

Chapter II

W

The Salmonil

June 22, 1748 EQ, East of Selma, Andril Kingdom

Talon sat on the front stoop of his grandparent's cottage in the Andril Mountains. The excitement of exploring and swimming alone had already worn off. The problem was he didn't have anyone to explore or swim with and loneliness was beginning to fill his mind. It wasn't easy finding another eight-year-old here. Talon's grandparents lived on the outskirts of a small mountain village called Selma nestled in among the evergreens of the Elentil River Valley. Although Selma lay at the intersection of a mountain road and a caravan route, only the locals knew the town existed. Even the tradesmen that traveled this route rarely stopped at Selma. Instead, they stopped at the Fortress of Carmel on the southern side of the Andril Mountains.

Selma offered his grandparents solitude, but solitude wasn't what Talon needed. It had been hard for Talon since his parent's death, he had no other family – no brothers or sisters or extended family besides his grandparents. Some great mystery surrounded his grandfather's past, something that made connections with an extended family a dark secret. If he ever asked, they would tell him that his aunts and uncles “moved far away” and if he asked further, they wouldn't answer. Something must have happened; some family feud or sin they wanted to keep private. So, Talon knew of no other living relatives besides his grandparents.

Still, he had developed a deep bond with them. Even though they were no true replacement for parents, they had tried helping him as much as they could: coming out to the capital of Cannor where he lived and staying with him until he finished out court training each year and when summers came, taking him into their home. Now, after the newness of another summer vacation had worn off, he once again felt the generation gap between him and his grandparents starting to widen and for the first time he understood why. They chose to live out the remainder of their twilight years away from the hassle of court life whereas he wanted to explore and make friends. His grandfather used to hold the respected post of Earl of the West Gate and that post

was now conferred upon the young Talon but he hated court life. Both his grandparents spent their entire lives as ambassadors whereas Talon wanted to become a knight or join King Leonid's army and avenge his parent's death. They looked forward to gardening, quiet nights, and most of all, fishing with their one and only grandson; he wouldn't be able to see his friends from the city for weeks until school started again and fishing was also starting to get real old. The only highlight of his stay in Selma now was an occasional visit by a merchant named Mishmar who came to visit his grandparents and taught Talon to sword fight.

When Talon first arrived, he was not disappointed at first. His grandpa or *Papa* as he called him was great company and took advantage of their time together. But still an old man did not like to play little boys' games all day and Talon wanted nothing more than to crawl around in the dirt with someone. Though a bad leg and reliance on a walking staff meant Papa couldn't get down in the dirt, he recognized Talon's longing for companionship and tried to make up for it. He even showed Talon some of the secrets of the lost arts and, though not one of the great masters, the old man could use the lost arts as a gardening aid. The lost arts had waned in forgetfulness among the common masses because they had been forbidden for all except the highest aristocracy and clergy.

Being an old dignitary tucked away in the mountains, the local population had adopted his papa as their own sage. They called him by his old title of Ambassador and often dropped by asking for advice or to settle a civil dispute. Occasionally, he was even asked to perform a wedding or birthing ceremony. This suited Papa well because he privately craved the attention that aristocracy provides without the hassle of politics.

Talon's grandma also loved the company of the locals, for her delight was to entertain and cook. It was her "lost art" and she had plenty of time to practice it. Her sweet nut rolls were Talon's favorite. Most of all, when he spent time with his grandma, he didn't have to eat *Janaro roots*.

Every culture has its Janaro root. It somehow contains a universal substance that crosses all cultural and planetary boundaries. Every sentient race has a form of this substance that mothers believe cures all ailments and causes children to believe that if it makes you gag, it must somehow be "good" for you -- the converse of course is also true. Among the people of the Andril Mountains this universal substance took the form of the Janaro root. Fortunately, grandma did not ascribe to this law.

In their court days, the other royalty looked down on her homemaking abilities saying that was the responsibility of serfs and not a noble lady of the court. Being the proud lady that she was, she disregarded these rebukes and kept the origin of her domestic talents a secret. Talon knew nothing of court politics, only that he loved his grandma's cooking. Little known to him, his childlike ignorance of his grandma's secret origin was about to change.

