

Chapter I — The Encounter

It was a lazy Sunday afternoon. White billowing clouds slowly meandered across the deep blue sky. Marcos gazed thoughtfully into space. Marc's Bellview villa stood at the edge of Whitegate, a suburb of Metro. Beyond his second story balcony stretched the gently rolling hills of green that formed the East Range. Not quite mountains, these hills marked the eastern edge of West Flats, a large, fairly flat land that sloped uniformly to the sea. West Flats was bounded on the north and west by the great river, Grenwald, which was nearly a mile wide at Greenside, where it fed the sea. Nestled between Grenwald and the East Range was the huge ancient city of Metro, with its magnificent harbor. In all of Isle, Metro was the biggest city and, in its younger days, the most splendid.

In the olden days when Metro was built, a giant, semi-circular wall or fortification was built around it, the Round. These days, of course, the Round was crumbling — at best, in disrepair. Metro had expanded, being noted as the City of Merchants. It had prospered. Today, the wealthy lived on the east side, beyond the Round, in the suburbs of Whitegate and Southview. The poor had generally taken over the areas known as Dunky and Harlos, bordering the sea on either side of Metro. The northern parts of Metro's suburbs were filled with sprawling industries. Black Bone Tools were renowned throughout Isel.

Metro proper was a vast maze of shops, stacked endlessly, end on end. It has always been said there was nothing you could not get in Metro.

Marcos, who was turning twenty, came from the Blancas family, one of the more prosperous merchants of Metro. Marc became heir to his father's business at the early age of fifteen. Being exceptionally bright and alert, in only five years, he had taken the business and expanded it five fold. He had made excellent transactions with the Mariners, cornering the markets on fish, tobacco, and tea. Marc, now of age, was known in Metro as a Master Merchant.

He had studied extensively in the Academy and had virtually perfect marks. But now he had grown tired of the constant hassling of the markets and had retired to Bellview, his father's old retreat at the east edge of Whitegate. From here he conducted his ever multiplying marketing. Marc leaned his long arms on the balcony rail and stared off at the vast green hills and blue sky. He was bored. "Yes, that's exactly it," he thought, "I'm utterly, completely, positively bored!"

The markets, he found, offered no new challenges because he knew, or so he reflected, all there was to be known there — or at least "necessarily worthy of knowing," as he'd put it. He had already invented a system by which his enterprises could almost run themselves by a process of slow expansion. "There is no more game here." He continued to gaze.

Since his parents died five years ago, he'd become very independent. Perhaps too much so, as it was frequently discussed by those in the pubs. Indeed he had no permanent servants, only Sheeba, who came to fix dinners three times a week and handle the laundry. Aunt Gertrude, he recalled, put up such a fuss. "You must have at least five servants. You are noble now and very successful. Now, the Freedors's have six servants. I'm sure you make more money than they do. It's quite unbecoming of you to cook your own meals; and it's too horrible to think of you, Marcos — well I just can't say it — cleaning, you know." He remembered how he'd just smiled, saying "Ok," and kissed her lovingly on the cheek and asked her to bring some more tea.

So partly to avoid isolating himself from the rest of Metro, he'd consented to hiring Sheeba. Later, he had contracted for Bill Jacks to take care of the buildings and grounds at Bellview. This way the rest of Whitegate didn't think he was too weird, just an eccentric young man who had not settled yet.

The clouds billowed now and rolled by him. "They feel so close, it's like I could almost touch them," he mused. The hours drifted by with only a shifting of feet to mark their passage.

He was well built, tall and slender, with long straight black hair, and piercing black eyes — handsome and quite bored. It was nearly four, when a soft voice behind him called to him, so gently, that for a second, he felt as though the white forms were speaking. Turning around, his eyes fell on Mindi standing in the doorway. For an instant, her long black hair and light robe gently swaying seemed to match the clouds. As if coming out of a dream, he said, "Huh?"

"Come in and have some tea," she repeated in her gentle voice.

