

# *The Buried Symbol*

*The Runes of Issalia, Book I*

*Jeffrey L. Kohanek*

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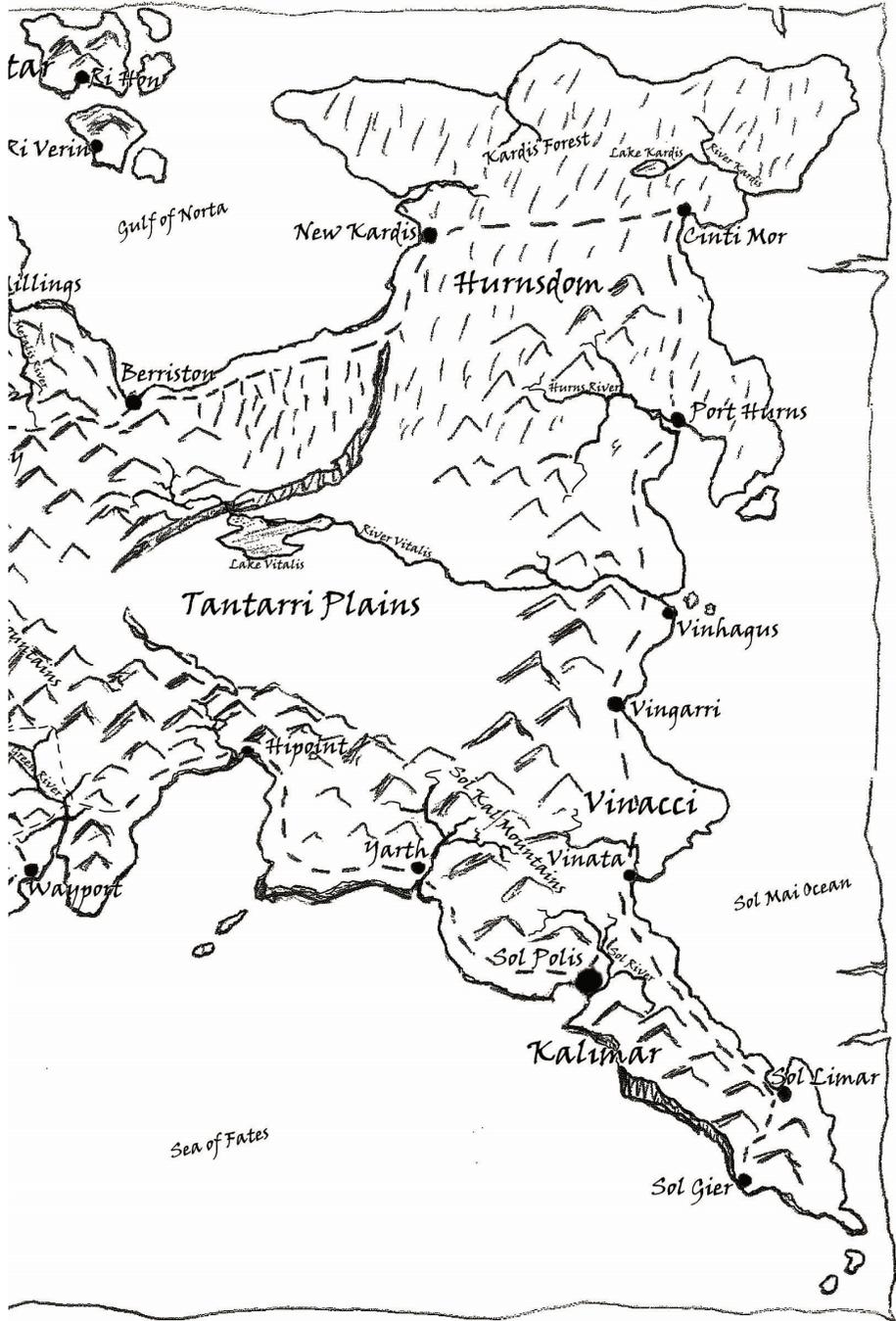
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This tale is dedicated to my family for their inspiration and support.

Believe...





