

The Crystal Key

T. L. Howard

To my daughter, whose patience I sorely tried
on more than one occasion.

The Crystal Key

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Prologue

The scorching summer sun beat down mercilessly on the parched creek bed. Normally a narrow stream of sweet smelling water surrounded by tufts of sturdy grass, flowed through its center. This summer however, was proving to be exceptionally hot, meaning the stream had long since dried. Without water, what little had managed to sprout, had withered leaving the dust to rule.

Hidden beneath the cool canopy of the trees that had sprung up along the banks over the years, was a tall, wiry man who found this particular stretch to be a tranquil haven following a trying day, and today had been one of the worst. For reasons known only to the students at the academy, they had decided to make a valiant effort to set a new record for injuries acquired during weapons training.

Today, as Rasmun wove his way around the debris that had collected in the bed, each step he took was punctuated by small puffs of dust that rose up and clung to the hem of his drab gray robe. A mumbled, steady stream of curses also punctuated his steps as long unresolved frustrations again boiled over into anger. The fuel for these tirades came as always from the humiliation and idiocy he was forced to endure as Healer to the Academy for the Knights of Deceris, a profession, though highly coveted, he despised.

The vocation had not been his choice, but that of his mother's family, specifically, his grandfather. All of this had begun when his father, a noble chosen by his grandfather, threw him and his mother out swearing he wasn't his father. Immediately, his grandfather had resolved to eradicate the label of bastard this action had thrust upon him. The old man's solution had been to purchase his admission into the Academy for the Healing Arts, a choice based on the fact he had demonstrated a remarkable talent in this area. This had convinced the old man he would reach such greatness, all traces of the shame would be removed. As with many things, he'd been wrong about that also.

"I would give anything for the chance to put those arrogant delinquents in their place," he swore through clenched teeth. "Better yet, give me command of an army of the true faith, and I will tear down every archaic institution those pampered, aristocratic whelps

cling to, including the self-righteous, self-serving government that supports them.”

He was so utterly absorbed with planning how he would bring this about; it took a flash of blinding light to catch his attention. The flash had come from a grouping of small stones that lay perched upon a weed-choked protrusion on the bank. His curiosity peaked; he began to carefully move the stones aside, searching for the source of the light. Near the bottom, wedged between two of the stones, he found an amulet of a design not seen since the Great War. With great care, he began to work it free. At last, he held a perfect disk of iridescent silver into which sacred runes had been inscribed around an inlaid star crafted from the purest black onyx. For many, this amulet represented the end of the world, but to him it represented salvation.

“This can be only one thing, for nowhere in the world does there exist another amulet bearing his holy symbol. After so many years, my prayers, our prayers, are to be answered.” The overwhelming joy Rasmus felt as he cradled the amulet lit his face.

Enraptured by the knowledge the amulet’s appearance signaled their chance to end a millennium of oppression; Rasmus felt a sense of hope begin to replace a lifetime of anger and hate. Eager to search his books for what was required to set this change into motion, he started to place the Holy Amulet into his pocket. Yet, as his hand opened to drop it in, the star began to pulsate. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, until he found he couldn’t look away. His gaze transfixed by the hypnotic pulsating, he became aware of a voice, distant yet commanding, emanating from within the light that now probed deep into his soul.

“Yes, yes, your heart is pure,” the voice began, its tone seductive, barely more than a whisper, yet crystal clear. “Though it is also troubled by the injustice and persecution you must not only witness, but also endure daily. Yet I see these trials have strengthened your convictions, not lessened them. You are indeed a man of great inner strength as was the last who held my Amulet.” The voice fell silent, but with the silence came a great warming comfort, the kind that comes only when true empathy for another’s pains and sorrows is present.

“It is to this man of unyielding convictions that I now appeal. Our time of redemption approaches. For too long, my faithful have been without guidance, powerless to end their suffering and forced to bear indignities without solace. Stand with me and openly acknowledge

me. Together we will rise up and end the reign of our oppressors, end our enslavement.” With each word, Rasmusn’s soul felt his newfound hope strengthening. Yet, this did not quiet the whispers of skepticism born from a lifetime of scorn and being forced to embrace the very thing he hated most. He was about to ask how he alone could give rise to their redemption, when the voice returned.

“You need not speak for I know your mind and heart, and understand your doubt. Remember humanity’s obligation and feel now the power that will enable you to banish this world, and in its place build a new one dedicated to me.”

The voice had not fully faded, before Rasmusn felt an indescribable power coursing through his veins, igniting new, grander images of a world freed from its current oppression. Even as his mind grappled with these new possibilities, the voice added, “Yes, that’s right. Our path to freedom begins when you accept the eternal sacred duty that possessing the Holy Amulet commands. Speak my name and accept this duty, for with your acceptance, your journey to establish our new world begins.”

Without thought or hesitation, Rasmusn fell to his knees, clutching the Holy Amulet to his breast. “Hear me, oh great Lord Belamon. I, your servant Rasmusn, do humbly and of my own free will, offer you my mind, heart, body, and soul in service as your High Priest. I ask only that you bid me to do your will.” After a lifetime of searching, Rasmusn finally knew where his destiny lay.

“Stand my son, my champion, my Chosen, and hear the sacred duty you have sworn to undertake, for it is you who will lead the battle to bring about the change.

“Your first task is to seek out the one who would be the Chosen of Deceris, she who will possess Her Key. Having found her, show her patience and kindness, and through this, bring her into the true faith, for this is the way to undeniable victory. Yet, even as you do this, spread the news to my faithful that the time of change is approaching. So as not to alert our oppressors, be certain to use caution and discretion. When the faithful ask how this new world will be achieved, tell them it is through their unfailing allegiance to the Seven Devotions and my Commandments.”

A thin, calculating smile so long a part of him, as was the bitterness and hatred that had created it, crept across Rasmusn’s face as the realization he would be the one to cause the downfall of all he

loathed, blossomed full and rich in his mind. Yet, as quickly as the smile had formed, it vanished.

“My Lord, I am humbled and honored to serve you in such a glorious task, but how can I find someone whom your sister’s priests teach is a mere myth?”

“The woman of whom I speak is as real as the Holy Amulet you hold in your hand.”

Rasmusn’s smile returned, even larger than before. “Then you have but to tell me where I can find her and the task is as good as complete.”

“Alas, knowledge of each other’s Chosen is forbidden us. It is for you to discern this woman’s location, I can offer no assistance.”

Being told he needed to search for this woman, Rasmusn’s mind instantly brought forth the name of a young man he felt certain would be as eager as he was to embrace this task. Like himself, he held a great disdain for the current order and craved a new world. It helped that his ego was rankled by a system which jealously restricted advancement of those not of noble families. The fact he also possessed a hidden talent would prove invaluable.

“May I recruit another, if for no other purpose than to expedite her discovery?”

“How you complete this task is at your discretion. All I require is that when the moment of change is at hand, the woman who will bear my Sister’s Key will also bear a heart dedicated to me.”

“Then be assured it shall come to pass.” He started to ask how much time he had, when the light vanished and with it the voice.