Something caught his attention up the road. He saw a tall, cloaked figure approaching. The man -- he assumed it was a man though he could not see any distinguishing features from this distance to tell him otherwise -- walked up the mountain road towards the only residence on this side of the street. As the man started walking up the footpath to his papa's door, Talon looked hard and long at him. No, he hadn't seen him before, but he couldn't be sure because the hood hid the man's features. Talon was sure of one thing, though: this man didn't come from Selma. Talon had never seen anyone wear a hooded cloak before, neither here nor in the big cities.

"Hello there young Talon," called out the stranger as he approached. Talon could not see, but he guessed the man was smiling by the way he sounded. Talon looked down and didn't



answer, not because he intended to be rude, but because he was timid. How did this man know his name? Still sitting, Talon scooted over a little to allow the man to pass.

The man stopped and pulled back his hood. The sun caught his long white-gray hair and almost made it glow. As he smiled, the folds of wrinkles on his face deepened. He had a soft, pleasant expression that almost made you want to hold his hand and ask him to sit down and tell you a story. Somehow Talon knew he would be good at telling stories. At the same time, Talon felt this man was a warrior. He seemed pleasant and polite, yet down to business. He held himself with the air of a dignitary, standing ramrod straight, eyes focused and clear. His eyes ... Talon's favorite color, a crystal clear blue.

Talon smiled back. He liked this old man already. How old was he? Talon couldn't tell. Anyone over twenty-five was old to him. But something about the way he smiled told him that this man was the kind of person that was willing to get down in the dirt and play games with children.

"My name," the man said presently in his thick accent, "is Firesmyth Mancuso. Is your grandfather, Endvar, available?"

Talon nodded. He had rarely heard his papa called by his birth name. Tradition allowed only equals call each other by their birth name. All others must use a title. *I didn't know there was another ambassador around here*, he thought.

He escorted Firesmyth into the cottage and announced the stranger's presence. His papa approached the man smiling and the two bowed a little to each other with hands pressed flat and with fingers pointing up in the proper court style of greeting. His papa did this warmly although it seemed Firesmyth arrived unexpectedly just in time for dinner. He offered Firesmyth a seat and as he sat down, Talon caught a glimpse of his ruby hilted sword under his cloak.

"Woah," said Talon forgetting his shyness. "Do you want to practice with me? I'm pretty good."

Endvar waved him back. "Now, now Talon, this man has very important business and doesn't want to be..."

"Bothered?" Firesmyth cut him off. "I would love to," he said mussing Talon's hair. "But not now, later. I have some things to discuss with your grandparents."

Talon couldn't wait. It soon seemed that Firesmyth's definition of the word "later" took on an entirely different meaning than Talon's definition. Except for the nice things that grown ups usually say to young kids, the conversation tapered off into distant reminiscing. By the way they spoke about their past, Talon guessed that they and Firesmyth knew each other when they were very young.

"Have you heard of anything from the south?" asked Talon's grandmother. Her name was Fossa, Salmi for 'morning child.' Only her friends addressed her Fossa, and only her closest friends, those who knew her origins called her Morning Child.

"Nay," answered Firesmyth, "I have been away to the north and east on other matters. But I encountered the enemy within your own borders, at the ruins of Cah Bel."

"How did they get across the..." began Endvar, but Firesmyth cut him off.

"I do not know. The fact of their crossing does not disturb me as much as the devices they brought with them. He is using the lost arts again."

Endvar sat up, alert. His eyes narrowed. "In violation of the treaty?"



Mancuso shook his head. “I do not think so. Not the SYLC Treaty at least, perhaps one of your local treaties -- I am not familiar with the currents ones. These shadow knights have bio-implants ... well at least one of them did.”

“Like yours?” asked Fossa.

“Like one of mine, yes.” He pulled up the sleeve covering his left arm and turned his palm upward. “This one and yet...”

Talon looked up, curious now, and saw a flesh colored device more like a growth than a machine. “Euuu.”