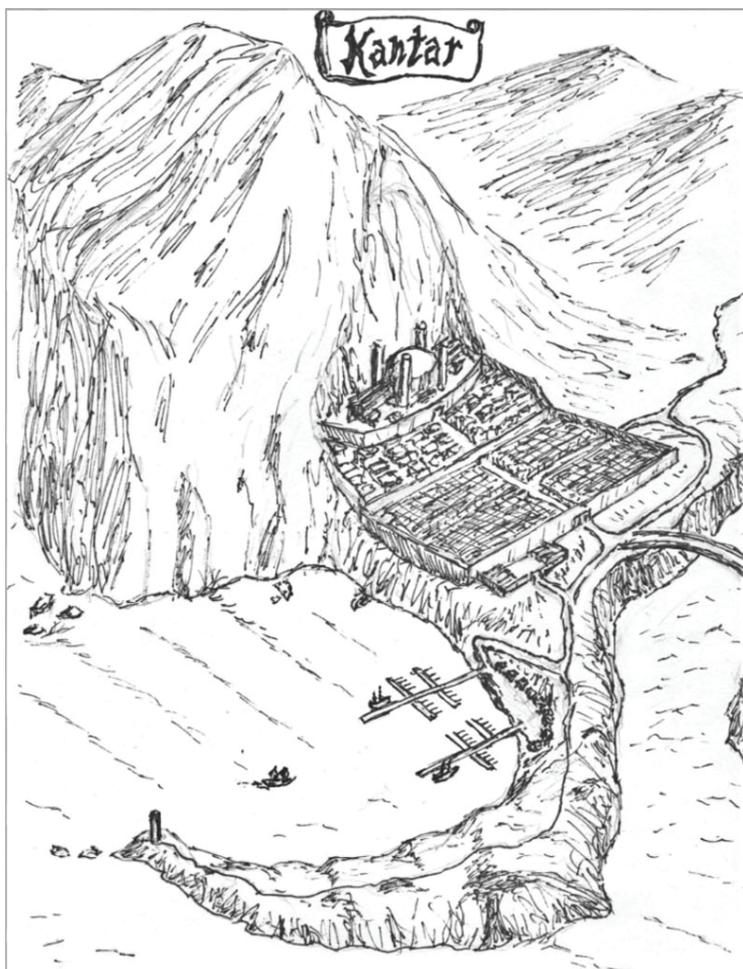


# *The Buried Symbol*



Jeffrey L. Kohanek

# PART I: UNCHOSEN



## **CHAPTER 1**

Moisture from the mist left Brock's hair damp and the roof tiles slippery. He leaned against the brick chimney, ensuring his footing as he watched the shop across the street.

Now nearly midnight, the only light was the pale blue aura emitted from the glowlamps at nearby intersections. The shop was midway between the lamps, their light barely reaching it through the gloom. The effect of the blue light upon the milky air gave an otherworldly feel.

The door of the inn beneath him burst open and two men stumbled out. The ruckus they created disturbed the tranquility of the setting. One man helped the other to his feet, and they set-off down the street. Weaving as they walked, they bellowed a common tavern song, not caring that they were quite out-of-tune. The two drunken men turned the corner, disappearing as their sorry song faded into the night.

When the street quieted, Brock heard another door open. Through the fog, he could just make out the shop owner pulling the door shut. The man locked the deadbolt and hurried down the street, heading the opposite direction of the two drunks. He passed the glowlamp and faded into the foggy night. It was time to move.

Brock shimmied over the edge of the eave, dropping to the balcony below. Stepping over the railing, he lowered himself until he was hanging with arms fully extended. He let go, landing lightly on the wet cobblestones.

He crossed the street and tested the door, confirming that it was locked. Reaching into a coat pocket, he withdrew a sheath containing a knife and bent needles. A moment later, the deadbolt clicked open and he slid inside.

Gently closing the door, he paused in the darkness to listen for

movement. Deciding he was alone, he replaced the knife and needles in exchange for a glass tube from another pocket. After giving the tube a couple good shakes, it began to glow.

The light revealed that he was standing in the front section of the store, divided from the rest of the building by a long service desk. He circled the desk, observing shelves lined with jars and canisters filled with liquids and powders. It appeared to be a typical apothecary shop, but after a week of spying, Brock knew that this was no ordinary shop.

Creeping past the shelves, he focused on the dark doorway at the back of the room. The soft light from the glowstick ate away at the darkness, giving shape to the room beyond.