Rasmusn cackled with delight as he slipped the Holy Amulet around his neck and beneath his robe. The moment the metal’s cool surface encountered his flesh, his heart stopped for the briefest of seconds as it, and the now barely discernible pulsating of the star, began to beat as one. Keenly aware of how he and the Holy Amulet were now joined, he turned and hurried back up the creek bed, stumbling and tripping over the debris in his haste. His immediate destination was his quarters located on the grounds of the Academy for the Knights of Deceris, an ancient, imposing structure, rising proudly up from the plain just beyond the northern gates of the great city of Novedos.

As he hurried along, Rasmusn began plotting how he was going to convince the young Knight assigned to guard the apothecary to assist in his new quest.

Ignoring the guards' greetings at the gate, Rasmus rushed past them and through the wide corridor beneath the Academy's looming central watchtower. Inside the compound, he turned down a street lined with the nondescript two story wooden structures that served as the student barracks. Nearing the end, he slipped between two of these buildings and down a dark, narrow alley emerging a few yards behind the substantial log wall that enclosed the training arena. The academy's apothecary that served as both a storehouse of herbs, potions and powders as well as his home, conveniently sat just outside the arena's back entrance. "That way they don't have to drag those arrogant, bleeding students too far for me to patch," he sneered as he scurried past the gate.

As he approached the apothecary, he spotted the Knight Sergeant dutifully guarding the structure despite the intolerable heat. Given the young man's robust stature, and the fact he allowed his shoulder length black hair to hang freely about his shoulders, he wasn't at all surprised to see his bronzed face glistening with sweat.

"Sergeant Diosk, how are you on this blistering hot day?" Rasmus inquired cordially, using the sleeve of his robe to wipe the beads of sweat from his brow.

"Fine sir, thank you."

"Since I've returned, why don't you accompany me inside out of this oppressive heat?" Rasmus smiled as he opened the door, allowing the cool shade within to entice the young sergeant.

He stood there a moment wondering why the young man hadn't moved, and then it struck him. Looking into the sergeant's dark eyes, he said, "If anyone questions, I'll simply say I ordered you to come in out of this deadly heat." This was all it took. Stepping aside, he waited for Diosk to enter. He liked Diosk, their minds turned in a similar fashion and he knew the young man saw him as an ally.

Entering the apothecary was like entering a whole other world. At first, one's nose was assaulted by a thousand different scents ranging from the dry dusty smell of various herbs, to a sickening rotting smell lying just beneath an overpowering sweetness. While attempting to sort through the conflicting scents, the visitor suddenly became aware of the structure's oddest feature; that no matter what the weather, the interior was always a perfect sixty degrees, never a degree cooler or warmer, which on day like today felt like heaven.

Once inside, Rasmus gestured for Diosk to take a seat at the well-used table just inside the door. As Diosk settled onto one of two

mismatched chairs, Rasmus took two tin cups from the shelf of an unsteady looking cupboard and turning to a pail filled with water on a nearby counter, he filled them.

“So my friend, have you received word regarding the promotion you applied for?” Rasmus inquired as he slipped onto the remaining chair and leaned forward out of what little sunlight could penetrate the dirt encrusted window behind him.

The broad smile that lit Diosk’s face gave him his answer before the Knight even spoke.

“Yes, I have. You are now speaking to a lieutenant. Starting two days hence, I will be guarding the eastern doors of the First Temple. It’s the night watch at this time, but soon I will be guarding the Archprelate himself.”

This didn’t surprise Rasmus, as Diosk was a highly skilled and intelligent young man, whose arrogance and ruthless ambitions often led him to boast he would not only be the youngest Knight ever to achieve the coveted rank of commander, but also the first sired by a pig farmer.

“Congratulations. It’s not often someone so soon out of the academy and not of noble blood receives advancement.” How fortuitous he thought. One of the obstacles he’d anticipated needing to surmount had been solved. With Diosk guarding one of the Temple’s doors, how he was going to gain access at night without being seen, had just been solved.

“In fact, such a momentous occasion demands a celebration.” Rasmus stood and pushed his chair back, its legs extruding an ear-piercing shriek as they scraped across the dusty wood floor. His destination was the opposite side of the room where the walls were nothing more than shelves overflowing with the tools of his trade.

Stooping, he reached behind a large box in the corner of a lower shelf and removed an odd shaped object wrapped in a soiled cloth. Once back at the table, he removed the cloth to reveal a pear shaped bottle filled with an amber liquid.

“This is something special from Krys Province. It’s called spiced wine,” he explained as he poured the water from their two cups onto the floor, letting the liquid run through the cracks between the boards, before refilling the cups with the contents of the bottle.

“The makers blend grains and fruits before carefully aging it through a process known only to them.”

Rasmusn smiled to himself. He noticed Diosk was watching him take the first drink. He could only assume he was waiting to see what effect, if any, it had on him. Evidently, the young man concluded it was safe, because he lifted his cup and drank fully of the spicy, sweet smelling liquid. Rasmusn watched with pleasure as the warmth created by the drink caused a slight pinkness to rise in the Knight's cheeks.

"Interesting drink, rather potent," Diosk commented taking a second swallow.

"That it is which is why I offer it to only the most important people." Rasmusn smiled as he refilled Diosk's cup. Though spiced wine wasn't an uncommon drink amongst those who could afford it, the particular bottle from which he was pouring was quite unique. Being a master at his craft, he knew precisely which blend of herbs to use to both augment the wine's natural effect, while enhancing the drinker's susceptibility to flattery and suggestion. He had long ago developed a high tolerance to these herbs so, of course, Diosk had seen nothing to make him wary of the drink.

Rasmusn watched a broad, slightly skewed smile take possession of Diosk's face, affirming the wine was doing its job.

"Thank you," Diosk said, his speech slightly slurred. "You are one of the few here who have the intelligence to recognize my inimitable talents. I'm going to miss our little talks."

The corners of Rasmusn's mouth curled up ever so slightly. The opportunity to seduce Diosk into joining his quest lay before him; made much easier with the wine's assistance.

"I see no reason for our little talks to stop. I have a proposition I believe you're going to find very appealing." Leaning forward, resting his folded arms on the scarred surface of the table, Rasmusn imparted all that had transpired during his walk. He made certain to mention how he was willing to share the glory and power with the right man.

It became readily apparent to him that with each new revelation, Diosk's interest was growing stronger. The young man had leaned forward and was listening intently. Yet, something told him it wasn't just his story that had caught Diosk's attention. He would have been willing to wager he'd also noticed the changes in his appearance. His eyes, for instance, had gone from a true blue to an icy one. In addition, his usually fair, yet healthy complexion had paled to the point it nearly matched his white hair that lay draped over his shoulders. Then there were his general features. His long slender jaw, along with the long thinness of his nose, mouth, and high chiseled cheekbones,

had always been prominent, but now they were sharp, almost knife like. In truth, he would have to agree he looked as though he'd aged considerably in one short afternoon.

"May I see the Holy Amulet?" Diosk asked, his eagerness showing on his face.