Fossa looked over and chided Talon, “Now that’s not polite, dear.”

“And you tell no one about it, understand?” added Endvar.

Talon nodded, wide eyed.

Their conversation soon meandered off into more mundane tales of old times, which alienated Talon and strained his patience although he tried his hardest to listen and understand. Soon he found himself outside playing alone again hoping Firesmyth would soon join him. Being young and inventive, he often found things that would bore adults ... meticulous things that exemplified his organizational gifts. His attention now turned to a frog that lazily hopped across the path. Talon followed it with eager fascination. He liked how it looked; dark, thin front legs with webbed fingers splayed out and powerfully thick back legs. Most of all, the brilliant blue stripe down its shiny back looked as if it had been painted with a color more vivid than he had ever seen.

“Hey, what are you doing outta Papa’s pond? I’ll help it back home.” But every time he tried to catch it, it jumped away. “Wait up,” he called out gently, “I won’t hurt you.” Then he tried a different tactic by methodically laying down barriers in an effort to guide the frog’s path. He continued his pursuit and before long he heard voices again. He looked up to see that the frog had jumped off his path to a bush under the window of his papa’s shed. Talon recognized the voices as belonging to his papa and Firesmyth. Apparently, they had made their way over to his shed for more talk. Talon was about ready to resume his frog hunt when he heard his name mentioned. He stopped and listened intently. The visitor was talking, something about the boy’s future vital to the fulfillment of an old prophecy.

“That’s what your kind said about me when I was a youth,” replied Endvar.

Now, talk about himself was almost enough to peak his curiosity to the point of eavesdropping, but talk of his papa’s mysterious past was too much to resist. He eased his way between the bush and the cold stone shed wall. He edged as close as he could to the window without the risk of being seen. He wanted badly to look into the window, but dared not take the chance.

“Consider this...”

Talon heard a rustle of stiff cloth. The temptation to peek seized him and he quickly looked over the window’s edge. Firesmyth held a golden rod and showed it to Endvar. Talon ducked back down, his heart racing.

“The shadow knights in Cah Bel had it. It disturbs me enough that it fell into Araknik’s hands, but what is more disturbing is what is written upon it. The device itself is Arcathian, by the look of the workmanship, but see these runes?”

“Yes, it’s written in Salmi.”

“Would you like me to read it for you?”



“No,” said Endvar. “My Salmi’s a little rusty but I believe I can read it.

Alas, then came the devourer,
The gray wolf who stalks his prey.
But hope arrived this late hour,
The lion who drove him away.

The wolf clad in lion’s clothes
Caught the eagle in his nest
But an arrow from the wise man’s bow
Pierced the gray wolf’s breast.”

“Do you understand it?” asked Firesmyth.

“Well, the gray wolf is Araknik and you’re called the Golden Lion but I don’t know about the eagle or the wise man.”

“Yes, that is the mystery of it. It quotes the *Ox Shalay*, book 23 and chapter 13, starting at stanza 19. The only reason Araknik would go to the length of having this engraved on a device of the lost arts is that it vexes him so. He is as obsessed with this prophecy as he is with his own immortality.”

“An eagle ... hmm,” Endvar mused, “why would I be described as an eagle?”

“I do not believe it is you.”

“But I thought *I* was the fulfillment of the prophecy.” Endvar sounded a little miffed, like one who sacrificed much for a promised reward only to be given emptiness in return.

“Ah, you speak truly. You are part of the fulfillment, my friend.”

“Part?”

“Talon, I believe,” explained Firesmyth, “is both the eagle and the wise man.”

“Talon is not a man and I won’t expose him to Araknik.”

“He will not be a child forever.”

“Forever? That’s worse.” And now Endvar sounded very old to Talon, “I’ve reached the last years of my life, and I expected to see Araknik come to justice.”

In a deep, low voice of an old friend more humbled than reprimanding, Firesmyth replied, “The prophecy is not for your own satisfaction, Ambassador. Nevertheless, I believe you will see it fulfilled.”

“Not likely if I have to wait until Talon’s an adult.”