He stopped before the doorway, scanning the interior without crossing the threshold. If there were traps set against thieves, they would be within that back room, beyond the area of normal business.

He knelt to examine the floor beyond the doorway. From the low angle, he noticed one floorboard sticking above those around it. Perhaps the wood was just swollen from moisture. Perhaps it was something else.

Reaching into another pocket, he removed a pouch filled with coins. He tossed the pouch toward the floorboard and quickly spun from the doorway.

Brock heard the *thump* of the pouch landing, followed by a *twang* as two crossbow bolts flew past to impale the wooden shelf across from him. The *thud* from the impact of the bolts left his heart pounding and his stomach twisting in anxiety. Staring at the shafts vibrating, he thanked Issal that they were embedded in the shelf and not in his chest.

He took a breath, calming himself. He hated this, but had no choice. Closing his eyes, he found his resolve and reopened them.

Sliding through the doorway, he scooped up his coin purse and stood to examine his surroundings.

An empty dual crossbow mounted on a stand pointed toward the door. Below the crossbow was one of three workbenches aligned along the wall. Bowls, vials, jars, papers, and hand tools rested upon the benches. A wooden stool sat before each bench and a large fireplace waited at the far end of the room.

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Brock approached the nearest workbench and began searching for a hidden compartment. Finding nothing of note, he turned to move along and the fireplace caught his attention. It seemed an ideal location to hide items of value. At least, that is where he would hide them.

He started toward the fireplace, stopping when something made him hesitate. Feeling a slight pressure against one shin, he leapt backward. He heard a *swoosh* and felt a sharp pain just above his eye. His hand went to his brow as he looked up to see what had cut him.

Two spinning blades, set at a height to decapitate an average man, were swinging on a pole that had dropped from the ceiling. Brock's quick reaction when feeling the tripwire had saved him from a grizzly death. Again, he thanked Issal for the luck that he still lived.

He grabbed a rag from the nearest bench, looping it around his head and tying it tight to stop the bleeding. Ducking under the swinging blades, he warily advanced toward his goal.

The fireplace was made of irregular stones the size of a man's head. Within an arched opening that stood eyelevel to Brock at its apex, a large black kettle occupied the fireplace. He spit on the kettle to test if it was hot. When the saliva did not sizzle, he reached out and touched it. The cast-iron body of the kettle felt cold.

Brock held the glowstick inside the fireplace to inspect the interior. Looking up, he noticed one stone less soot-covered than the others. He nudged the stone with his hand, feeling that it was loose. Twisting his body to grab it with both hands, he wiggled and pulled until the stone came free.

He set it down and reached into the opening to withdraw a small jar. Opening it, he took a sniff to identify the contents. A bitter aroma attacked his senses, making his eyes water and leaving him light-headed. It was Yellow Sky. The presence of the illegal drug confirmed his suspicions: the shop owner was abusing his vocation, creating the addictive drug to sell on the streets of Kantar.

Holding the glowstick high, he peered into the hole to find a dark pouch among six similar jars. Brock replaced the jar and grabbed the pouch. Shaking it, he heard the clinking of coins. He stepped from the fireplace and loosened the drawstring at the top. Peeking in, he saw the sparkle of gold. A satisfied grin spread across his face as he

examined his newfound wealth. A startled yelp escaped from his lips when something moved within the sack.

He dumped the contents of the pouch onto the nearest workbench, gold and silver coins spilling-out. A red scorpion emerged from the pile. Brock knew that they were extremely lethal. A single sting would send its victim into seizure, foaming at the mouth. Paralysis would then set in, followed by a slow and painful death.

The upset scorpion scuttled across the bench, crawling into a leather glove. Brock scooped the coins back into the pouch, wondering if the shop owner would be stung when he next used those gloves. If the man was willing to deal with a scorpion, Brock mused, then it was at his own risk.

Retracing his steps through the store, he slid his glowstick into his coat and peeked out the window. With nobody in sight, he slipped out the door and faded into the foggy night.

## **CHAPTER 2**

Light from the rising sun crept westward toward the province of Kantaria. For some time, the peaks of the Brimstone Mountains kept the capital city of Kantar in shadow. Once the sun crested those peaks, the heat from its rays began to burn away the marine layer that had crept in the night before. As if retreating in fear of the light, the wall of white mist slowly faded back toward the ocean.

