

Chapter I

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TREASURES FROM THE PAST

August 16, 1745 EQ, Disputed Territory of the Erdi Desert, Epi

Five-year-old Talon and his parents rode along in their carriage at the head of a caravan full of food and goods. Talon peered out his window at the desert outside. He could just see over the window's ledge and it bumped his nose as the carriage made its way down the rarely used road. He expected to see sand but didn't. Like most "deserts" it was just arid and void of lush vegetation. He looked up at one of the companion guards that rode alongside him. The guard wore chain mail and a leather cap brimmed with iron. A sword was strapped to his side and his shield dangled from his horse's saddle.

Talon sat back and looked at his mother sitting across from him. She was beautiful, or at least he thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world with a lovely name of Mushina. She, like other ladies of the court wore her black hair pulled back in a bun. She sat back gazing out the window with a distant look in her eyes. She wore a red dress and a jade necklace of a tiger, the family insignia of the second born of the house of Rongxing. She was not born into the house of Rongxing; she married into it.

That was her husband's heritage, Trinel, the Earl of the East Gate of Cannor, Talon's father. He sat beside Talon and wore his light dress coat and black trousers and his sword lay at his side in its scabbard. He was reading a scroll the best he could given the bumpy ride.

Talon looked back at his mother. "Why are we coming here, mama?"

She turned and looked at him with her dark brown eyes filled with kindness. "I told you, love. We're brining these people food."

"Why?"

"Because they're hungry."

“Hungry? Why, mama?”

“They have no food. There’s been a drought...” she saw the blank expression on his face. “That means no rain for a long time.”

“Oh ... why?”

She looked at her husband and said, “He gets it from you, you know.”

He looked at her and raised one eyebrow, smiled, winked and returned to his reading.

They bumped along. Talon stared at the hilt of his father’s sword. It was a long blade, which he couldn’t see since it was in its scabbard, but he could see the crossbar and hilt. The crossbar curved up towards the tip of the blade. Leather covered the handle in a way that begged Talon play with it -- although if he did he knew the punishment would be something close to death, at least his dad let him think it would be close to death.

“M’lord,” came a voice from outside the wagon. Talon turned to see that one of the companions had ridden up to his father’s window and addressed him. “Riders approach from the southeast.”

Trinel leaned forward in his seat and replied, “Bring us to halt captain.”

Mushina leaned forward and placed her hand on his as he exited the carriage. “Are we there already?”

“No.”

As Trinel exited the carriage, she spotted a look of concern in his eyes that Talon missed. She turned towards the boy with hands outstretched saying, “Come here, love. Sit beside me.” He did and she leaned forward and lifted up the seat he just left. It hinged on the back revealing a compartment underneath. “Time for hide and seek.” He crawled into the compartment and as she laid the seat back down she said, “And remember you must keep quiet. That’s part of the game.”

Talon nodded.

She placed her finger to her lips. “Shh.” She forced a silly smile and added, “Don’t let daddy know.” But behind that smile simmered the dread that this was more than a greeting party.

Talon nodded enthusiastically. He liked these games and wasn’t about to let his father know where he was.

Mushina told herself it was just a precaution. She looked out the window and counted maybe fifty riders coming their way. That meant they were out numbered almost two to one. She rebuked herself for allowing Trinel to talk her into bringing Talon. “Some learning experience,” she mumbled.

Trinel, who now sat on a horse next to the companion captain, turned and saw Mushina and waved her back. At first, she was a little put out by his forcefulness and then a wave of fear washed over her and she sat back rigidly. She closed her eyes and prayed silently.

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Only the slimmest sliver of light came into Talon’s compartment and already it was getting hot. But he held back and breathed little so he could listen. Despite the fact that he couldn’t understand a lot that was said and that most of the time he couldn’t tell who was speaking, he was able to piece together the following.



Greetings were exchanged between his father and one who introduced himself as a chieftain of the Nomar tribe and he sounded a little short tempered. “Where are you taking such a large company?”

“To the Ingaray villages along the border,” answered Trinel. “We are bringing them food and basic necessities.”

The chieftain grunted, “Did we give you leave to pass through our land?”

A drop of sweat slipped into Talon’s right eye and he wiped his brow with his sleeve.

“No, but safe passage was guaranteed by both the Ingaray and the house of...”

“Their words are useless here.” The chieftain spat. “You forfeit all goods to us for this transgression. Leave the baggage carts and go home at once.”

Talon heard a sloshing clinking sound like someone’s hands going through coins in a small chest. Then he heard his father’s voice again. “I offer this gold to you as a payment for passage but do not take the food.”

“These are not your people. Why do you care?”

“They are hungry.”

“So am I.” Then the chieftain said, apparently to his men, “Take it all.”

Talon then heard something he didn’t expect: his mother’s voice. “And leave those people with nothing?”

Silence.