Rasmusn smiled and, grasping the chain from which it hung, pulled the amulet out from beneath his robe. As he cradled it in the palm of his hand, Diosk's eyes grew wide with wonderment.

"Is this authentic? Did you really speak with him?"

"Yes, there is no doubt that Lord Belamon has found a way to break his forced exile and, with our help, will soon be able to return."

Rasmusn leaned back and waited. He could see the workings of Diosk's mind flickering through his eyes. First, his eyes narrowed as he questioned things, then they grew wide as he began to embrace the idea. Finally, the Knight smiled and asked, "How do we begin?"

"We first need to learn exactly what Deceris' Key is. All our history says is that it's some type of pendant. Once we've learned that, we find out where the woman who possesses it lives." Before Diosk could open his mouth, Rasmusn added, "Before you ask, it will be my job to get into the restricted room in the library and start going through the official records. We'll start the moment you take your new post."

The two spent the remainder of the day, huddled over the table, plotting and planning every move. Things had been going well until Diosk mentioned the door to the official records section was secured by an impressive series of locks. Rasmusn had simply smiled. Apparently, the reason he excelled at his trade was the fact he was also a Practitioner, a Terran to be exact. Diosk had smiled and nodded. The fact this piece of information wasn't known was quite understandable, as it was unlawful to practice the black arts without being sanctioned by the Temple.

By the time the night watch showed to relieve Diosk, their plans had been set. It had been decided that each night Rasmusn would enter the Temple grounds through the eastern gate just before the changing of the guard. He would then conceal himself behind the large stacks of empty crates that, thanks to the storehouse being located there, were perpetually stacked against that portion of the wall. Rasmusn would then wait for Diosk's signal, a signal that would let him know the Archprelate, whose official Audience Chamber was just down from the library's doors, had left with his guard. At that point, Rasmusn

would slip in behind Diosk and into the Temple. They had determined this was the best solution, since people would begin asking questions if they saw him entering the Temple night after night.

Exactly one week after Diosk assumed his new post, Rasmun entered the Temple for the first time. Thus began his arduous task of not only discovering exactly what Deceris' Key looked like, but also its current whereabouts.

Once inside the eastern vestibule, Rasmun would conceal himself in the shadows along the walls then cautiously work his way through the huge chapel that was the Temple's first floor. Upon reaching the marble stairs in the northern vestibule, he would deftly scurry up them to the second floor. Again clinging to the shadows, he would work his way down the dimly lit corridor where, upon reaching the great library's doors, he would slip quietly inside, grateful for the long held tradition that allowed them to remain unlocked.

Now hidden in the darkness of the cavernous repository, he would hurry past the rows of study tables and shelves packed with books to an obscure door in the far wall. There he would use a simple spell to open the locks that barred his access to the Temple's official records. Having gained access into the sprawling, light starved room, he would head straight for the theological records and resume his search through the dust covered volumes of official information crammed onto the rows of shelves, looking for anything that might mention Deceris' Key.

With barely two hours left before sunrise on what was proving to be another fruitless night, Fate handed him a promising reference. Quite by accident, he had stumbled across a slim volume titled *The Sacred Symbols of Belamon and Deceris*, poking out from behind a stack of dusty books resting on the floor against the wall. Saying a quick prayer, he opened the book's well-worn cover and began to read. Almost immediately, it proved useful. Within the first few pages, it confirmed the amulet he possessed was the same amulet worn by the High Priests of Belamon. It also confirmed that it provided them a direct line of communication with the god.

His hope rising, he continued to read. Sure enough, within the next few pages was the information he sought. Though the book was merely a summary of these two artifacts, it contained all the information he required. Specifically, it confirmed that the Key served Deceris' Chosen in the same manner his Amulet served him. It also stated it had been entrusted to a real woman, with the command it was

to be passed down to her subsequent generations. Most importantly, it contained a detailed rendering of the Key. Given where he'd found the book, he felt assured he was finally on the right track. All he needed now was to locate the records containing the most crucial piece of information; that being in which of the Temple's convents this woman's current descendant could be found.

For a second time that night, Fate stepped in providing the needed clue. While returning the slender volume to its place, a small scrap of paper drifted out and onto the floor. As he reached down and picked it up, he discovered the words—verify bloodline accurate; see census Brys Province—written faintly upon it. 'Is it possible she's hidden amongst the common people?' Convinced he now possessed a vital clue to the last piece of information he required, he put the note into the pocket of his robe and hurried out.

Barely reaching the outer doors before Diosk was due to be relieved, he found the young Knight standing in the hot, muggy predawn, noticeably uneasy and impatient.

"Well?" Diosk demanded in a hushed, yet terse tone. "We can't keep this up much longer. The longer it takes the greater our risk of being discovered; especially if you keep staying so long."

A furtive smile curled Rasmusn's lips. "Patience, my friend, I found the first piece of the puzzle tonight. It shouldn't be much longer. Besides, I have every confidence that someone with your superior intelligence will have no problem answering any questions from your interfering comrades."

"It's not the questions that concern me," Diosk retorted angrily. "It's the increased risk of you being seen. One of these times someone's going to see you leaving."

"Is that what's bothering you?" Rasmusn gave him a devious grin. "Remember, we discussed this; if anyone asks why I'm here, I'll reply that I'm researching new herbal remedies and the only time I have to do so is before dawn. No one will question the statement's veracity because everyone knows how busy my days are."

"All right, but hurry."

Rasmusn was amused over how piqued Diosk remained. Grinning, he dashed across the courtyard towards the eastern gate. He had no problem getting past the two Knights on duty; they were too busy cleaning up their card game to notice him.

Spurred on by the vague reference in the note, Rasmusn spent the next few nights methodically going through the huge census books

of Brys Province located with the mounds of others in the rear of the room. Tonight, as he yet again turned page after page of the latest volume looking for any indication that one of the thousands of names recorded was the name he sought, it struck him. At varying intervals, he'd been seeing a single name inconspicuously marked in the outer margin with a date and a star inside a circle. When he looked back at these names, he found that not only were they all women, but also mothers and daughters and the mark had not been placed next to the daughter's name until the mother was deceased. Instantly his mind screamed it could mean only one thing.

A cautious smile crossed his face as he began to reason things out. "What if the note I found was a reminder to verify this mark had been made next to a woman's name? The mother had just died and they needed to make sure the daughter's name was marked."

Convinced he had the answer at last, he turned to the last page and began to work backward until he spotted the mark. After noting the woman's name and location in his journal, he relocated the slender volume with the rendering of Deceris' Key and made a precise copy of the sketch. Satisfied he at last had what they required, he practically flew from the library and down the stairs.

"I have what we need," he whispered in Diosk's ear. "Come by the apothecary after you're relieved from duty and I'll give you all the details."

"Finally. I was beginning to think you'd never finish."

"I told you to be patient." Rasmusn smiled and shook his head before disappearing into the dark.

As the rays of yet another sweltering morning sun fought to break through the thick layers of dirt on the apothecary's small window, Rasmusn finished making some final notes in his journal. He'd just laid his pen down when there came a knock on the door. Quickly slipping the journal into the pocket of his robe, he called out "Enter."