"Hi, Mindi. Sure. Actually I guess I'm glad you dropped by. You know," he said sitting down across from her and accepting the cup, "you know — well, I've decided I'm bored! I've been here thinking for hours, and I've really decided that. I've mastered all that's here — in Metro, I mean. Merchants now bore me. It's the same old conversations day after day. You know that I can buy anything I want, but I cannot think of anything to buy! What would I do with five houses? I'm quite comfortable here at Bellview. I can run a good mile and I'm mean at the swords," he concluded.

Mindi watched him with her pale blue eyes, and occasionally sipped her tea as he talked. She replied softly, "Yes, I know." A thoughtful silence followed, broken only by occasional sipping noises. Mindi Francos was the closest thing to a best friend Marc had, ever since they were kids playing in the streets.

He had pretty well spotted what had been going on by the age of ten. He was something of an eccentric then, or more exactly, he seemed a bit different from others in West Flats. He had had difficulties as a child. Everyone that he played with soon found that Marc easily surpassed them. So it was each time he made a new friend — within a few weeks the friendship terminated — Marc was just plainly not in their league.

Then one day he had been playing hide and seek with some new friends in Southview, where he first met Mindi. Time after time, when no one else could find him, there would come Mindi. It was as if she could always find him. Right then and there, they struck up a friendship that had endured and they were now very close.

Mindi was twenty as well and quite a fair young woman. At times she could be the most beautiful, quiet, soft spoken young woman you'd ever want to meet; and at others — well, let's say she could give Marc a battle at swords. She was widely known in long distance running events and had won a number of trophies in gymnastics. It was quite an enigma to Metroites, when at the annual fair, one day Mindi would take top prize for a roast leg of lamb and the next day, one for the mile run.

She and Marc had grown so close that, at times, he felt she could read his mind. But they were not lovers, as each felt they were not yet ready to settle into family life. But for Marc, she was the only person in Metro, or West Flats for that matter, who was of comparable magnitude. She felt similarly of him. Hence, for over ten years, they had been very close.

These last few days, a new feeling had been spreading over Marc. As if guessing it, Mindi asked, "What's it feel like, Marc? Can you describe it?" There was a pause and then he said, "Well, it's like I want to just get up and go somewhere — no where — wandering. Oh, I don't know." Marc's mind was troubled. Merchants were never inclined to wandering, nor even farming as their distant relatives in East Flats. Merchandising, marketing, and more recently manufacturing were their prime interests.

Had he been talking to his aunt, he could have predicted a sudden gasp. But Mindi only raised an eyebrow. "I thought it was something like that, but I was not totally certain, Marc."

"Yes, I know — well don't give me any of those lectures on you know these are dangerous times; the world is cruel, full of unknowns and evil things — yuc! I've heard that since I was a kid. You too, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes," came the brief and frank reply.

"Well, I know only too well how bad the times are. Only yesterday, we lost three prize lambs to them — the Scavengers. They broke open the shop over in Black Bone around one p.m., Henry guessed. Hardly a day passes when some new report comes into Metro concerning their wickedness. So far the Patrol has been useless."

Metro, once the splendor of the south of Isel, had fallen into hard times. Actually, Isel was isolated from the rest of the world except by sea. The Old Caravan Road going northwards had long been abandoned. In olden days it was the main artery, filled with many caravans and travelers of all types. But that was in the days of the wizards, who were now long gone.

In these times, people spoke only in hushed whispers about the Desert King who had taken over Kalhari Quad, the desert up north. None can pass through his realm — at least alive and free, it is said. Many servants and armies were rumored to be wielded by the Evil One. Scavengers was the name used for all of the servants, whether tormented men, goblins, wolves, or other ghastly beasts. By night, these would pillage where they might — taking slaves as well as goods. It was heinous but none so far had defied them. Travel, these days, was very risky and wholly unthinkable at night. People kept big bolts and locks on their doors. There even was talk of rebuilding the Round, though none possessed the skill to do so.

