

Chapter 1 -- Welcome to Edara

Cyrus

*Even now, I'm only sure about three things.
I'm alive. I'm eventually going to die.
And my name is Cyrus Delgami.*

I had a dream that someone was watching me. There wasn't much else to it, not a full vision, as dreams rarely are, but there was a distinct feeling that someone, somewhere was looking... staring... at *me*.

It was like an itch on the back of my neck, a tingling in my spine, and it said that someone... or *something*... was there.

But for all that I tried to look back, I couldn't see them.

"Who are you?" I remember calling out.

They said nothing.

"*What* are you?" I asked.

Again, no response.

Their silence made me uncomfortable.

"I know you're out there," I said. "Just show yourself."

All of a sudden, emanating out through the silence there was a whistled quartet of notes, beautiful and clear.

High, then high, followed by low, then low.

And then nothing.

I was left alone.

What seemed like ages later, I was awoken by the sound of footsteps on sand approaching me. I didn't remember falling asleep on sand, so that was surprising, and it was even more surprising to suddenly find a pitchfork thrust into my back.

"Gwaaaaaaa!" I shouted, throwing every part of my body around in a single spasm and hearing a gruff gasp of surprise. I snapped up to my feet, ready to run at the slightest provocation.

"Well godtdamn son, what's gotten up in *your* pants?" a man asked, cocking his head to the side. He was tall and built like a bull, a big wide hat on his head, a working man's clothes on, and the offending pitchfork held to the side.

I didn't respond to him immediately, instead taking a moment to look around and assess my surroundings. I was on a narrow beach, only about a dozen yards separating ocean from thick, dense treeline, and with the sun just past noon above me. That was new, actually. We didn't see the sun often back home.

"You alright?" the man asked. I cautiously gave myself a once-over. Nothing out of place, no bleeding wounds, at least not that I could see, and all four limbs still squarely attached to my

body. I was wet though, very much wet, like I'd been in the water.

"I think I'm alright," I responded carefully, rubbing my shirt to check again. Yep, I was definitely covered in water.

"You sure you're alright?" the man asked. "You don't exactly *look* it."

"What, is something wrong with me?" I asked, a little annoyed.

"No, no nothing wrong with ya' just... well, wondering why there's a soakin' wet man lying on the beach in the middle of nowhere," he said.

Well, wasn't that the question of the day. Nothing seemed familiar about this place.

"Honestly I have no idea why I'm here," I said. "Where are we?"

"Slantshore, nearabouts to Sunsetton," he responded.

Hmmmmmm.

"I have no idea where any of those places are," I replied. "Any big cities nearby I'd recognize?"

He rattled off a few but nothing rang a bell.

"Well look son, you're on the Western coast of Edara," he offered. "Does that help at all?"

I shook my head, a little bit concerned. I had never even *heard* of a place called Edara.

"Boy, where are you from?" the man asked.

"Where am I from?" I repeated.

"You heard me," he said.

"Valgardia," I answered.

Apparently that was the wrong answer. I saw his eyes squint again, and he took a half-step back.

"Ha ha boy. Now where are you really from?" he asked.

"Valgardia," I repeated, giving him a step back and slanted look of my own.

"Yeah, I heard your little joke the first time. Now I want a *real* answer," he said.

"That *was* a real answer. I *am* from Valgardia, and I mean, of all people wouldn't I know?" I said.

"Valgardia. *Valgardia*? You honestly expect me to believe you're from Valgardia?" he demanded.

I thought for a moment. I was at least, like, 95, 98 percent sure that I was from where I remembered being from my entire life. Did people lie about that a lot?

"Um, yes, I *do* expect you to believe that I'm from Valgardia?" I said, going for honesty.

"Yeah, and I'm a pig with wings," he spat.

"Well you're obviously *not* a pig with wings..." I said.

"Yeah, and you *ain't* from Valgardia," he responded sarcastically.

"Okay... well let's just agree to disagree on that point and I'll get on with my business," I said. "I was doing just fine before you got here and I'm pretty sure I'm doing fine now."

"You're fine now?" he asked. Once again I looked around, before giving him a shrug.

"Yeah, well I don't know why I wouldn't be," I replied.

"Where the hell are you gonna go?" he asked.

"I don't know, back to *Valgardia* if that's okay with you," I said, before talking a half step back towards the water.

"Boy you don't need my permission to go, but do you have any idea the direction you're supposed to be headed in?" he asked.

The man saw my face go from frustrated to suddenly *very* confused and laughed to himself.

"You're up shit creek with no paddle ain't ya boy," the man said, laughing. "Hell, you even know what your damn name is?"

"Cyrus Delgami," I answered.

"Cyrus Whozawhatsit?" he asked.

"Cy-rus Del-ga-mi," I said. "That's my name."

"Cy-rus Del-ga-mi," he repeated.

"Yes, that's right," I said.

"Strange-ass name," he said.

"What?" I asked. It was my name, so I'd never thought it strange before. But before I could even process what he'd said or try to raise an argument back, the man spoke again.

"Well then let's get goin' Mr. 'Cyrus Delgami' of 'Valgardia,'" he said, nodding further up the beach.

I looked where he had pointed, finding a wagon tied to two horses.

"Get going?" I asked.

"Well, into town. I'll give you a quick ride, get you pointed in the right direction, see if you can't figure out where the hell you are," he said, very matter of factly.

I was caught off guard by the sudden kindness.

"You'd do that for some random stranger?" I asked.

"Wouldn't any man?" he responded with a shrug. "It's sure better than havin' some crazy kid walk into the woods and die alone."

"Is that my only other option?" I asked, looking at the forest beyond the road. For the first time I recognized an eeriness to it, a wild force that seemed to breathe out of the trees even from here.

Almost without realizing it I felt myself take another half-step backwards. Bram had gone quiet too, and when he finally spoke again there was an edge to his voice, the first uncertainty I'd heard since I'd met him.

"No, no way. People who go in there they don't come back out. I seen a few. Seen a few tried to brave it, thought they were clever... not a single one came back out. And I sure as hell ain't gonna let some confused boy, washed up on the beach get lost in there and die within fifteen minutes of me meetin' him. You ain't goin' in that forest, 'least not while I can help it," he said. After a moment he shook his head, taking a deep breath in and out before turning back towards the horses.

"No, our move is towards Sunsetton," he said. "Them horses is fine girls so they should handle the extra weight alright. I don't want you thinkin' this is some sorta free lunch though. I'll need a little help here and there while we're traveling, and a little more once we get to Sunsetton, but if you can do that we'll call it square. I'll need your word, but I'll trust ya if you'll trust me."

"Of course, that's more than fair," I said. "That's very generous of you."

"Well, I don't know about generous, but it sounds like we got ourselves a deal," he said. "Now come on, let's get goin'."

"Wait!" I said, as he started to walk away.

"I never got your name," I said. His eyes twinkled.

"I appreciate that, boy," he said. "My name's Bram, Bram Cooper."

He offered a big hand, which I shook.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Bram,” I said.

“Likewise Mr. Delgami,” Bram said. “Likewise.”

And with that, we headed up towards the horses and made our way off towards Sunsetton.