South of the city, the dissipating fog revealed farmers already tending their crops. Water from the Alitus River flowed from the nearby mountains as it wound its way past the southern outskirts of the city. Sluice gates lining the banks of the river provided a steady flow for irrigation ducts that fed the fields and orchards that stretched toward the southern horizon.

The morning bell tolled, marking the start of a new day. The gates of the city opened to welcome locals and travelers who had gathered in the early morning hours. Some had arrived from the east via Glowridge Pass, while those coming from the south had crossed the bridge over the Alitus River.

To the west was Kantar Bay, the largest harbor on the Indigo Ocean. Two ships were sailing into port while dockworkers lined up with wagons, ready to unload the ships and deliver cargo to the holding yard for distribution. Other ships that had been docked overnight were being loaded with fresh cargo to be delivered to distant ports for sale or trade. The slips closer to shore, where the smaller watercraft docked, sat empty with the local fishermen already off in search of the day's catch.

Inside the walls of Kantar, the streets were coming alive. One of these streets housed businesses tucked along the eastern wall in the district of Lower Kantar. This particular street was least desirable in the city because of the pungent smells coming from the fisheries,

tanneries, and metal smelters that operated there. The predominant west winds pushed the unpleasant smells away from the city, toward the mountains to the East. Someone with a flair for ironic humor had named it Flower Street long ago.

As the rising sun crested the eastern wall, a ray of sunlight streamed into the second story loft of one of the tanneries. The sunlight crept down the wall until it shined on a pallet where a brown-haired teen was sleeping. The warmth and light from the incoming sunbeam caused him to stir. Opening his eyes, he rubbed them to work the sleep away. He sat up and looked toward the pallid-skinned woman on the nearby bed.

He leaned over, gently shaking her frail body. After a moment, her eyes flickered open. She blinked as she turned to face him. Though she had seen only twenty-nine summers, she appeared much older.

Her heavy eyes looked at him, focused on the intense green eyes staring back. His disheveled brown hair enhanced his engaging smile.

“G ‘morning Ellie,” he said softly. “How are you feeling?”

“Brock,” Ellie mumbled, “I’m so tired...” Her weak breath emanated the fetid stench of the disease that racked her body.

Brock reached for a cup resting on the nightstand. “Here. Drink some water.”

He lifted her head with one hand while holding the cup to her mouth. She slowly took a sip. Throughout the process, her gaze never left him. After swallowing, she spoke again.

“You’ve got to get out, Brock. The life of an Unchosen is no life to live,” she pleaded. “I want so much more for you. Your mother did too.”

“What choice do I have, Ellie? It’s not like I have options,” he said.

Ellie began to cough, clutching her stomach in pain. When the coughing subsided, she spoke again.

“No, there’s a way. I’ve heard about this man named Alonzo.” She paused for a breath. “He can be found at the Aspen Inn, near the Lower Wall gate. He’ll need to be paid, but they say he can help you start a new life.”

She lifted her arm, her hand shaking as it reached out to touch his face. Her eyes locked on his, pleading.

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“Promise me that when I’m gone, you’ll do this.”

Ellie’s eyes remained on Brock, waiting for his response. Another round of coughing spoiled the moment.

When she quieted, he responded, “Nothing’s going to happen to you Ellie. I had a good night. I now have enough money to pay a medicus to come see you.”

Her eyes had closed while he spoke. He tried to get her to take another drink, but she was unresponsive. If not for the slight movement of her chest rising and falling, she could be a corpse.

She wasn’t doing well, but he could save her. Nobody had saved his mother years ago. Brock couldn’t let that happen again. He now had the money he needed, but he didn’t have much time. She was getting worse every day. After kissing her forehead, he began to dress.

He slipped into his worn brown trousers and his over-sized leather boots. Grabbing a light-brown shirt with torn armpits, he pulled it over his head and climbed to his feet. From a hook on the wall, he grabbed the thigh-length leather coat that held his knife, glowstick, and lock picks. He pulled the coat on as he ran to the stairwell.

When he descended into the tannery, he saw his father busy treating a sheet of leather. As usual, the man was well into his work before Brock woke. The pungent smell filled the room. After being around the smell for seventeen years, Brock was far past being affected.