When the door opened, it revealed a tired, but anxious Diosk, wearing a broad grin of anticipation on his face.

"Get in here and be sure to lock that door behind you."

Once Diosk was seated, Rasmusn smiled and asked, "Well, my friend, are you ready to resign from the Knighthood and travel with me to Brys Province?"

Rasmusn reached into his pocket, removed the journal, and placed it on the table, revealing all he had learned about Deceris' Key.

“So as you now see, we need only to find this woman and befriend her, turn her heart to Belamon, and soon after Deceris’ followers will feel the pain of our retribution.”

Rasmusn couldn’t hide his eagerness as he watched Diosk lean back in his chair, its spindly back creaking from his weight. He didn’t need to be a mind reader to know the young man was weighing the chance to be part of a revolution that would shake humanity at its very core, against the price he would have to pay to bring about this change.

“Before I just throw away an accomplishment few in my station ever achieve, I need to know one thing. How do you see me fitting into this new and glorious world?”

Rasmusn smiled shrewdly. He knew exactly what to offer him. “I see you as the supreme commander over the most powerful army ever created.”

Smiling, Diosk replied, “When do we leave?”

With summer waning, the two men resigned their positions and began the long journey to the far northern agricultural province of Brys; a sleepy province nestled between the formidable sacred peaks of the Dekeris Mountains to the north and the well-worn Chira Mountains to the south, a border it shared with Heran Province.

They traveled by coach across the open plains from Novedos to the trading port city of Nysna. From there, they secured passage aboard a merchant vessel that took them up the Hypern River to the eastern Brys port city of Gainesport. With the crispness of fall in the air, they were now just two days out from their final destination, the provincial capital of Bryston; a small community despite its prominent status, located almost exactly in the center of the province.

After they’d purchased two horses from a local livery, they headed west along the hard-packed dirt road that passed for a highway. The two men had expected to find the province, in their opinion, somewhat backwards. However, as they choked back the dust and fought their way through flocks of sheep and past lumbering wagons bent on hindering their progress, they concluded it wasn’t merely backwards, but had stagnated completely.

None of the province’s breathtaking beauty made an impression on either man. Their only goal was to get to Bryston and establish themselves as the town’s healer and his apprentice, a profession in which Rasmusn possessed great skill and one that would gain them entry into every home. With this level of access, locating the

woman who, according to the last census, was in possession of Deceris' Key should prove to be only a matter of time.

Tired and covered in dust that smelt of the fields they'd passed, they reached Bryston as the late morning sun winked in and out of trees displaying the early signs of autumn. Gradually they made their way up the cobblestone main street to the town square where they stopped. Like most towns, a large communal fountain dominated the center of the square. This one had six spouts mounted to its center column with a steady stream of cold water flowing from each. Pausing a moment to refresh themselves, they were preparing to inquire as to the Temple's location, when Diosk spotted the entrance just to the east. They needed the Temple because the only person who could grant Rasmus the position of healer was the Prelate governing this province.

As the two men approached the Temple's main gate, they couldn't help remarking how it looked like all provincial temples: a modest two-story structure of white marble and granite beneath a gold clad dome crowned with Deceris' Eternal Light. Even the obligatory arched portico supported by crowned columns marked its main entrance while a standard defensive wall surrounded the entire complex. As they got closer, two Knights wearing the emerald green surcoat of the Brys Temple emerged from the watch station just outside the gate.

"Welcome, friends," the first Knight greeted, a warm smile on his face. "I believe you are new to this town. How may I help you?"

Rasmus smiled and nodded. "My apprentice and I seek an audience with the Prelate regarding offering our services as Healers."

"Deceris be praised," called out the second Knight as he walked toward them. "You couldn't have arrived at a better time. Last spring our Healer succumbed to a long illness and we have been without one ever since. We are indeed in great need of your services."

"Then tell us where we may find the Prelate and we will formally offer them to your community." The smile Rasmus presented was warm and beguiling, cleverly concealing the joy he felt upon hearing the news of the previous Healer's death. This had to be yet another omen foretelling a time of change was approaching.

"Prelate Rogét is in the Temple. If you will be kind enough to follow me, I will take you to him."

No sooner had the three men emerged from out of the passage that ran beneath the twin watchtowers, than they found themselves

being assaulted by a stampeding mass of young school children rushing toward the gate after being released from their morning studies.

“That’s something else that will change,” Rasmun hissed to himself as one of the children ran into him. “Educating a farmer’s child is a waste time.”

Finally escaping the energetic children, Rasmun and Diosk followed the Knight across the cobblestone courtyard to the Temple’s back door. Once inside the structure, they continued to follow him down a narrow corridor illuminated by only a few smoky candles. When he reached a door at the opposite end, the Knight stopped. After placing a finger to his lips, he ushered Rasmun and Diosk into the back of the unpretentious chapel.

A short distance ahead, with his back to them, stood a short, portly man reading from the Book of Deceris. His audience appeared to be the latest group of novices gathered for their requisite morning study.

After quietly closing the door, the Knight gestured for them to have a seat on the bench to their right. As they sat down, the Knight positioned himself a few steps back from the orator and waited patiently for the man to finish his reading and dismiss the group. Once the last novice had filed out through a side door, the Knight approached the pulpit and spoke in a voice too low for either Rasmun or Diosk to understand what was being said.

“Really, Sergeant?” the man exclaimed. His enthusiasm written all over his face, he rushed toward them. “Greetings, friends. I’m Prelate Rogét and Sergeant Blair tells me one of you is a Healer.”

“Yes, Prelate, I’m a well-practiced Healer. I am Rasmun of Wymurth, Heran Province. My apprentice and I have come looking for a quiet place in which I may practice my art. If I understood the good sergeant correctly, we seem to have arrived at a very opportune time.” Rasmun was convinced the Prelate possessed the brightest green eyes he’d ever seen and if the man’s smile had grown any broader, it would’ve devoured his face.

“You have my good man, you have. Tell me, do you come to us from Wymurth?”

“No. Until recently, my apprentice and I have been in the service of the Academy for the Knights of Deceris. Though it grieved me to do so, I found that after many years of caring for the youth who pass through that honored institution, I needed to find a quieter,

slower pace. In truth, Provost Captain Tyce found it difficult to accept my resignation.”

In response to this, the Prelate threw back his head and let loose with a laugh so strong, his belly shook with each renewed breath, a reaction Rasmus found excessive if not downright disturbing.

“I can image that after a while all of those energetic youths could tire one. Well, welcome to Bryston and that quieter life for which you were searching.”

Rasmus tried hard not to cringe as Rogét reached out and grabbed his shoulder; he hated being touched.

Though it took considerable effort to fight an impulse to remove the jovial Prelate’s hand, Rasmus let him lead both himself and Diosk past the pulpit, around the boxed pews owned by the wealthier parishioners, then down the broad center isle lined with those used by the common people. Upon reaching the massive main doors, they paused only long enough to allow Sergeant Blair time to open the wicket on the right, before being whisked out into the brisk autumn air.