The chieftain asked, “Is she yours?”

Silence.

The chieftain laughed. “Will you offer her to us now too?”

Talon heard a scuffle, coins tossed, swords drawn, battle cries, cries from wounds, horses neighing, the twang of many arrows, more slashing and yelling. Then he heard something in Salmi, the language of the desert tribes, which he didn’t understand. He heard ponies ride off, then silence -- a long silence when he barely breathed and it was no longer a game any more. The compartment lid opened and Talon saw his father’s wounded servant beckon him out. Before the servant could cover his eyes, Talon got a glimpse of the scene that told the rest of the story. A contingent of Andril border guards had ridden out from the Fortress of Carmel and chased off the Nomar raiders, but not before many Nomar and Andril lay dead or wounded ... and his mother and father lay among the dead.

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May 24, 1740 EQ, Cah Bel, Andril Kingdom of Epi

The wind stirred. It whipped leaves and dust into little swirls between the fallen, moss covered pillars.

Lenesco walked through the swirling wind waving the golden rod slowly before him allowing it to do the tracking. The rod, the same that Mr. Hoo Nun held, hummed and glowed with its wings extending towards the ground. As he passed the rod over the stone floor in one particular spot, the hum from the rod resonated and the inner light wavered. He crouched down on one knee to verify and the rod glowed intensely.

“This is the place,” he said confidently. He looked up at his commander. “The enemy will come here.”



His commander, a lean, muscular man named Consus came up and looked over his shoulder. His face showed the weathering of many harsh winters, while his Asian eyes gleamed with the hard, stern look of numerous battles fought and won. He looked slightly older than Lenesco, older but in better shape. Both men appeared to be in their early twenties. Consus drew his heavy scimitar out of its scabbard. “The enemy, a Firesmyth pretender, comes in a POD.”

Lenesco had never seen a real Firesmyth. None in his generation had. He also didn't know what a POD looked like. He had never seen one. Neither did he know how the rod worked. Few did. On both accounts, he didn't care. He just followed orders, and the orders he was now following told him to track, capture, and acquire. He was good at following orders. That's what made him and the five other Shadow Knights such valuable tools: quick strike and no questions asked. They usually succeeded.

He wore a loose fitting, dark uniform without symbol or badge from head to foot. It helped conceal his movements and allowed him to respond quickly. The only device on his uniform beside the broadsword strapped to his side was a gold band around his left arm just above his elbow. When activated, this band acted with opposite effect of the rod. It repelled chronomic waves, making him invisible to the POD and its occupant and since all the Shadow Knights wore the same band, the occupant of the POD would think he was alone.

Lenesco snapped back the two wings on the rod so that they lay flush and extinguished the light. He glanced toward his commander and nodded. With a swift and practiced hand signal, Consus motioned to the others several paces behind him. Without a word, they activated the gold bands and dispersed, hiding among the fallen ruins to wait for their victim.

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Years ago these sleepy ruins were the central structures of Cah Bel, the military academe of Arcathia, a highly advanced civilization long since fallen. They built Cah Bel on a low mountain in the middle of a great uninhabited valley. Crumbled towers stretched out away from this central lone mountain across the plane as far as the eye could see. Now abandoned, both capital and civilization had succumbed to the ravages of time and slipped into forgetfulness. Few now remembered their names or could even read their writings.

At the summit of the mountain, stood the dominant edifice, a fortress in the shape of an eight-pointed star. The Arcathians called it *Zhongjian*, which meant “The Center” in their tongue but the locals now called it the Old Fortress. Here thousands of would-be soldiers once trained and defended the Arcathian civilization, but Consus and the Shadow Knights had scanned for the POD, not in the Old Fortress, but the large amphitheater upon a lower foothill. Those who forgot its real name called it the “Old Arena.” It was designed so well that in its prime it could seat some three thousand people all able to hear a single orator without the aid of artificial amplification. Senators once debated here before the assembly enacted on a pending law, but the voices had long since fallen silent. Carpet and ceramic tile once marked off sections showing the sixteen regions the old arena represented. Only the faint remnants of tile could be seen at the center of the amphitheater now, the wooden podium and carpet long since reclaimed by the elements. Only stone benches, some with room enough for two or three delegates, survived the centuries: too tough for rain and cold to rot, and too heavy for scavengers to cart away. Encircling the remains of the Old Arena stood great marble pillars, some toppled and broken others still supporting the enclosing foyer. The shattered bits of the roof they supported now lay scattered across the stone foundation below. Weeds grew up between the cracks in the pavement and a few trees forged their way into the circle of pillars, reclaiming nature's right. No one alive today could reproduce the architecture of these buildings. When the civilization fell during a



time called the Fall of Nations, the memory of its people, its knowledge, its technology, and its history fell as well. In its place grew myths and legends like the trees that grew up from its fallen ruins.

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Again, the wind stirred.