His father was of average height with a balding head of sparse brown hair. He wore heavy leather gloves and a tanner’s smock to protect him from the treatment chemicals. The man glanced up from his work, noticing Brock.

“It’s about time you got up, boy.” His father always called him *boy*. “I thought you were going to waste the whole day away.”

Brock knew enough not to be confrontational, instead focusing on what was important.

“She’s not doing well, Pa. She needs help.”

His father glanced toward him again. His brow furrowed, distorting the *Artifex Humis* rune that marked his forehead. “Well, be that as it may, I’ve no means to help your aunt Ellie. If it’s her time, hopefully she’s done enough good in this life that Issal will bless her

in the next." He then turned back to the hide he was treating.

Brock tried again. "If you don't have anything pressing for me right now, I want to see if I can find someone to help her."

His father continued to work the hide as if he hadn't heard a word. After a minute, he relented.

"Go on and do what you think you need to do."

Brock hurried out the door before his father changed his mind.

## **CHAPTER 3**

Weaving through the crowd, Brock's feet moved him as quickly as possible without running. He didn't want to attract the attention of the city guards, not with all the gold he was carrying.

Minutes later, he turned from Alistair Avenue onto Center Street and the foot traffic thickened. The smell from the bakery he passed caused his stomach to rumble, reminding him that he had yet to break his fast.

Continuing upward as the street's slope increased, he passed numerous shops and vendors. Farmers were selling fruit and vegetables off the back of wagons. Butchers offered their best cuts of meat. Tailors were displaying garments for sale.

Melvin, who often purchased hides from Brock's father, was placing a pair of black leather boots in his shop window. Brock paused to stare in the window, longing for a new pair of boots to replace the oversized pair he wore now.

A fast-approaching rumble broke him from his reverie. Turning his head, Brock saw a steam carriage roaring toward him. He dodged to the side as it sped past and continued down the hill toward Southgate.

Staring at the rear of the coach as it rolled on, he wondered what it would be like to ride in such an amazing contraption. He would never know since only the wealthy could hope to afford one.

He turned as a man rudely ran into him, knocking him back.

"Watch where you're going, you filthy Unchosen."

Brock didn't want trouble. He gave a small bow.

"Sorry, sir. It was my fault. Won't happen again."

The man sneered at him as he walked away. Brock stared at the man's back for a moment before moving along. He soon approached the wall that separated Lower Kantar from Upper Kantar. He glanced

up at the brick barrier towering above as he passed through the gate. The other side of the wall revealed a district far different from the one below.

The wide clean streets and elegant buildings of Upper Kantar were a stark contrast to the dirty streets and dilapidated buildings that prevailed in Lower Kantar. Only Center Street and Alistair Avenue largely escaped these issues.

His gaze landed on the citadel, looming above the city. The bright sun made the stone towers appear like pale sentinels watching over the people of Kantar. Light reflected off the stained glass panels of the Citadel Temple's domed roof. With the backdrop of vertical rock walls behind the citadel, the image was impressive.

The idea of living in Upper Kantar seemed like a dream, but living in the citadel was unimaginable.

He passed a blacksmith shop, slowing to admire a beautiful longsword and dagger displayed in the window. Turning at the next intersection, he approached the second door on the right and knocked. He stepped back and waited. Glancing up, he read the sign above the door, engraved with the words *Miguel Guyenne, Medicus*.

A young man, a few years older than Brock, opened the door. He was tall and thin with well-kept black hair combed to one side. Bangs hanging on his forehead partly obscured the *Medicus* rune that marked him for his vocation. Brock assumed the young man to be Guyenne's apprentice.

"I'm here with a commission for Medicus Guyenne," Brock said.

The apprentice looked him up and down with a doubtful expression. "Medicus Guyenne is far too busy for jokes. You should run along to wherever you came from, *boy*," he said with a sneer.

Brock took a breath to keep his cool. Reaching into his coat, he removed a leather pouch and shook it. The clinking coins caught the young man's attention.

Brock explained, "I met with the medicus last week and he told me he'd heal my aunt if I could pay the commission. Inside this pouch are four gold imperials, which is the rate he quoted. She's very ill and needs attention as soon as possible."

The apprentice grimaced before retreating into the building. Stepping inside the same room he had waited in a week earlier, Brock

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closed the door behind.