“Yes,” Firesmyth continued, “but you know the oracle gives no guarantees certain events will take place, only that certain events are likely to take place. I believe the *Ox Shalay* speaks the truth, though not with the same veracity as the Scrolls of Yashu. Think of it as probable future history.”

“History?” Endvar sighed. “I was young when I first heard those promises and now look at me. Justice should be swift and history takes too long.”

“That is because you do not see history like I do and as for justice, there are many facets, angles that we do not see.”



Talon waited for a while. He heard nothing and started to think they left the room entirely and was about to look over the window ledge when he heard Firesmyth speak again.

“I have not come to speak about your roll, but about Talon’s. Rarely have I told anyone what they are to do even when I held certainty for a given event. It is far too dangerous to know one’s future before it happens ... even my own.”

“Why?” asked Endvar.

“If you know, really know beyond a doubt, what you are to do in a future circumstance, you might not react the way you should. Often the unrehearsed action is the best action.”

“So why even bring it up?”

“In this case, I am afraid you might ruin it.”

“Ruin it? Ah, there you are wrong, sage. I wouldn’t ruin anything for my grandson.”

“You love him, do you not?”

“Yes.”

“Would be willing to give up anything for him?”

“Yes.”

“Want only the best for him?”

“Of course.”

“And what exactly is the best for him,” asked Firesmyth.

“The best education, best training ... every advantage I can give him.”

“Would you prefer military or court training.”

“Well, I would prefer him to be a ambassador like me and not a warrior like his father.”

“Be careful not to project your own life’s ambitions onto your grandson.” Firesmyth hesitated.

Talon’s legs began cramping up. To remain out of eyesight he had to haunch down with his back along the wall and knees bent. His thighs were telling him they had enough of this position.

Finally Firesmyth answered, “He is to be both. Do not steer him away from the sword ... no, no, I am aware of your concerns. The blood he shall shed will be the true enemy’s blood, not blood shed in vain glory.”

“You ask a hard task, old one.”

“I am not done,” continued Firesmyth. “You also have one more great task ahead of you. You are to save Selma.”

“From what?”

“I can not say.”

“You’re no help, Mancuso.”

Firesmyth Mancuso sighed. “My task is to hold the doors open for both you and the boy, no more, no less, though I would dearly love to do more.” Talon heard them stand up. “Come, I wish to see how the tent maiden is fairing.”

Talon heard footsteps leaving the room, the shed door open and lock close. He sat alone again behind the bush with the frog looking up at him with large, lonely eyes. “I get to be a warrior,” he told the frog. “I get a sword, a real sword ... don’t worry. I still won’t hurt you.”

* * * *



After dinner, Talon went out to the front porch and sat down to watch the setting Epi sun, called Berea, which sets to their east. After a few minutes, his papa joined him and brought a board and a small sack under one arm and his cane in the other hand.

“What’s that, Papa?” asked Talon.

“A baraka set. Do you know how to play?”

“Sure, you try to get the other guy’s pieces, right?”

“Well, yes, but it’s a lot more complicated than that.” The old man set the board down and poured the pieces out of the bag. Each piece was either white or red and each was uniquely shaped. Some bore the images of a wolf, others of a bear, an eagle, hunters, archers, ambassadors, and the like. *Papa must have paid a lot for this set*, Talon thought. Most of the sets he had seen were basic geometric shapes representing their piece name in only the most abstract of ways.

“It’s not that hard, Papa. All you have to do is know how each piece can capture another.” He picked out a red wolf. “See this one, it’s my favorite. It can go in any direction and capture all but the prince. I can win the whole game with this piece alone.”

Endvar frowned. “If you really think that is enough, you are only thinking one move ahead at a time.” He continued setting up his white pieces and Talon started setting up his own.

“Thinking one move ahead at a time might help you *now*, but when you start playing against an experienced opponent, you better think farther ahead than that.” He fixed his gaze on Talon and squinted his eyes. “You need a *plan*.” He said this last word with such a hush and so intently that it made Talon shiver.

Talon whispered back just as intently, “What plan?”