It whipped fallen leaves into little swirls. A high pitched noise, just beyond hearing at first, grew louder. The wind grew, gathering the little swirls into a larger whirlwind that centered itself on the spot marked by Lenesco. Sparks of light seemed to jump between the flying debris. The high pitched noise dropped in frequency and began to pulsate. A faint line of a half dome shape a little higher than the height of a man began to form among the swirling leaves. Shimmers of light danced between leaves and outlined form. The high pitched whine grew to a crescendo and the outline took solid shape: a smooth white, oblong dome -- almost like half an egg laying on its side -- with thick runes written in red around it at shoulder height. A red line enclosed the letters and trimmed the bottom of the dome. At the narrower part of the dome and intersecting the runes, the stylized image of a lion had been carved in deep lines of gold. No other markings distinguished it.

The wind settled again to a whisper.

Silently, the dome shape melted away as if it were ice in a furnace to reveal a man wearing a dark hooded cloak sitting on a control bench of some kind with a small table extending up at an angle in front of him. The cloaked figure focused his attention on this table. The table was tilted slightly towards him and seemed to gain all its support from its extension from the bench.

Done with his work on the table, he lifted it over his head. It pivoted on the extension and came to rest slightly above and behind him. Unaware of the six men watching his movements, he stood up and sighed, a long, peaceful sigh of one whom remembers the former glory of a thing now haggard by time. Conspicuously, he did not have a sword. Then as if suddenly recalling an urgent task, he walked briskly up an aisle and towards an arched exit. As he walked, the control bench shimmered and melted into the shape of a bench similar to the others in the Old Arena.

The cloaked figure walked down the arena hill and up the summit to the Old Fortress. He walked between the east and southeast points of its star shape that lead to what once was the Snake Gate or Shu?muñ in the ancient tongue. The walls closed in before him on both sides; their once smooth four-story high walls dotted with narrow slits for windows no longer held the threat of detection that they did in their former years. Then they were smooth and showed unblemished strength. Now they were half crumbled with decay. They once held back armies and later, after the Arcathian civilization had perished, they held back looters with just the menace of their empty gaze, but the days of looting had long since passed. The looters had picked the Old Fortress clean of any treasure no matter how broken or quaint and in the place of treasure grew something more elusive in recent years, a force that kept even the heartiest adventurer out. Not even looters would venture into this place now, because legend, a force stronger than crumbled walls or forsaken battlements, held off the inquisitive treasure seeker. These legends concerned a clan of mage-warriors called Firesmyths that once guided this planet's politics with a gentle but firm hand. It was said that the Firesmyths were born six millennia ago on another world and that they witnessed the birth of civilization on Epi. And since Epi was now a world where any technology greater than the bow and arrow or catapult was forbidden, stories told of the Firesmyths and their living machines held children in awe.



Neither the specter of these walls nor legends stopped the cloaked man. As he reached the Snake Gate, he put his hand into his cloak and withdrew a cylinder. With a word of command the cylinder emitted a brilliant beam of white light. He resumed his walk passing through the gate and stepping over the remnants of the large titanium doors -- the use and even name of titanium had long been forgotten. He crossed the wide-open courtyard and entered the great hall of the Old Fortress, navigating his way effortlessly through the passages as if he knew them intimately. He stopped occasionally, stooping to look at the debris discarded by looters. He made his way down several flights of stairs into what appeared to be an old subterranean barracks section, housing for hundreds of soldiers that made up the Capital Guard. The barracks were dug deeply into the solid mountain rock providing protection against attack. He counted room by room as he passed soldier's quarters on both sides of a long hallway. Though they all looked the same, he counted them not by number, but by the names of soldiers long dead.

At the end of the hall an arched double door entrance led to quarters larger than the rest. A casual observer could see that this room was probably for a commander of some sort. The room, now empty of anything of value, would be completely dark if it weren't for the light cylinder he held. Entering this room, he looked around for a long time, recounting its contents with his finger from left to right: a decorative stone door frame around the entrance, a broken sofa in the corner, a beautifully carved stone relief so large it covered three walls, a rear exit into a narrow hall, a broken cistern long since dry, the chipped supports for a marble bookshelf (the marble slabs of the shelf must have been carried off), and scattered debris across the floor.

Then shining this light on the decorative stone door frame the cloaked man found a statuette of a Jarmil, a large marsupial swamp creature found in the Southern regions of Epi, a creature of such ugliness, no one would steal it even in desperation, a creature only a mother could love: large, bulbous eyes, loose hanging jowls with a protruding, fat lower lip ... and completely hairless. Proof that God has a sense of humor. He applied the flat portion of his signet ring to the Jarmil's protruding eye. A light shone in a circular sweeping pattern through the gaps between ring and stone. The facade of the stone doorframe popped open, releasing centuries of dust into the air. The dust settled to reveal a ring, a scroll, a scabbard, and a belt. He withdrew the scroll and ring and placed them in a pocket inside the fold of his cloak. Then he removed the scabbard and belt, and strapped them around his waist. He closed the secret compartment door with an audible "click."