Outside, Rasmus finally freed himself from Rogét’s grip and fell in behind Blair who had taken the lead. With the other two following, Rasmus followed Blair south across the courtyard, through a shrub-lined garden where the faint scent of summer flowers still hung, to a towering gated hedge that concealed the postern. Once through the postern and off Temple grounds, he found himself following Blair down a dirt path worn deep by many years of use. After rounding a large tree stump, the path opened onto the threshold of a well cared for stone cottage nestled within a copse of ash and alder.

Rasmus stood staring at the layer of fine dust that had settled on its large multi-paned window. As he thought how the dust would help to keep prying eyes at bay, Rogét slipped up beside him and declaring, “Here we are!” opened the home’s stout door, its sturdy strap-iron hinges surprisingly silent despite the hints of rust peeking through. “I’m afraid it’s a little dusty.”

The moment Rasmus entered he realized the Prelate had seriously understated the amount of dust that had collected. Everything from the table and chairs in the center of the room, to the stone hearth dominating the back wall, was blanketed beneath at least an inch of the fine, gray powder. Even the air seemed thick with it.

“As you can see the place is spacious and has a good hearth. The bedroom is there on the left and the storeroom is on the right.

That's the kitchen directly across from the storeroom. Those bottles and such on the shelves are Healer Crystin's supply of remedies."

Rasmusn couldn't believe it. What the Prelate had called the kitchen was nothing more than a long, well-used wood plank resting on top of three barrels over which hung rows of shelving crammed with bottles, pouches and jars coated with the sticky tendrils of cobwebs. The only other piece was a substantial cupboard tucked snugly alongside the counter that held a stash of dishes and cookware.

"At this moment there is only the one bed, but I will send the sergeant over to the storehouse to arrange to have a second brought over. I'm sure once you've dusted things off and aired the rooms out, you'll find the place to be quite comfortable."

While Rogét was busily expounding the cottage's features, Rasmusn had exchanged a look with Diosk that said, 'it's going to take us a week to clean this place.' Tired, and not wanting to be up all night cleaning, he moved to the door and rested his hand on the latch.

"It is indeed an excellent cottage and I'm sure we'll be quite happy. We can't thank you enough for your kind welcome and acceptance of our services," he said feigning a deep yawn. "Please pardon me Prelate. I meant no disrespect." They needed to get started and that required getting Rogét to leave.

"No need to apologize, my son, you have traveled far and are naturally tired. I'll leave the two of you to get settled. You'll find an excellent butcher and baker as well as the general supply shop along the main road. The supply shop is the last one on your left. I'll send a Knight to advise the shop owners you'll be coming so they'll know your charges are authorized."

The Prelate gone, Rasmusn began the task of eradicating the worst of dust that had accumulated since the demise of the cottage's previous occupant. He'd set Diosk to cleaning the main room and adjoining bedroom, while he went to work in the kitchen and storeroom. Rogét had been right; the shelves contained the previous healer's store of remedies. After doing a quick inventory of what was there, he turned his attention to the storeroom and the task of putting his own rather unique assortment out of sight. Along with forbidding the use of the black arts, the Temple had also banned the use of certain herbs and roots claiming they were the product of evil. However, as with so many other things, he had found ways to not only learn about, but also incorporate, these prohibited items into his practice. If the truth were told, his use of them was largely responsible for his success.

By the time they'd finished, the sun was well on its way down. They may have finished sooner had it not been for Sergeant Blair and two other Knights coming with the second bed. It had taken almost an hour to get them to leave. They had insisted on helping with the cleaning and straightening of the cottage and the small stable in the rear of the apothecary.

With the Knights finally gone and the cleaning done, Rasmus sank down onto one of the chairs at the table. As he did, Diosk walked up and said, "It appears we'll need to purchase two extra blankets along with the food stores. That is, if the shop in this backwater town carries such things."

"I agree. We're not accustomed to cold temperatures. Also, don't forget an axe. There was little in the woodbin outside and we used most of it to get this fire going. You'd better hurry so you can get to the shops before they close."

"Me? Aren't you coming too?"

Rasmus gave him a sly smile as he removed his boots. "The fetching and carrying are part of the apprentice's job." Leaning back, he watched Diosk's temper flare. He knew the last thing his companion had expected upon entering into this relationship, was to be treated like a second-class citizen. It was taking considerable effort not to laugh as he watched his protégé force back what he felt certain was a stinging response, before yanking the door open and stomping out.

Diosk stormed down a second path that ran along the outside of the Temple's perimeter wall, kicking at every stone he found. He was cursing the day he'd let Rasmus coerce him into this venture. In the beginning, all had seemed equal. However, as they rehearsed their cover story on their journey here, things had begun to change. In the end, he had been forced to capitulate to all of Rasmus's demands.

The first of these had been that under no circumstance was he to reveal he had been a Knight. The old healer was adamant on this point, believing that any question regarding why he'd left the Knighthood posed too great a risk. He had also demanded that he assume the role of an apprentice. This was the demand that chafed him the most. He could live without proclaiming he'd been a Knight. However, if it hadn't been for Rasmus's assurances they'd reach their goal sooner if all thought they were master and apprentice, he would've abandoned the quest and returned to the city. The promise of a new

world order did not diminish how degraded he felt every time he was forced to call the old healer Master.

After making quick stops at the baker and the butcher, Diosk headed to the last shop, the one with a sign hanging from the front announcing it to be Bryston General Supply and Dry Goods. The door had been closed against the late day chill, but as his opened it, his nose was instantly greeted by an odd mixture of scents coming from all corners of the well-kept shop. The first and most readily identifiable were the sweet, salty and piquant smells emanating from the spice bins arranged in neat rows along the wall to his right. Intermingled with these was the dry, earthy smell of wheat and rye that had been turned into flour. Beneath all of this came the sharp, undeniable smell of lamp oil and candle wax wafting from the back shelves where the house wares were kept.

“Good day, friend,” greeted a small woman not yet middle-aged, with long, dark brown hair and piercing hazel eyes from behind a wooden counter. “I don’t believe I’ve seen you before. May I help you find something?” The woman’s tone was firm and warm as was the smile that danced across her face and into her eyes.

“Thank you. You are right, my Master and I just arrived this morning. He has accepted the position of Healer for your fine town.” Diosk returned her smile. Being sure to use all courtesies was yet another one of Rasmusn’s rules.

“Yes, Sergeant Blair stopped by to give us the news.” He could see the delight this had brought in her brightened smile. “If you could wait one moment, I would like to get my husband. He is eager to make your acquaintance.” With that, she hurried across the shop and disappeared through a door recessed into the back wall between the shelves.

A few moments later, she returned with a tall, husky man with deep brown eyes, a full bushy beard, and sandy brown hair tied at the nape of his neck. A well-used pipe hung from the corner of his mouth, its pungent scent wafting across the room on the tendrils of smoke curling up out of the bowl.

“Good day, friend. My wife tells me you are the apprentice to our new Healer. I was happy to hear the Prelate was finally able to secure us a new one. Our community is small and it made his search difficult,” he asserted in a deep, yet soft voice as he removed the pipe from his mouth. However, despite his welcoming smile, Diosk could see the suspicion in his eyes. Here was a man who didn’t easily trust.