Endvar sat up straight. The secretive mood had been broken, “What plan? Why, your plan, of course. The one you’ll make up in that wonderfully smart, little brain of yours.” He tapped Talon lightly on the temple with his forefinger. He must have sensed Talon’s confusion and added, “Here, I’ll show you a plan. You think your red wolf is the greatest?”

“Yeah, he can’t be beat unless you don’t watch what you’re doing and make a dumb move.”

“No. What piece is more valuable than the wolf?”

“Ah, the palace, but it can’t move. It can only capture a piece right in front of it.”

“Leave your palace where it belongs and place your wolf right here.” Endvar placed the red wolf diagonally in front of the red palace.

“Now I take my ambassador...”

“I don’t like those, Papa.”

“Why not?” He sounded slightly hurt.

“You can’t do much with them. I mean they can only make that funny move.”

Endvar frowned. “Well, it all depends on how you use it. Watch.” He took the ambassador -- an image of a skinny bald man dressed in a dignitary’s robe -- and placed to the right of Talon’s palace and wolf.

At first Talon didn’t understand the importance of this. Then he saw it in a flash. “Oh,” he said almost laughing himself off his seat. “The ambassador can get both the wolf and the palace. OK, OK, I have to save my palace or lose the game, right? So I have to sacrifice my wolf?”

Endvar smiled, which was a rare sight for him since he was beginning to lose his teeth and felt ashamed. “You learn quickly, young Talon, maybe you’ll be an ambassador like me yet.”



“Uh ... yeah. Sorry, Papa. I think you’re great and all, but I don’t really like ambassadors.” He looked up at the kind old man before him and corrected himself, “... eh ... ambassadors other than you, I mean.”

“Well, we ambassadors might teach you something yet, young man. That move I just showed you is called the Shú-mún move, named after a famous ambassador that became king by using a move like this in real life. I knew Shú-mún, you know.”

“Uh huh.” Talon busied himself with setting up the pieces for a game. He wanted to see if he could get his papa in a Shú-mún.

“Shú-mún came from the Huanan Kingdom and...”

“Uh huh.” Endvar looked up and saw that Talon, who had already set up the pieces for a new game, was more interested in playing the game than learning the history of ambassadors, however much it interested the old man.

So the game began. Endvar played easy at first allowing the novice to get the upper hand, but had to quickly reverse his tactics because, although Talon still tended to think one move ahead, he was fairly good. In the end Talon won with only a couple of pieces left. Gathering up the pieces, Talon asked, “Papa, how did you and grandma meet?”

The old man stopped collecting pieces and looked blankly towards Berea. He said nothing for a long time but just watched the last rays slide behind the mountains. Talon began wondering if his papa was getting too old and couldn’t hear.

Then with a voice that made him sound very far away, the old man replied, “Well,” and then said nothing for a very long time again. Talon looked down at the pieces left on the board. No, he still wasn’t able to make the Shú-mún move in this game, maybe the next.

Finally, the old man spoke. “It was here in Selma. I was settling a dispute with the desert people...” turning to his grandson to make sure he understood the geography, “the plains on the southern border of the Andril Region...”

Talon nodded. “Papa, everybody knows about the desert.” Then with eyebrows knitted and in the best grown-up voice he could muster he continued, “That’s where the Salmonil live, the horse people.” He wanted to show his grandpa he knew a lot about the Salmonil. In fact, he knew very little.

Endvar nodded and continued his narrative. “Over the last twenty generations or so, they’ve developed a reputation as ruthless hunters and marksmen archers. In the old days, they were content to live lives as herders. Their lives centered around the triceratops. But when I was a young man, they started raiding the border and slaughtered whole villages.”

Grandpa looked very hard at him. “Do you know why,” he asked.

“Well, they’re just ... just born that way. They’re evil. They burn their faces with hot coals, and eat their prisoners.”

