

## **Chronolapse – Basically Lost**

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**Contents**

<b>CHRONOLAPSE – BASICALLY LOST .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Contents .....	2
<b>PART 1 – BASICALLY LOST.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Chapter 1 .....	3
Chapter 2 .....	5
Chapter 3 .....	6
Chapter 4 .....	8
Chapter 5 .....	10
Chapter 6 .....	12
Chapter 7 .....	16
Chapter 8 .....	19
Chapter 9 .....	21
Chapter 10.....	24
Chapter 11.....	29
Chapter 12.....	31
Chapter 13.....	34
Chapter 14.....	36
Chapter 15.....	38
Chapter 16.....	40
Chapter 17.....	43
Chapter 18.....	45
Chapter 19.....	47
Chapter 20.....	49
Chapter 21.....	52
Chapter 22.....	55
Chapter 23.....	58

## Part 1 – Basically Lost

### Chapter 1

It was an average day for Dillon. Work was busy, the clients were always calling him with questions, and the weather was forever overcast with the promise of rain but never quite delivering.

He exited through the rotating glass doors in the building lobby, briefcase in one hand as he met the crowded sidewalk, making his way towards the street. He had a new client to meet personally uptown, and needed a cab.

One was already forging it way through the traffic on the opposite side, headed in the right direction, with no fares already inside.

Dillon gave a shrill whistle, which barely brought any attention to him from the mass of pedestrians and waved his hand to the cab which started to slow.

He had one foot out over the curb, and down onto the road surface, and his whole world changed. One moment the busy sounds of downtown were washing at his ears, next it was dead quiet. Gone were all the buildings, the skyscrapers, people, cars, the road, and the sidewalk.

He was a little stunned, as he stopped with both feet on what was, or used to be the road but instead was brown dirt covered by a thin layer of dead leaves. Around him now was a forest of trees, laying a thick blanket of shadows almost as effective as the buildings that had been there a moment ago.

Dillon looked about at all this, blinking stupidly as thoughts started to churn through his mind wondering what happened.

He remembered calling for the cab, and stepping down off the curb, and then wham! He was here. Dillon looked behind him, at what he thought he stepped down from, and saw the massive gnarled buttress of a root running out from a nearby tree.

He wondered not on where he was, but at how he got here. Briefly, he had thought that he'd stepped through something, like on TV, some sort of portal. Lifting his right foot, he carefully stepped back up onto the root, and swayed for a moment as he tried to keep his balance in his 300 dollar a pair shoes.

Nothing. It had been a stupid thought anyway, though he still considered other possibilities. Stepping back down onto the firm ground, he looked about, searching furtively for signs of what he hoped were a movie set. Plastic looking props, metal stands, guy wires, and hidden cameras... but nothing. It was the look and feel of a real rain forest, complete with the sounds of birds.

If it was a movie set, it was the most realistic one he'd ever seen outside of LA. But movie sets didn't just appear in downtown New York. This was the place for mugging's, armed hold ups, and knifing's.

This was more like a drug induced trip or a dream. Dillon held the bridge of his nose, as he tried to think back from this morning, when he thought he woke up.

Alarm went off, woke him and Patricia up. Breakfast as usual, read about the Republican push in the upcoming election, kissed his wife goodbye. All the usual things one expected and just the usual coffee. No reason to suspect he'd been slipped something, and he remembered everything clearly, right up until he stepped off of the sidewalk. Reluctantly, he pinched himself on the thigh, feeling the sting of reality. It couldn't be a dream, yet... No, the sidewalk... Had he been hit by a car?

Dillon sat down on the buttress, laying the briefcase across his lap. He gave his leg a rub as he thought about this all been one big dream brought about his sudden and inexplicable unconsciousness.

An unconsciousness of unbelievable reality! He ran his fingers over the black leather briefcase, feeling the hard edges, knowing it to be real. Both thumbs pressed back the two buttons, releasing the clips back with an audible double snap. The case eased open, and he found everything he expected to be in there, his diary, notebooks, pens, wads of printed records of stocks and accounts, and a few CDROM's of a new stock market tracker.

Everything felt real, looked real, even sounded real as he shuffled through them, and also smelt real. The paper records still had that fresh ink smell of been recently printed.

Dillon shook his head in confusion, and shut the case. Once again he looked about, knowing now that wherever he was, he was lost.