“Thank you, sir, allow me to introduce myself. I am Diosk of Ferst, Heran Province. However, my Master and I come to you from the great city of Novedos where our services were employed by the Knight’s Academy.” Diosk nodded politely.

“A pleasure to meet you. I am Tifan and this is my wife, Mora. We are both native to this fine community.” Tifan returned the nod then added, “Now that we know one another, what is it my wife and I can help you with?”

“We brought little with us so will need the basics such as,” Diosk pulled out the list and began reading from it, “lamp oil and wicks, two woolen blankets, flour, sugar, salt, and if you happen to have it, my Master would like a little black pepper. Oh, and the baker said you could arrange for us to get fresh milk and eggs each morning.”

“Yes, we can and if your Master is a connoisseur of spices, we carry a selection from the southern island provinces of Ays and Paju, as I’m sure you noticed upon entering.” The next thing Diosk knew, Tifan had taken the list out of his hands.

“If the need for the axe is to chop firewood, then you will not need one. The community not only provides the home, but also wood for the fire as part of the Healer’s payment.”

“That is most generous. I’ll be sure to tell him.” As Diosk nodded his thanks, he caught notice of the pendant hanging around Mora’s neck. It was a slender, star-shaped crystal of the richest amber color, wrapped in a delicately fashioned vine of silver leaves and tied securely to a leather cord.

“Please pardon my boldness madam, but that is a very beautiful pendant you are wearing.” He felt his pulse quicken as his mind raced to confirm what he was seeing. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it.”

“Why thank you, sir. It is nothing really. Simply a small treasure given me by my mother.” He needed nothing else. In his mind, her statement had confirmed what the old healer had been insisting all along; the Fates were with them.

It was at this moment that Diosk heard what sounded very much like a low growl come from Tifan. When he looked up at him, he saw that the man hadn’t liked the attention he had just paid his wife.

“If you’ll come with me sir, I can get you what you need and detain you no further.”

Diosk had heard a definite warning in Tifan’s tone, telling him he needed to tread softly. Obediently, he followed the big man to the

back of the shop making a mental note to advise Rasmun of his reaction.

As Diosk dutifully took what Tifan was handing him, a slight slip of a girl burst through the back door. When she saw Diosk, she stopped so abruptly she nearly tumbled head over heels.

“This is our daughter, Mirah,” Tifan explained as the young girl’s soft hazel eyes filled with skepticism much as her father’s had upon seeing Diosk.

“Good day, young mistress.” Diosk acknowledged the introduction by giving the girl, whom he judged to be not yet five, a warm, beguiling smile as he nodded politely in her direction.

“Good day, sir,” Mirah replied managing a polite curtsy.

“Have you come to help your mama?”

“Yes, sir.” Giving a quick nod, she hurried off to the front of the shop.

Diosk turned to Tifan and smiled. “If you will allow me to say so sir, you have a charming daughter.” Diosk hoped this compliment would soothe some of Tifan’s earlier irritation.

“Thank you, sir.” One look at Tifan and Diosk could see the pride showing in his eyes as he watched his daughter help Mora straighten the shelves in preparation for closing.

With Tifan gathering the items on the list, Diosk was soon on his way back to the apothecary, his rucksack and arms filled. In truth though, he wouldn’t have known if he had everything or not; his thoughts were still whirling over how the Fates had guided him to their goal on their first day in town. Practically bursting through the cottage door, he had barely closed it again before blurting out his discovery.

“Are you certain the pendant she wore is the one we seek?”

Rasmun was sitting at the table where he’d had left him, his feet resting on the chair beside him.

“I’m positive it’s the one you rendered in your journal.”

Diosk waited. He knew Rasmun well enough to know the reason he hadn’t responded was because he was mulling over the possibility he could be mistaken.

After a few anxious moments, Rasmun nodded slowly and replied, “It seems the Fates are with us. The time has come for us to start our work so that all will be ready for Lord Belamon’s return. While we put these things away, I want you to tell me again exactly what it is you saw and what you were able to discern about this woman and her husband’s character.”

By the time they had everything put away and were ready for bed, they had set some tentative plans on how to being making incursions into gaining Mora and Tifan's confidence.

The weeks turned to months and soon winter was upon them. Almost overnight, the town was blanketed in a heavy snow with temperatures so cold a person's breath seemed to freeze in midair. During these months, Rasmus had managed to worm his way into the heart of the community. By year's end, his reputation for being able to cure the vilest of ailments had spread to even the outlying villages and hamlets. This reputation is what brought Tifan to his door one particularly bitter night not long after the turn of the year.

He'd been sleeping sound when a pounding on the door woke him. Rising, he wrapped himself in his wool blanket then went to see who it was. When he opened the door and found a very worried Tifan on the other side, a knot formed in his stomach. Something told him Mora's recent illness had grown worse.

"Come in from the cold, friend," Rasmus stepped aside and gestured for him to enter.

Once Tifan was in, and the door closed again, Rasmus turned and asked, "What is it that has you so troubled?" The apprehension he felt came through as a deep concern.

"Healer, its Mora. Her cough has grown deeper and she's complaining of sharp, shooting pains with each breath she takes. The tea you'd given her no longer seems to be working. I know it is bitter outside and the hour is late. Please, could you come and see her?" He could hear the worry in the man's voice. It took little for him to understand Tifan believed his wife to be deathly ill.

"Of course I will come. Have a seat by the fire and warm yourself while I rouse Diosk and we dress."

"Thank you." Tifan pulled his cloak about him and seated himself beside what was still a healthy fire.

Back inside the bedroom, Rasmus closed the door before lighting the lamp on the table between the two beds.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered to Diosk who was already sitting on the edge of his bed.

"Yes." With that one word, Diosk announced just how worried the news had made him. "What happens if she dies?"

Rasmus said nothing as he finished dressing. With his cloak on and fastened, he knelt down, carefully pried up a loose floorboard and, setting it aside, removed the small vial hidden beneath, slipping it into

one of the cloak's inner pockets. "I'll just have to make certain she doesn't."

"Is it safe to use that?"

"That oaf won't know the difference. All he'll know is that his wife was deathly ill one moment and miraculously cured the next." Moments later, all three men were hurrying back to Tifan's home behind the shop.

Rasmusn arrived to find a very weak Mora lying in bed wrapped in a multitude of heavy blankets and quilts. Her face was flushed with fever and he could hear each shallow breath rattle deep in her chest. At least Tifan had warmed the room by lighting a fire in the home's hearth just across from the bedroom's door.

"How long has she been like this?" he asked as he set his apothecary box down next to the oil lamp on the bedside table before removing his cloak.

"It's been getting gradually worse all day. I woke about an hour ago and noticed she was struggling to breathe. I gave her some of that tea you'd given us, but it didn't seem to help so I came for you," Tifan answered from the doorway behind him. Rasmusn adjusted the lamp's dim light then, peeling back the blankets, began to examine Mora.