Then he directed his light beam on the wall carving just to his left. There, in detailed relief, the life size image of a knight slaying a dragon-like creature called a korax had been carved into the stone. The korax, similar to the tyrannosaurs rex on our world, ran on two large, powerful hind legs with an oversized, retractable claw with which to slash at its victims. It used a huge tail for balance and two smaller forelegs or arms for grasping. These forearms looked small compared to the rest of the massive body, but were actually larger and stronger than a human arm. And just like a t-rex, the mouth contained large, serrated teeth, some longer than a human hand. The korax had nearly been brought to extinction centuries ago, but now they were coming back especially in the winter when the snow forced them out of the frontier and into villages looking for food. Years before, some looter had even tried desperately to chisel this image from the walls. Pit marks could be seen along its border. The thief was barely able to chip away at the wall itself, but the carving lay unmarred. Apparently, the carving must have been made of tougher material than even the mountain bedrock was. Despite its toughness, the image was intricate and extremely lifelike. One could see the fierce determination in the knight's face that



contrasted with the look of lingering defiance in the korax's. Long ago the stone mason inscribed the knight's name in ancient runes, *Firesmyth Mancuso the Golden Lion*.

The cloaked man stood back and remembered the scene. Only one commander had his quarters decorated this elaborately, but it wasn't by his own volition. The former resident of these quarters, Firesmyth Mancuso, had lead his men so well that one of them, a skilled stone cutter who was injured in battle dedicated this work in his commander's honor after he retired. Hundreds of years ago Firesmyth Mancuso had gone into retirement with all the other Firesmyths after the establishment of the Laws of Separation and hadn't been heard of since. In the stone relief, Firesmyth Mancuso wore the armor of old with a craftsmanship that could not be duplicated today. It fitted his slim build well with just enough plastisteel to protect him but not too much to get in the way. The sword – lighter and of finer steel than its contemporary version – also looked like it had been crafted by a lost skill. Unlike the heavy broadsword variety now in use, this sword could easily be wielded with one hand. True the larger, heavier swords could crack armor and deal a brutal blow when used correctly. But in the time it took a warrior to land one blow with the larger sword, his opponent wielding the older, lighter sword could make two possibly three stabs, and all it took was one well placed jab.

The cloaked man leaned toward the wall carving and applied the flat portion of his signet ring again, this time to the jewel on the hilt of the carved sword. Without a sound, the stone hand turned plastic, releasing its grip on the sword. The color of life breathed into the sword turning it from a dull gray to the luster of polished metal, ivory, and a large ruby at the base of its hilt.

He gently took hold of the now released sword and it awoke a flood of memories in his mind. Yes, it was his. The cold steel glistened in the white light. The ivory handle still held its luster. And there, above the ruby, lay his engraved initials, still legible after over 501 years. He turned, letting the light run along its blade. "Good morning, LaSor," he whispered the sword's name. "Time to awake from your slumber. We have work ahead of us again, old friend. Hmm. That's odd," he said as he balanced it in his old weathered hand. "You feel heavier than I remember." A faint smirk drew across his lips. He guided the sword into the scabbard with a sound pleasing to his ears.

He took an extra moment to stand and remember himself in the korax scene. "History always looks different after the fact," he muttered, "so much more ... stylized."

And then he heard a noise out on the other end of the hall, or at least thought he did, the sound of something suddenly sliding along the floor until it came to rest under the resistance of its own friction, like someone accidentally kicking a stone shard as they walked. In that instant, Mancuso knew he was not alone and rebuked himself for wallowing in self-gratifying nostalgia.

Satisfied that he could not be seen by someone in the hall, Mancuso moved the sofa aside a little. Squatting down to where the sofa had been he whispered a word of command to the light cylinder. The light changed from white to red. When he directed the red light on the floor, ancient characters and symbols appeared. He touched five of these symbols in what appeared to be a random sequence. Stale air escaped with a hiss through cracks before unseen on the stone floor. He quickly lifted the slab loose and pushed it to the side. Nothing but a small wooden chest with tarnished brass bands lay underneath. Removing the chest and carrying it under his left arm he returned to the entrance.

He neither heard nor saw movement outside, but he knew better. That rock didn't fall. It was kicked.



The main passage lay back the way he came and he would have to pass whoever was out there to get to it and this visitor was not going to greet him with affection. Fortunately, the architects of the Old Fortress laid out the barracks in keeping with the old tradition of separating the officer from the common soldier. Since they considered commanders as part of the officer class, they built a narrow hall connecting all of the commanders quarters. This allowed the officers to meet in private but still have quarters near their men. They divided the barracks into sections of 50 rooms, two soldiers to a room with 25 rooms on each side of a hall and the commanders quarters at the end of each hall. A great corridor joined each of the “halls of hundreds” and a narrow hall joining the quarters of the commanders of hundreds.