“Yes, I know it’s a stupid thought. I bet you just want me to up and marry you, have three children, and stay home and play. Well darn it, I don’t feel like that!” he angrily burst out.

“Whoa Marc, you know I don’t want that any more than you,” she said taking his hand in hers and confronting him squarely. “That’s enough of that! You know, as well as I, that if you’re angry, you miss the target. So sit down, relax, have some tea, and tell me more about this feeling you’ve felt.”

Grumbling, Marc sat down and fingered his tea. As usual, Mindi was right; they’d discovered that bit about anger long ago. It served them both very well in life. “I mostly feel very restless, almost like a great uneasiness has come over me. I cannot say if it’s connected to the evil tidings or not. Perhaps not, dear, since I’m sure I’d have it anyway. Things — life — all; it’s just boring to me here. I feel just like walking and seeing Isel. But it’s unheard of for a merchant of Metro to do that, or even consider it,” he continued.

“I understand,” she acknowledged. “You feel yours is bad, consider mine. Here I am twenty years old and no thoughts of marrying. By now all young girls should be married; so says mom nearly every day. You know how much flak I get every time I compete? You yourself have handled mom by telling her not to worry — girls should be well rounded, and they’ve a right to their own life and viewpoint.” She paused and continued, “I feel, Marc, as if I too have a great gap in me, a void so to speak. Something’s missing. And it’s not a bunch of kids, I assure you,” she said laughingly.

Marc broke up and began to laugh too. He knew only too well her plight was even worse than his. Grinning, he said, “Come on, let’s go for a walk. You’re right as usual, love. At least I have an idea what I need; you don’t. Come on.” So arm in arm, they strolled out onto the grounds of Bellview around sunset, as the rose colored clouds met the deepening green hills.

It was about seven o’clock when they parted with a loving kiss. Mindi left him standing in the doorway, and his eyes followed her as she gracefully, yet swiftly, walked off south towards Southview. He went inside and picked up the cups off the balcony. It was nearly dark now. As if remembering the afternoon, Marc gazed off to the east, across the rolling hills towards the old city and tower. That’s when his eye caught the pale blue light coming from Obelos Sud, the two hundred foot tall ancient tower.

He nearly dropped the cups; he was startled. In olden days, Metro had another part, called Obsel, now called the Ancient City. It was built right against the base of the rolling hills, about one mile from where he stood. It had been abandoned for centuries; most of the buildings were in very ruined condition. In olden years, it was the City of the Watchers, the Protectors, the Wizards.

The wizards used to be the guardians of all of Isel and had built the strange obelos, twelve in all. Each was a tall tower — all nearly two hundred feet high, according to the legends. There was only one door and no windows, except at the top. The tower ended in a platform-like room from which the wizards operated. Tales tell of how the wizards would stand vigilantly watching and protecting the lands. That was before the Great Battle.

Many stories had been told of the Great Battle. Briefly, the wizards were destroyed, some say by their own hands. And the world and Isel fell into a great darkness. Out of that darkness, the Merchants with the help of the Mariners had continued and now were thriving. No one ever went into the ruins. Some say it's full of evil things. Most were just plain scared, although they did not admit it. That's why the tea cups nearly crashed when Marc saw the pale light.

Almost without thinking, Marc grabbed his blue cloak, his torch light and his sword and immediately left the house. Quickly he began to cross the grounds of Bellview. He was not sure of what he was going to do. Curiosity was the biggest thing. Who was up there? Why seemed an even bigger question. Stealthily and quickly, he moved across the grounds, barely perceptible as a shadow. Were the Patrols there? Should he alert the Patrols and just go home? Let them do their jobs? He knew he should.

After covering a half mile, the going got rougher; small hills kept rising up in front of him. He was breathing deeply now. He resolved to be a spy. If it were Scavengers, it's best not to be discovered. If it's the Patrol, he should not be found there anyway. His nerves were tingling with excitement. He had not felt this alive in years!