As he worked, he heard a child's sleepy voice behind him say, "Papa, what's wrong?" When he glanced toward the doorway, he saw their young daughter looking quizzically up into Tifan's worried face.

"It's all right, little one," Tifan answered. "Mama's not feeling very well so Papa went and got the Healer. Go on back to bed."

Rasmusn waited as Tifan kissed Mirah gently on the forehead and sent her back to bed.

"Tifan, listen to me and listen well," he said as he straightened and looked the big man in the eye. "Mora has a dangerously high fever and her lungs are filled with a foul poison that is preventing her from breathing. We must force her to cough this out or I fear she will not survive to morning. While Diosk and I prepare the necessary poultice and potion, I want you to get some cool water and rags for compresses. Mind you I said cool, not cold." Before Rasmusn could turn back around, Tifan had rushed outside with the first pot he could grab.

With Tifan out of the way, Rasmusn went to work mixing a potion using a blend of dried herbs and the liquid contained in the vial. He worked quickly knowing that, should he be caught using this liquid, he would be condemned to life in prison on the Isle of the Profane.

While he measured and mixed, he'd set Diosk to work applying liberal amounts of a poultice consisting largely of dried eucalyptus and lanolin.

"Master, what's wrong?" Rasmus had barely heard Diosk he'd spoken so softly.

"This infection has spread far quicker than any I've ever seen and she is so small. I've never given this to someone so frail before." Suddenly Rasmus felt unsure of Mora's ability to withstand such a strong potion.

"You've given it to the young men at the Academy many times and some of them were not much bigger at the time."

"True, but a man's body, even a young one, is stronger than a woman's and as I said, she is extremely weak. I just pray the Fates remain on our side and this does what it should." Taking a deep breath, Rasmus took the bitter potion and, mixing it with water, helped Mora to drink it. Almost immediately, her breathing became less labored as she fell into a deep sleep. He was putting things away when Tifan returned with the rags and water he'd warmed over the fire.

As the big man sat both on the bedside table, Rasmus looked up and said, "I have given her a potion which, along with the poultice Diosk rubbed on her chest, has already begun to ease her breathing." He rose and began putting things back into his box. "But I must tell you, the poison has severely weakened her lungs. I'm afraid that whether she lives or dies is in Deceris' hands. I've done all I can."

"Thank you Healer. I know you've done your best."

"Keep those cool compresses on her forehead to help draw the fever out," Rasmus added as he and Diosk prepared to leave. "I'll check back in the morning." With those words they left, praying Mora would live; without her, there could be no new order.

The next morning, at the break of dawn, Rasmus again found himself being awakened by a pounding on his door. This time when he opened it, he found Thea, Tifan's sister and wife to the town's innkeeper, tears clouding her eyes. A frantic Tifan had sent her with the message that he was unable to feel breath coming from Mora.

For the second time, Rasmus and Diosk quickly dressed. With his apothecary box tucked securely under his arm, they raced back to Tifan's home.

With Thea announcing they'd arrived, Rasmus entered to find Tifan standing in the bedroom doorway, tears in his eyes. "I cannot feel breath coming from her and she's so cold." Rasmus could tell it

was taking every ounce of the man's willpower not to breakdown and sob.

The fear that had knotted Rasmus's stomach the night before returned even stronger when he saw Tifan's face. As he slipped past the big man and entered the bedroom, he convinced himself he would discover that Mora's fever simply had broken and she was now in a deep recuperative sleep.

Little had changed since he'd been here a few short hours ago; Tifan had not even blown out the lamp. He handed his box to Diosk and began his examination. With each successive test, he knew he'd be able to announce all was well, but as each one in turn failed to prove Mora lived, panic began to work its way from the pit of his stomach until it flooded his mind. When he finally surrendered to the only conclusion left to him and looked up at Diosk, it was clear their worst nightmare had come true. Mora had died sometime during the night.

Diosk opened his mouth, but Rasmus quickly silenced him. This was neither the time nor the place to discuss this turn of events.

Unable to conceal the desolation he felt over having failed in his sacred task, Rasmus exited the bedroom and looked first at Thea then Tifan.

"I cannot put into words how stricken I am that my skills failed to save such a vital, caring woman. I can only offer in my defense that I did all within my power to save her."

He watched as Thea, using the table for support, rose from where she'd been sitting next to her distraught brother as he rocked his sobbing daughter.

"Healer, I know I speak for my brother when I say we do not blame you. We know you did all that was possible. Clearly, though we would've wished it otherwise, Deceris decided it was time for our Mora to return to her."

Unable to do anything else, Rasmus nodded his thanks for their understanding. As he and Diosk collected his things and started to leave, he heard Thea say in a voice filled with tears, "Tifan you stay here with Mirah. I'll go with the Healer to get Prelate Rogét."

While the townsfolk were preparing for the funeral of one of their most beloved citizens, Rasmus and Diosk had remained within the apothecary struggling to understand what went wrong. Rasmus had been the one to conclude this was Deceris' way of preventing them from completing their holy task. He had also been the one to devise what he called a foolproof plan to beat her at her own game. As they'd

discussed the situation, he'd become convinced he remembered Belamon stating it was with Deceris' Chosen and her Key dedicated to the true faith that would ensure their victory. To Rasmun this meant there was still hope. If he could at least secure Deceris' Key, he may still be able to salvage his mission.

On the day of funeral, they had gone to the Temple, and like the townsfolk, filed by Mora's casket to place a remembrance in it, before stopping to give Tifan and Mirah their condolences. However, they slipped out as the mourners knelt and began the Liturgy of Remembrance.

"The pendant isn't there," Diosk began once they were safely outside the Temple. "It's neither on the mother or the daughter."

"Which means it's either back at the house or that meddling Prelate has it." For a brief moment, Rasmun's gaze turned distant as though he was a million miles away. Then, as quickly as it had come, the look vanished. "It's at the house," he announced with a sly smile.

Their hopes riding high, the two men hurried to Tifan's home. They had no difficulty gaining entrance since the townspeople seldom locked their doors during the day. Once they were inside, they headed straight to Tifan and Mora's bedroom.

Forced to pause so his eyes could adjust to the dimness of the room, Rasmun let out a squeal of glee when he spotted the pendant lying in plain sight on the small bedside table.

"At last, all of these months of having to flatter these pitifully stupid people have come to fruition. Soon Deceris will be no more; soon a new world will dawn." With that, Rasmun reached out and grasped the crystal.

What happened next was something he never could have predicted. No sooner had he closed his fist around it, than he grew frighteningly pale as all his strength drained away. Suddenly the small crystal felt like a tremendous weight in his hand. Dropping it, he sank to his knees and, had Diosk not been there, he would have collapsed onto the floor.

"What happened?" Diosk asked.

"Get me out of here," Rasmun's voice was weak and barely audible.

"But the Key..."

"Leave it...get me out...quickly..."

With Rasmun using Diosk as a crutch, the two began the painstakingly slow process of walking back to the apothecary.