Grandpa shook his head. “Lies. I know from experience that they do *not* eat their prisoners.” From the tone of his voice, it was clear that Endvar was not pleased with his grandson’s answer. Talon hadn’t noticed it until now, but Berea’s fading light turned this formerly kind old man’s face into a livid blood red mask and it frightened him. Endvar continued, “Those are lies told by people that don’t understand the way of the Salmonil warrior-herdsman. The land itself made them hard. You see, the harsh, barren climate of the southern plains allows only the strongest man or beast to survive. They have learned to live alone on the plains with their herds of grazing triceratops and, when the time comes, they slaughter these beasts ... their only neighbors.”



Talon listened intently to every word his papa said. Little was generally known about the Salmonil. “But what does that have to do with you and grandma?”

Talon’s question seemed to catch his papa off guard as if he asked something he shouldn’t have. Endvar looked gravely at his only grandson. “What I’m about to tell you, you can not tell anyone else. Those we want to know, already know.”

Talon gave a solemn nod. He imagined some great terrible secret. Perhaps she lived near the Salmonil a long time ago or maybe she was even kidnapped by them.

“Your grandmother,” coming closer to Talon and lowering his voice, “your grandmother is a Salmonil tent maiden.”

A horrified look crossed the boy’s face, something between pity and fear. “Euuu ... how? Was she kidnapped and forced to do all their cooking?”

Endvar smirked. “That’s the first time I have heard *that* response. No, my grandson, they did not make her cook and they did not kidnap her. She is Salmonil.”

Talon’s expression changed to disgust. “And you *married* her?”

“Yes. Do not be too disgusted, young one. I may have married her, but since she’s your grandmother, that makes you part Salmonil.”

Talon stared blankly at him for a long time. His people held such a prejudice against the Salmonil that it came as quite a shock that he was actually one of them. Physically, there was no obvious difference between his people and the Salmonil, because they were one people long ago. It was the contrast in their culture that drove a wedge of distrust and hatred among them.

“But aren’t they vicious killers?”

“Killers? Yes, they are killers. We are all killers. Did we not kill fish this afternoon and eat them tonight?”

“Yes, but Papa, it’s not the same. I mean, they kill people. Didn’t they kill mom and dad?”

“Yes, but that only came later. Raiders from the Nomar Tribe killed your parents but weren’t your parents trying to help the Ingaray, another tribe of the Salmonil? You see, Talon, at first they only killed animals, their own livestock. They usually kill running animals from the saddle. This in itself is no easy task since the rider must use both hands to shoot the arrow while at a full gallop and steering with his legs.” Endvar did his best to demonstrate with his legs straddling bags of supplies and pretending to shoot an arrow off to the side. Talon’s mind filled in the rest with vivid imagery. “This ability has made the Salmonil herdsman-warrior and his steed a formidable fighting unit. They can travel in one day what would take an infantry army four days of almost non-stop marching. Even worse, when the Salmonil were on the move, they could continue to travel at this pace from one day to the next comfortably.” Turning to his audience of one he asked, “And do you know why?”

Talon shook his head quickly. Berea now lit the whole porch up with the eerie red glow. Alone with this red-faced old man telling secret stories gave the lad a thrill of terror.

“I will tell you,” he continued with a note of satisfaction. “They are comfortable traveling like that because they are nomads. They can cover whole regions in a matter of days. They have different groups among themselves, ranks of men and tribes of people. One tribe is devoted entirely to the work of a blacksmith, shoeing ponies and making swords. But among these groups the shadow knights are the worst. They all fight together in one well trained unit under the direct command of their generals and chieftains.”

“Have you met them Papa?”



That question broke the mood. His grandfather shook his head and said slowly, “I will not say ... not here ... not now. The night approaches.”

Again silence; except for the breeze blowing through the forest trees. The last curve of Berea had quietly set beyond the mountains and darkness came in as a cold blanket.

“Fortunately,” he continued in a coarse whisper, “they have not yet tamed the shantilla.”

This gave Talon a shudder that lasted the rest of the night, partly because of the growing cold and partly because of the chilling tale. The shantilla are subject of stories told by those who want to scare little kids.

Evidently, his grandfather saw Talon’s reaction, hesitated but continued. “The shantilla are not the monsters you have been told about. They are large reptilian-like creatures of ancient blood...”

“Yeah, dinosaurs.”