Mancuso used this narrow hall to bypass his visitor slipping silently through the rear exit. To his left he passed dozens of commander quarters until the narrow hall opened up to the officers’ dining hall. Here he became more cautious keeping to the shadows because the openness of this place made him vulnerable to observation or attack.

No attack came as he crossed the dining hall. He noted that this room was by far the most damaged with a large hole in the ceiling high above that allowed weather, dirt, and seed to take their toll on the floor below. The mountainside did not offer shelter to this part of the building, since it was not underground. A dome ceiling decorated with mosaics of heroes and princesses used to be overhead but now, he noticed, more of the roof lay on the floor than overhead now. What apparently started as a small crack in the vaulted ceiling opened up over time to a gaping hole.

Again he chose an exit that was less known and would allow him many routes of retreat in case he was cornered. A large tapestry used to cover an archway. It was from behind tapestry that servants used to run errands, but now only its sodden remains lay before the exit. Just as he exited the dining hall through this small passage he thought he caught a glimpse of a shadow moving at the end of the hall far to his left. He did not look back but quickened his pace and heightened his senses. Down this small corridor he flew, a turn right here, a turn left here, down a flight of stairs through a passageway, to a large room that had once been used for storage. He ran to the east wall and located a light fixture on the wall. He turned it to the left, right, and back towards center. A portion of the wall opened revealing a long, straight tunnel. He slipped through the opening as an unseen counterbalance eased the heavy wall around its pivot. Once inside, he spotted the hand crank and brake lever below long-dead quantum controls. These high-tech controls might have seemed out of place to someone unfamiliar with Epian history. But Arcathia thrived during an age when technology surpassed that of genetic manipulation and nano-technology, an age that Mancuso remembered. He pulled back on the brake lever, locking the wall in place. He released it and started turning the crank. His heart leapt when saw lights coming down the hall outside the room he just left. He turned the hand crank furiously like a ship’s captain trying to avoid an iceberg collision. The door shut just before the light bearers entered the room.

Mancuso turned and jogged down the dark tunnel, his light beam bouncing before him. The tunnel sloped slightly downward and was wide enough to transport large equipment. It eventually dead-ended with a crank, brake, and another cold control panel. He released the brake, turned the crank, and the wall opened partway. He slipped through the narrow crack into the open air of the Old Arena foyer. Tree roots had prevented him from opening the door any wider. He took a moment to look around. From this hidden doorway on the northwest side, he was relatively hidden from view since the door was in an alcove. He didn’t see anyone and slipped cautiously through the door to search for the release mechanism. This left him



vulnerable for a moment to anyone hiding but he had no choice. Then he saw it. The pillar the release mechanism was on had fallen but there under its debris was the cable. With some effort, he pulled it and it clicked under the force, returning the wall to its closed position.

He ran through the arena and stopped for a moment to check for the enemy at one of the arched doorways of the amphitheater. Panic almost overwhelmed him as he surveyed the multitude of benches. “Oh no. Where did I park?” Then remembering the spot just on the other side of the hall and to the east of where the Governor from Kastanza used to sit, he saw it. “That chameleon device really is too good,” he muttered to himself.

To him the way seemed clear, but something didn’t seem right. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. He had no time to check, despite his feelings. Making his way swiftly towards the POD, he saw them, just moving shadows in the corner of his eyesight at first, and then recognizable shapes of men ... six of them moving in from all around the arena with swords drawn. He surveyed his opponents cautiously, summing up their abilities. He knew their mark, the Shadow Knights of the Salmonil. The Salmonil, fierce nomadic warriors, were bad enough albeit extremely superstitious, but the Shadow Knights, so called because of the dark clothing they wore, were worse. This band of brigands had no honor and should not have been given the dignified title of *knight*. Instead of defending a code of honor, they pillaged, burned, and did whatever else their wicked leader desired.

He looked again towards the POD. He had the lead. He *could* get to the POD before them, but he would not have time to initiate a jump. He rebuked himself for not bringing a remote. Just as well, he wanted to find out more about his pursuers so he might as well take advantage of it. Why did they come here, since Cah Bel is within Andril Territory? Were they just patrolling the ruins and just happened to find him, or were they sent in search of him and his treasure?

Deciding to confront them directly, he stopped in his tracks a stone’s throw away from the POD. The Shadow Knights copied his move but then started walking sideways always facing him in a slow spiral drawing closer, swords at the ready almost in a dance.

“Go no further Firesmyth,” one, apparently the leader, called out in a pleasant tone.