When Rogét saw Rasmun leave the Temple, his first thought had been that, despite their assurances, the poor man was still holding himself responsible for Mora's death. As he began the liturgy, he decided that at his first opportunity, he would go and try again to help Rasmun see there were times when Deceris' plan was not easy to understand.

Upon concluding the liturgy, Rogét instructed the priests to seal Mora's casket then nodded towards the Knights who would bear it to the graveyard, letting them know it was time to go. As the mourners rose and waited for Rogét to begin the procession, the Prelate leaned over and whispered to the priest standing beside him.

"Father Reynold, I must go and comfort our Healer. I fear he still suffers from unwarranted guilt. You continue on to the grave site and complete the prayers." Nodding, Father Reynold took his place at the head of the casket and, as everyone began to fall in behind it, Rogét slipped out the back door.

He hurried to the apothecary certain he would find a distraught Rasmun sitting at his table, bemoaning Mora's death.

Upon arrival, he knocked twice and, receiving no answer, opened the door.

"Healer? It's me, Prelate Rogét," he called out, stepping into the home.

Inside he found remnants of their morning meal scattered across the table, but no sign of either man. 'I wonder where they could be,' he thought as he glanced into the bedroom, still finding no proof either man was home.

He was about to leave when he noticed the door to the storeroom was shut. 'The door is quite thick,' he thought to himself. 'It is conceivable both men could be in there working and unable to hear me.' Crossing the room, Rogét knocked on the door before opening it.

As it swung open, what he saw inside made his breath catch in his throat. Ahead of him, painted boldly on the back wall, was the Great Star of Belamon. On a table beneath it were seven broad candles arranged in a pattern he knew to be part of a liturgy defining worshippers of the dark god. Furious for allowing himself to be blind to Rasmun's treachery, he began searching the room. His goal was to find the required evidence needed to charge Rasmun with treason.

He didn't need to look far. On the shelves, hidden behind the stores of food and other supplies, he found pouches and bottles filled

with harvested ingredients used in forbidden spells and potions. As his eyes took inventory of these forbidden remedies, he spotted a small writing table nestled in the furthest corner. On top of it, was a candle sitting behind an open book. As he lifted the book from the table, he began to read. With each turn of the page, the anger he had been feeling turned to fear. He was holding irrefutable proof Rasmus not only worshipped the Dark Lord, but was also working to return him from his exile.

The journal now stuffed into a pocket of his robe, Rogét headed for the Chapter House as quickly as he could, oblivious to the fact Diosk and Rasmus were approaching from the opposite direction.

“I wonder where that fat old fool is off too in such a hurry,” Diosk asked aloud as he helped Rasmus into the apothecary and onto the nearest chair.

“Don’t worry about him. Get me the pouches in the storeroom marked with a tiny star and hurry.”

Diosk immediately headed to retrieve the pouches, but as he reached for the latch, he stopped abruptly.

“Master, this door is ajar!” he exclaimed his eyes wide in alarm.

“Then get in there and make sure nothing’s been touched,”

Rasmus croaked, his voice sounding alien and distant. Diosk had barely entered the room when he heard a howl of anger. Seconds later, his protégé rushed back into the room

“Your journal is gone!” he proclaimed.

Rasmus’s eyes filled with rage. “So that’s why that bumbling idiot was in such a hurry. Get the horses saddled, we’re leaving immediately.”

“But Master, you’re too weak to sit a horse. That foul crystal drained all your strength.”

Rasmus reached out with his right hand and, with a strength that belied all logic, grabbed Diosk by the throat. “I said saddle the horses. Don’t ever make me give an order twice again.”

The minute Rasmus released his choking grip; Diosk ran out the door and headed for the stables.

Rasmus smiled, pleased with this sudden strength. He didn’t need to see the Amulet pulsating beneath his robe to know it was the source. However, he was unaware that this newfound strength would vanish the moment they’d reached safety.

Feeling stronger than ever, he grabbed an old flour sack and began stuffing it with his rare and unique ingredients. Verifying he had

everything, he joined Diosk. Only minutes after learning they'd been discovered, Rasmun and Diosk were riding hard across the frozen fields to the south, leaving no trail for pursuers to follow.

After nearly running the entire way, Rogét burst through the main doors at the Temple's Chapter House for the Knights of Deceris. Ignoring the watch sergeant's offer of assistance, he sped down the central corridor stopping when he reached the last door on the right. Without knocking, he threw the door open and burst into the room. At his desk, eating his midday meal, was First Captain Dalton, the man he wanted.

"Prelate, what is it? What's happened?" Dalton asked, dropping his fork.

"I want you to get a security patrol together and come with me immediately. We're going to arrest that traitorous Healer and his apprentice," he blurted out, the sweat pouring down his red face.

"Excuse me?" Rogét's order clearly puzzled the Captain.

"Don't question me, Captain. Just do it."

In one fluid motion, Dalton was on his feet and out the door. Seconds later, Rogét heard him calling for every Knight within the House to follow him.

With Dalton and the Knights hard on his heels, Rogét raced back to the apothecary. When they reached it, they found the door standing open and the interior in shambles thanks to a hasty departure.

As Rogét hurried inside to close the storeroom door, he heard Dalton order, "I want you to break into four groups, each taking a different direction. I want these two found and brought back now!"

With the Knights scrambling to form the search parties, Rogét pulled Dalton aside. "Captain, I need to leave now. I have another urgent task I must tend to so listen carefully. First, I want that storeroom sealed. No one, not even you, is to enter it. Once you have completed that, post a guard outside that door and the door to this cottage. No one enters until my return. Finally, no one is to learn of what transpired here. For now, say only that you don't know the circumstances surrounding the healer's sudden departure, but understand I will be issuing a statement shortly. You are also to command any Knight who has responded here to reply in the same manner. Is that understood?" Rogét had made sure his tone and expression left no room for doubt as to the seriousness of Rasmun's offense.

“Yes, Prelate.”

Confident his instructions would be carried out, Rogét hurried to the main road; he needed to see Tifan. He knew it was late and Tifan would not only be physically but emotionally exhausted as well, but he needed an answer to a question that couldn't wait. After seeing the rendering in the journal, Rogét felt certain he knew why Mora had died. Rasmun had come to Bryston to get the pendant she wore; he'd come for Deceris' Sacred Key. The closer he got, the more he feared he was too late.

When he arrived, he began to knock frantically. When Tifan finally answered the door, he pushed past him and into the home asking, “Forgive me my son, but where is Mora's pendant?”

“It's in our room, Prelate. One moment, I'll get it.” The look Tifan gave him said the man was clearly bewildered as to why he wanted to see Mora's crystal pendant.

After a few very anxious minutes, Tifan returned.

“Here is it, Prelate. Sorry it took so long, but somehow it got knocked off the table and I almost missed it on the floor. You will return it, won't you? Mora made me swear that if anything happened to her, Mirah would get it.”

Seeing the pendant safe in Tifan's hand, Rogét heaved a heavy sigh of relief and sat down on one of the kitchen chairs.

“That's why I'm here.” Looking up into Tifan's puzzled face, Rogét smiled sadly and said, “Sit down my friend. We need to talk.”