“True, but these are more birdlike than reptilian and stand a height and a half as tall as a man on large, powerful legs. Long ago the Knights of Shinang chose the shantilla as their steeds over the Boraks, the large burden bearing behemoths of the Khangil highlands. They chose the shantilla because they could outrun a horse both in a sprint and in an endurance race. But they could only tame a few.”

“Don’t they eat people, Papa?”

“The shantilla? No.” He hesitated and in a low, raspy voice barely above a whisper, “Not them.”

He said this in such a way that made Talon think that the Salmonil tamed a more dreadful creature. “But why did they start attacking us?”

Grandpa looked out again towards the horizon. He sighed. “Berea has gone to bed. It is time for us to join her.” He grabbed the few remaining game pieces.

“No, no! Papa, please. Tell me the rest.”

Endvar’s face, now cooled by the evening breeze and perhaps a little more scary in the twilight, turned towards Talon. “Such things should not be talked about after dark, especially to little boys with too many questions.” His grandpa looked small now. He hunched his shoulders as if he were cold and leaned against porch wall as if it offered safety against some unseen or imagined menace. His eyes darted from shadow to shadow, peering into their darkness. Then suddenly, he straightened up startling Talon. “We must go in now,” he insisted and finished picking up the pieces.

Talon leaned over and put his hand on his grandfathers. “Papa, we don’t get to talk like this much. Now’s a good time to finish the story.”

“Hush. You already know too much to clutter your little mind. We must go inside.”

Talon hesitated, looked around, then obeyed. *Well, I’m not scared*, he thought to himself. *I am almost nine years old, almost grown up, and I should know about the Salmonil.*

Endvar did not talk about the Salmonil again, and the look on his face over the next few weeks told Talon that he would be wise not to bring it up.

June 22, 1748 EQ, Just West of the Village of Selma

The shadow knight kept under the forest’s dark canopy. It took little effort for him to sneak across the border into the Andril Kingdom and hide in the mountain forest. The slim resistance he did encounter came not from the boarder guards, who were not vigilant, or from the Long



Wall that separated the two peoples, which he discovered had several breaches. No, the resistance came from the mountain terrain itself. His shaggy desert pony was used to the temperature extremes of the high Erdi Desert; she was not used to steep slopes. She, like the rest of her breed, could not see her hind hooves and get a proper footing. It made for a slow and dangerous journey but if he got the information he was hoping for, it would be all worthwhile.

Now he had to wait. He did not like to wait; he craved action. His arm itched. He pulled up his sleeve and scratched the skin around a new bio-implant. The doctor had told him it was healing well but it didn't seem so to the shadow knight. He didn't trust his own tribal shaman let alone some foreign doctor that Araknik dug up.

Then he heard someone coming up the wooded path and threw himself back against the tree.

* * *

The iron guild master from the Capital of Cannor smiled to himself as he walked up the wooded path. A fresh pine scent filled the air, but he didn't notice it. The birds, which were singing earlier, had stopped, but he ignored them. Fresh pony tracks lead to a cluster of trees to his right, but he paid them no attention, even if he did know what to look for. No, his mind centered on how well things had been going for him: how he had accumulated a small fortune and how he had kept this fortune hidden from his master. It was only a matter of prudence, he told himself, to take advantage of his position and set aside a little for his own. His master had given him an assignment and he had fulfilled it – something his predecessor had failed to do and it cost him his life – and now he began thinking how he might discretely spend all that wealth. He mentally brooded over his stash, counting every coin as he prioritized his buying list.

That is why he was almost upon the shadow knight before he realized he was there. The sight of the dark robed warrior standing in his path with arms folded startled the guild master and he froze in his tracks. They locked eyes for a moment until the shadow knight finally spoke. “You're careless and walk like a pregnant goat.”

“So shoot me.”

The shadow knight only chuckled. “You've lived among these people far too long.”

The guild master smiled and then took on a more somber expression. “I have found the traitor.”

“Really? The master will be pleased,” the knight nodded.

“Assassinate?”

“No, observe. The master wishes to savor this one.”