Firesmyth Mancuso threw back his hood and drew his sword. He wore the armor of old like that in the korax carving. His face, now visible, could have been mistaken for a man of much younger years if it weren’t for his shoulder-length hair and a neatly trimmed beard which were gray but fast turning white. He wore a few wrinkles like a soldier wears campaign ribbons. They showed that he had survived a few battles in life and though he appeared old, he had a vitality of youth about him as if age touched only the surface of his life. His eyes . . . his eyes were alit with a blue flame, brilliant blue, the mark of his clan.

Upon seeing whom they confronted, the Shadow Knights drew back a step except for the leader Consus, who smiled mockingly with hand outstretched. “What? Does this old man best us at swordplay?”

Now Mancuso spoke for the first time keeping an eye on all who closed in on him, “This old man drew blood before your grandfather drew the breath of life.” He spoke with a thick accent – with a stiff upper lip and rolled his R’s -- an accent no one could quite place.

“Face facts, old man. The days of the Firesmyth clan are over.”

“Over? Do you not remember the prophecy?”

When fire brands the smith of old,

The stories shall then be retold,

The robber shall forfeit his gold



And time will once again refold.”

He waited, allowing the words to sink in. “No, the days of the Firesmyths are not yet over, but yours is at hand.”

He saw them flinch a little in reaction, but not quite giving in to this insult. Their training would not allow them to give in. Instead, they resumed the walk around him drawing in the circle, burning in outward anger and inward fear.

Mancuso looked at Consus eye to eye and asked, “What would you have of me?”

“We will have what you came for. What’s that you have in the chest, old man? Let’s take a look.”

“Who sent you?” asked Mancuso without showing emotion.

“Sent us?” Consus acted stunned, unconvincingly. “No one *sent* us, we was just out for a little loot. Come on, did you find some for us?” All the while advancing, the others now jeering and mock jabbing at him with their swords when his back was turned.

Mancuso shook his head slowly. “The false-hearted always lie: a treasure seeker declares himself an explorer; a bandit claims to be a treasure seeker; but only an assassin or worse would admit to being a thief.” He gently placed the chest down with stiff back and bended knee, never taking his eyes off of Consus. Patting the small chest with his free hand he replied, “Now, why not come and take a look, little children?”

Training or no, this was just the push they needed. At once, Consus and the others rushed at Mancuso.

In one swift motion, Mancuso flung his cloak at those just behind him and lunged at those before him. His blade grew hot with a bright amber edge. *LaSor* was no ordinary blade; it had a heritage older than Cah Bel and came from unknown origins. It could slice through steal and stone as easily as through flesh.

The first Shadow Knight to come toward him must have known of *LaSor*’s history, for as soon as he saw the amber edge he dodged rather than parried Mancuso’s first slice. Mancuso’s jab glanced to the side, but using this momentum he ducked to one knee swung around with the other leg outstretched and tripped this knight. As the knight fell back he tried to balance his fall with a stone bench. Mancuso sliced up through the bench leg. It crumbled and Mancuso kicked it on top of the knight ... one knight down, for the moment.

With no time to rest, another knight used a bench to jump high into the air and landed right behind Mancuso. He did not land right, and in the moment it took him to catch his balance, Mancuso, still low to the ground, kicked up. The blow landed squarely in the knight’s gullet. The man’s hands went to his chest gasping for air. He stumbled back and fell over the bench he had just jumped. The dull thud of his head hitting the stone pavement told Mancuso he would not have to worry about this one ... two down.

Mancuso had to remind himself that his goal was to repel, disarm, and question these men, not kill them.

He jumped up seeing two more coming at him swords ready. Apparently *they* had not heard about *LaSor*. Mancuso took full advantage of this ignorance as the two knights took up a dual ambush position, a standard tactic of the Shadow Knights. They depended upon out-numbering and out-maneuvering their prey taking every dirty opportunity they could to claim a victory. “Not very honorable,” Mancuso mumbled. “I have no qualms teaching you a lesson in manners.”



As LaSor came down across the first man's blade they locked for a split second. LaSor instantly glowed white hot as if in anger. Then, to the astonishment of the Shadow Knight, his blade split asunder into a shower of a thousand sparks. The shock of the blast blinded the unprepared knight who dropped the blackened hilt and stepped back holding his eyes in pain.

Not wasting the momentum, Mancuso continued to swing around and catch the other knight unprepared. Instead of bringing the full force of the still white hot edge against his opponent's blade, he used the flat side of LaSor to deliver a shocking blow. This with a twisting flick of his wrist ripped the knight's sword from his numbed hand and sent it flying into the air. The knight watched it as it flipped end over end and started its way back down again. He did not remember seeing it hit the ground but saw only darkness and would wake hours later with a welt the size of LaSor's ruby on his left temple ... three and four down.

The next knight held back a little further seeing what just happened to his comrades.

"You're ... you're a real Firesmyth," he sputtered.

Firesmyth Mancuso just smiled and bowed gracefully.

Seeing that he was alone ... the knight ran.

