looks...well.”

“Your words are of shocking kindness, sweet sister,” said Celes’s mother with a wry smile.

“Was it always this small?” said Aunt Cyra airily. “I’ve grown so used to the Milton Estate. I’d quite forgotten that people still live in such...*cramped* conditions.”

“Hush now, Cyra. The house looks wonderful. And your children are all grown up, I see!” said Uncle Jaime with a warm look at Celes and his sister. Marine beamed.

“They do all the growing themselves, Jaime, if you’d believe,” said his mother kissing Uncle Jaime’s cheek. “And where is your own son? Where’s my handsome Sam?”

“Right here, Aunt Cyanna,” and right on cue, Sam Milton himself appeared. He had lost the puppy fat since the last time Celes had seen him and was taller than him, too. He favoured his father’s colourings over his mother’s with deep auburn hair that grew long to his shoulders and a fringe almost to his eyes. “I’ve missed you,” he said warmly to his aunt.

“And I you, my little nephew,” said Celes’s mother hugging him. He was almost as tall as she was. “My how you’ve grown, Sam! You’ll have to tell me all about how you’ve been getting along.”

“I’ve been getting along well, Aunt, in fact,” Sam quickly turned to look to his mother who gave him the slightest nod of approval, “I’ve got some news.”

“Oh, what news is this?” asked Marine. Sam’s face lit up, pausing for dramatic effect though Celes had the strong suspicion his cousin had rehearsed this. *He looks like he needs the loo*, he thought, wondering what the news could be.

“My magic has shown itself,” announced Sam. “I’m an Invoker!”

There was a moment of silence wound tight as a spring. Uncle Jaime looked on proudly. Marine’s mouth gaped open.

“That’s...that’s wonderful news!” exclaimed Celes’s mother.

“My darling boy,” said Aunt Cyra, clasping her hands over Sam. “Takes after his father. He’ll be a great man one day, I know it.”

There was feverish talk as they bustled into the kitchen for lunch, but it seemed to Celes to be coming from a great distance. He knew he should be happy for Sam—he was, after all, Celes’s cousin. But all he could think was how he would have given almost *anything* to have been an Invoker himself.

The adults moved to the kitchen leaving the two of them alone. Sam drew up to his cousin. “Um, congratulations,” said Celes.

“Thanks,” replied Sam. “I’m not surprised, though. My father is a great man, you know. I knew I’d be an Invoker: it’s in my blood.” He gave Celes a haughty stare. “What did *your* father do again?”

“He was a smith,” replied Celes, his mouth becoming as dry as sand.

“Oh yeah,” said Sam shrugging. “Well, I’m sure you’ll make a great *smith* one day. We can’t all be great men now, can we? That’d be silly, wouldn’t it?” Then with a slap on the back that was just a little too hard, Sam swaggered away leaving Celes alone in the corridor feeling, if possible, even more hollow than he had moments ago.