He kept on going, being as quiet and as quick as he could. Fifteen minutes later, he was scrambling over the ruins of Obsel, the ancient town. The old city roads were mainly blocked by fallen rocks from the houses. Going was bad in the daylight. He found it very difficult to be both quick and quiet now. The situation, he figured, would require stealth; so he slowed down and carefully picked his way.

Using the torch as little as possible, he continued scrambling. Even then, he covered it as best he could with his hands so that only a little light came out. His excitement grew. He found himself heaving heavily for breath. At last he was within fifty feet of the Obelos. There it stood, a pale grey, ominous tower rising to a great height. There was an old wooden door at the base. It was ajar! Nothing else was insight.

He paused a minute, caught his breath, and tried to calm his nerves a bit. “It’ll do no good to go in there shaking like a leaf!” he said to himself. There was no sign of a fire, men, or animals. The area was entirely lifeless except for the pale blue light coming from far above him. “It must not be the Patrol — they always use ponies but I have not heard or seen any. If it’s the Scavengers, I’d have heard a lot of noise by now — they are anything but quiet,” he thought to himself.

A great curiosity began to swell inside him, turning now to a desire to know. He carefully sneaked to the doorway. Still there were no signs of anyone else around. The old door was half open; it was made of heavy oak nearly two feet thick. Its massive hinges were layered with rust. But despite all its appearances, it was still solid, a formidable barrier if you had to get through it. At last taking a deep breath, he stepped inside. A blackness he’d seldom experienced surrounded him. For a moment fear swelled like a wave over him. Actually, he found his right arm was shaking quite by itself. That was unnerving to Marc, and he struggled to regain his self control. He decided to turn on the torch and see what to do next.

But before he could do so, an aging voice said, “Come on up; I’ve been expecting you.” It was so softly said, yet it had such a command value about it, that Marc could not resist. He was just shocked. He muttered something reflexively and turned on the torch and began climbing. The voice added with strong emphasis, “Do not touch anything on your way up.”

It was no longer by curiosity or desire that Marc began the ascent; it was as if some force beyond himself were totally compelling it. As he started up, the voice added from far above him, “And bring your friend with you.” Marc blushed. **Just what did he mean by that!** He’d brought no one, heard no one, saw no one as he came here. He quickly turned around. As he glanced by the door, there was a form standing in the opening. Marc nearly dropped his torch; it was all he could do to keep from screaming! Once again he reactively mumbled something that sounded like hello.

Then the familiar voice of Mindi came back. “It’s me Marc — Mindi. What’s going on here?” In hushed voices broken by gasps, Marc said he saw a blue light coming from Obelos Sud and came to investigate.

Then he calmed down. “What the heck are **you** doing here? This is no place for you.”

“Watch it, Marc,” came the sharp retort. “I was heading home and saw a blue light too. I went back to get you, but you weren’t there. So I came myself. I sort of figured you were ahead of me. But I didn’t see you until you slipped in the door. I could not say anything in time and besides I was afraid too.”

“Come on up you two, and do not touch anything,” came the voice from above.

It was Mindi's turn to start. She jerked sharply at the sound and grabbed Marc's arm, uncontrollably. "Who is that?"

"I don't know," he said. "I had just started up when it said bring your friend. I nearly fainted when I saw you there in the doorway."

"That's ok, love, come on; let's do as he asks. I don't think we have a choice," she replied. With his torch, they could see the circular stone stairs, ever rising. Side by side, they began climbing with their arms at their sides, for fear of touching anything. As they climbed, the torch lit the walls faintly.

They caught glimpses of strange forms, shapes, and creatures and men. A multitude of colors covered the walls; and there were many strange objects lying in perfectly carved nooks in the walls. Another time, another circumstance, they would have been content just to examine the walls. Now, however, they felt a strange compulsion to reach the voice; his commands had been forceful. Upwards they climbed, step after step, until at last they got to the platform at the top. There they stood, side by side, breathless, but intently looking forward.