Alone? What about six? Mancuso turned and looked. No one else around except for the ones he already vanquished. "But I saw six," he muttered. "Where is the leader and," he wondered with dread, "where is the chest."

Gone.

With a moan the blinded Shadow Knight blinked and started to regain sight only to see a blur of Mancuso rushing him. The knight shifted his weight to a ready stance but it was too late and he felt his legs sweep out from under him. The ground impacted with a thud that knocked his breath out. He opened his eyes only to look down at a glowing blade beneath his chin.

"Who sent you?" asked Mancuso pressing the flat tip against his chin.

Despite his pain the fallen knight replied only with a look of silent defiance.

"It must be someone who you fear more than death. Who?"

The knight looked at him through narrowed eyes and hissed, "Someone you should fear."

"No," Mancuso replied shaking his head, "someone I pity. Now how did you know of my coming?"

"Don't you think my master would know the hour and place of your return?"

Mancuso pressed the flat end of LaSor harder against the man's chin so he could feel the heat of the blade edge. As he did so, he caught sight of something behind the man's ear. He turned the man's head with his free hand. The knight jerked to resist but Mancuso repositioned his weight to pin him down. "Tell me of this." The knight didn't respond but Mancuso already knew what it was, a cybernetic implant. It used a technology far beyond Epian standards during the present dark ages. What Mancuso didn't know and what bothered him the most, is what the Shadow Knights were doing with it. The Shadow Knights came from the Salmonil tribes, a desert people traditionally engaged in herding hay-hochi, a small triceratops-like animal. They couldn't even mint their own coinage let alone develop the nano-technology and medical science necessary to construct cybernetic implants, but here it was and it bothered Mancuso deeply.

"What did you use to find me?"

The knight's eyes tightened in pain as the heat began to burn. No, he wasn't going to tell. Pain, pain. "All right! I used a rod, a golden rod. It made a noise and glowed at the place you were going to come."



“Was it this?” Mancuso held up the rod Lenesco used.

“Yes.”

“Thank you. My apologies for the burn on your chin. It will heal. Night knight.”

Then the knight saw and felt no more.

* * * *

Temporary Salmonil Camp Just East of Cah Bel

Consus entered the sanctum of his master's tent. He had to wait a moment to allow his eyes to become accustom to the darkness. He could just make out the outline of his master's throne turned away from him. A pit five paces before the throne, the only source of light, emitted a sickly green glow. At the periphery of the light's reach stood what could be called pillars. Their twisted shapes looked like they grew up thickly out of the ground only to die and wither into their present form, black, glossy supports of the tent roof above. Consus, who frequented this chamber more than most, dreaded every visit.

With reverence, he began his approach to the throne.

His master was growing quickly in power among the Salmonil tribes. Consus had to admire the way he was usurping the authority of the Counsel of Tribes, the old order that passed and enforced inter-tribal laws. Soon his master, Araknik the Gray Wolf, would take their place. He ruled with a heavy hand that some saw as oppressive, but others saw long overdue. The old pride of the Salmonil was being restored through conquest and to many, a glorious new age was about to dawn. The entire world might someday owe allegiance to this formerly backward nomadic herdsman, and Consus wanted to be at his side when it happened.

Yet something about Araknik bothered Consus. *Do I really owe allegiance to this man*, he had to ask himself, *if man he truly is*. Rumor had it that he had lived over a thousand years. Consus doubted that, but could guess that the *Gray Wolf*, as he liked to be called, was somewhere around ninety or a hundred, a withered and wasted man. This did not mean that Consus considered his lord weak or feeble. On the contrary, his master often chose his own tent guards as his sparing partners.

On either side of the throne, now stood examples of his Tent Guard. These men were specially chosen at birth for this service, huge men with shoulders of great girth, trained for years in all forms of combat and other arts. They stood with arms crossed and eyes closed. In their training, they developed a heightened sense of hearing that almost allowed them to fight with their eyes closed. This is probably good, thought Consus, because in this tent the strange lights and deep flickering shadows might hinder more than guide a fight.

No others were in the room with them. This was not a good sign for Consus.

He stepped up to his usual spot and presented himself. The back side of the throne faced him. It was made of the same glossy, black, dehydrated look that characterized the twisted columns. The throne did not turn around.

Consus waited. He always had to wait. He had to remind himself why he put up with this. First, it was the law of the land, fealty to one's liege lord. Second, and by far the most important, he was a powerful lord. He possessed power to punish and reward richly. It was hope for the later that motivated Consus to suffer through the terror of his position. He was usually not disappointed.



Then he heard the distinct voice of his master in a low crackling noise that fell dead in this tent of thick, sound absorbing cloth. As the voice warmed up, it grew louder but still more of a hiss than a voice, like the bones of an old man waking up after a long slumber. “What have you brought me?”