The waiting room had a glossy wooden floor, a high ceiling, and wood-paneled walls. Six chairs ran along two of the walls, between the two entrances to the room. He heard footsteps approaching. The interior door opened and a man with silver-peppered black hair emerged, followed by the apprentice.

"I understand that you have funds for a commission," the man stated, looking Brock in the eye. A heavy brow and piercing brown eyes gave a serious weight to the man's gaze.

"Yes, sir. I have the four gold imperials you require to come heal my aunt."

He handed the pouch to Guyenne, waiting anxiously as the medicus examined the contents. Guyenne's eyebrows lifted in surprise as he looked at Brock in a moment of consideration. The medicus handed the pouch to his apprentice and then turned to address Brock.

"Let me gather my supplies, and we'll be on our way."

Pushing past his apprentice, he stepped through the interior doorway. The apprentice grimaced at Brock before turning to follow his master through the door.

. . .

Brock ignored the look of disgust that Guyenne's apprentice flashed toward him. He was used to others treating him with contempt. That is, if they even bothered to acknowledge him. When they approached Flower Street, the apprentice pinched his face, further souring his disposition.

"What's that horrible smell? Do we really have to be here?"

Guyenne nodded. "That's the aroma of Flower Street. I'm sure you've heard of it. And, yes, we do have to be here. I promised this boy that I'd come and help his aunt if he paid the commission."

They turned onto Flower Street and approached the tannery. Brock opened the door, holding it for Guyenne and his apprentice to enter. He couldn't help but smile after they passed him. If the apprentice didn't like the smell before, he *really* wasn't going to like the smell inside the tannery.

Brock's father glanced up from his work, startled to see the well-dressed medicus and his apprentice. Dropping his tools, he removed his gloves and greeted the two men.

"Hello good sirs. I'm Milan Tannerson, owner of this shop. What can I do for you?" Brock's father extended his hand.

Guyenne responded, "I've accepted a commission to treat this young man's aunt. Where can I find her?"

Confusion crossed Milan's face. "You...I...well...she's upstairs." His brow furrowed. "But I don't understand. Who paid your commission? Are you aware that she's Unchosen?"

Guyenne, followed by his apprentice, headed for the staircase. He turned his head to respond over his shoulder.

"The boy paid the sum required."

The medicus ascended the stairs without looking back. Milan turned toward Brock, his face red with anger. Brock hesitated for a moment before bolting up the stairs.

Arriving in the loft, he noticed that his aunt hadn't moved since he had left.

The medicus approached Ellie, setting his case down. He pressed his fingers to the side of her neck and then bent to put his ear to her chest. After a moment, he picked up his bag and turned to Brock.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot help this woman."

Brock was stunned. "But sir, you promised you'd heal her if I paid you."

Guyenne retreated to the stairwell, pausing at the top to share a sympathetic look.

"I cannot heal the dead, young man. Nobody can. Not even the most skilled healer within the Ministry." The man then descended the stairs with his apprentice in tow.

Brock was in shock. She was alive just an hour earlier. He rushed to her, kneeling at the bedside. Calling her name, he shook the woman as he tried desperately to wake her. He patted her cheek while tears tracked down his. He couldn't lose her like he lost his mother.

"Ellie! Ellie! Please wake up! The medicus is here to heal you! Ellie!"

Her skin felt cold and clammy. How could she die when he was so

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close to saving her? He rested his cheek on her forehead and sobbed.

“It was her time, boy,” his father said. “Like your mother, she’s moved on from this life. We just have to pray that she lived well so Issal will bless her with a better station in the next life.”

Through a blur of tears, Brock looked up at his father.

“Ellie filled the hole in my heart when mom died. What am I going to do without her?” Using his sleeve, he wiped the tears from his face.

After a moment, his father responded, “Here’s what you’re going to do. You will fill that hole with honest work, boy.” His voice took on an edge of anger. “I don’t know how you came up with the gold needed for a medicus to break the law and come to heal your aunt, but I do know it was nothing honest.”

His voice rose to shouting. “First, you will take a batch of hides out in the yard and clean them up. Then you’re going to march over to the stockyards for another batch. And that’s only the beginning.” He paused, pointing at Brock. “See, your hole will be filled with work because you won’t have time for anything else.”

His father turned and stormed down the stairs, leaving Brock with his dead aunt in his arms.