In fear, Consus held out the cloth wrapped small chest with trembling hands. “Only what you have asked me for, Gray Wolf.”

Still the throne did not turn around. “And what of its owner?” the voice asked.

“Escaped.” Consus stood there shaking hoping upon hope that the tone of his voice would not betray his true cowardly actions. He believed his master could tell truth from a lie by just hearing one word, and since Consus was not telling the whole truth, he hoped his master could not tell in just one word.

The throne swung around to reveal Araknik the Gray Wolf: cold, heartless eyes; tight placid skin pulled tautly over the cheekbones; thin strands of long jet black hair hanging down, uncut for years and draped over his shoulders; curved beak-like nose; and absolutely no smile. He looked wearier than ever. His voice cracked again, “Lie.”

Consus stood still, heart almost stopping.

“You lie,” his master continued. “You took the chest when you saw the other knights kept the drakard occupied in battle, didn’t you?”

Consus’ heart did skip a beat. *The rumors are true*, he thought.

“DIDN’T YOU?”

Consus shook and cowered back a step. His master rose up to his full height with fists clenched, a tall man, as tall as Firesmyth Mancuso, almost a head above the rest even without the couple of steps that ascended to his throne. He looked more menacing now than weary.

Consus dropped to his knees and begged, “My lord, he was a real Firesmyth. I beg you to accept your gift and have mercy on me. Was it not for this that you sent us?” With that, Consus fell prostrate before him, hands splayed out in front offering the now revealed chest.

His master showed no emotion but took the chest. He studied the exterior for a long time. Consus remained unmoving on the floor before him. Then Araknik pointed a stylus of some kind at the brass inlaid lock. A brilliant red beam of light flashed from the tip of the stylus to the lock casing. Tucking the stylus in the folds of his robe, he lifted the lid up just enough to glimpse its contents.

He smiled. For a man of 678 years, it was amazing he still had teeth. Then he spoke. “You may have redeemed yourself, Consus son of Minar.”

Consus looked up still afraid but in time to see his master withdraw an old scroll from the chest. He dropped the chest, which tumbled down the stairs and came to rest near Consus’ hands. The Gray Wolf looked over the scroll. With every second the half-pleasant expression on his face turned sterner, from incredulity to abject anger. He hissed a long, slow hiss. A cold breeze seemed to touch Consus and a chill ran down his spine. He feared his last moments of life were quickly approaching.

“This is not it!” screamed Araknik. “This is a *love* poem!”

* * * *



Cah Bel, Andril Region

Firesmyth Mancuso sat down on the stone bench grieving over the loss of the small chest. Granted, it was only of sentimental value and not vital to his mission, but still, it meant a lot to him. For a man driven single-mindedly to redeem history, he did not allow himself many luxuries. This was one.

The poem was not for him, but for his mother written by his father. He would never see them again and hadn't seen them since he was nineteen. Firesmyth Mancuso possessed few articles from those early years, and this scroll was one of them. Over the years each of these articles had fallen out of his possession like the leaves falling off of a tree in late autumn. This recent loss served as a reminder that deep winter quickly approached.

He shook himself trying to clear the memory. "Face it, old man," he said to himself in his thick accent, "It is gone and has served a greater purpose."

He lifted his right hand over his head. The stone bench he sat on melted back into its original shape with the control panel overhead. He pulled it down and forward and it came to life with a low rumble of an engine. Dozens of jewel encrusted geometric designs joined by flowing ribbons of gold ivy adorned the table. To one who had not used such a device before this would look like a form of art, but to his experienced eyes, the symbols and jewels were powerful tools. He pressed a few and a soft female voice came from the control panel in an ancient language, "Hyper-jump activated." The air filled with an electric hum.

"Now, where to next? He pulled the scroll out of the inner pocket in his cloak and looked at it. Ancient words surrounded a hand drawn map that represented the continents of Epi though the mapmaker could use a lesson in proportion. Seven stars dotted the map, somewhat evenly spaced across the globe.

He lifted up his head in a short prayer asking for guidance. Then he pointed to one in the western hemisphere near Cah Bel. "That one. An old friend awaits his destiny."

The humming had grown and divided into harmonic beat patterns. It turned into a high pitched whine and the vessel shook a little. With a couple more adjustments on the table he sat back and smiled.

"Not a bad morning's work. It was sure good to see the old place again."

The dome shaped exterior of the POD reformed and the wind stirred. The hum increased in pitch and the POD faded into an outline. It whipped fallen leaves into little swirls. The wind grew, gathering the little swirls into a larger whirlwind around the silhouette of the POD. Sparks of light jumped between the flying debris. The silhouette shimmered and disappeared. A high pitched noise faded with a lingering pulsating beat.

The leaves settled.

All was as it had been in the beginning except for the unconscious Shadow Knights lying among the ruins of Cah Bel. The ruins, like a silent witness to all that had transpired, fell asleep once more.