He closed his eyes, thinking things over. Sitting here wasn't going to get him anything or anywhere, and about the only thing he could think of doing was walking in some direction. He opened his eyes, about to choose one to head in, when the sound of foot falls and shouts caught his attention.

He turned to the right, hearing an unmistakable voice through the trees. Slowly he stood up, wondering if he should try to find them, but it didn't matter as a figure appeared between the trees, running and bounding over roots.

"Hey!" Dillon raised a hand, and called out to the man, obviously running somewhere in a hurry.

The figure looked at he only momentarily as he approached and ran on past, completely ignoring Dillon.

Dillon watched the retreating back for a moment, when an object suddenly appeared in it.

The running figure stumbled suddenly, and then fell flat onto the ground without moving.

"Dammit, I told you to stop! Now lookie what I had to do."

Dillon turned back to where the man had appeared from, and found a second figure slowly walking his way, following the same path as the man. Obviously the source of the voice he'd heard, except it was female.

He looked at her for a moment, wondering who she was. She, like the man who'd run past, didn't wear a suit and tie, shirt, or even designer jeans.

She had a shock of short bright red hair; almost blonde in colour down to her neck, with long thin strands braided together that hung behind her ears and on either side of her neck. She wore a leather corset, which had all the appearance of something from the middle ages, even the way it pressed up her breasts. This wasn't what took Dillon's attention, but the mixed assortment of rough undyed cloths, and leather and metal armour that protected her arms and legs.

The woman gave him the strangest of looks as she walked past without a word, ignoring Dillon as she walked over to the prone form of the unnamed man.

Dillon also noticed as she went past, a sword neatly strapped in its scabbard on her back. He jaw dropped as he noticed the object she pulled out of the man's back, was a knife.

She wiped it off the on the man's clothes, leaving a dark red stain before she rolled him over.

"So that's why you didn't get up." She said.

There was a deep wound in his chest, where a sharp up-thrusting root had pierced the man's chest. She patted him down, almost pawing him as she searched for something without much luck.

"It's got to be here somewhere." Dillon could hear her say to herself.

He winced as she stood up, and kicked the body venomously.

Dillon didn't hear anything form where he was standing, but obviously she did, as she cocked her head, and kicked again.

"You son of a bitch." She said, crouching down again.

Her search this time centred on the body's crutch. "Oh not this... Uh huh... Eureka."

She drew out a long tube like leather pouch that jingled as she shook it. "You're a damn lousy thief, its no wonder you had trouble running with this load between your legs."

She gave the inert body another kick, before she turned away from it, hefting the purse in one hand.

"Um, excuse me." Dillon said, trying to get the woman's attention.

She stopped as she sheafed the knife on her waist, and gave Dillon her attention.

"Could you tell me where I am?" He asked.

"What are you that you don't know where you are?" She asked back.

"Um, kinda lost it seems. This is down town New York isn't it?"

She shook her head without a word.

"There was a road here..." Dillon started to explain, waving one hand about. "I'd just come from the Damien Whitcomb building."

"You talk strangely, and dress it too." She said, without answering him. "Are you some sort of demon?"

"Demon?" Dillon repeated, confused.

She reached one hand back for her sword, and his recognised she was serious.

"No, No!" Dillon said, waving both hands about. "I'm no Demon!"

"You are sure on this?" She asked, one hand still behind her head.

"Absolutely. I'm human. Just an ordinary man."

"You don't exactly look it." She said, but still brought her hand back down, empty of any weapons.

"I'm... not where I'm supposed to be. Do you know where this is?" He pointed generally all around him.

"Stranfen Island." She said. "Notorious hiding place for thieves, like that one."

She jabbed on thumb over her shoulder at the corpse.

Dillon shook his head, trying to think for a moment. He'd never heard of Stranfen Island.

"Country. What country, are... is this?" He asked.

"This is unclaimed territory. None of the nearby Lords lays claim to it."

"So we aren't near the United States?"

"Uh, no. What's the u-night-ed States?"

This was particularly bad. Either she was one hell of a good actor, along with the dead looking guy on the ground, or he was dreaming something really intense.

He wanted to sit down and think, but his mind was a complete blank about this. All he knew was that he wasn't anywhere near home, without a passport, and knew next to nothing about the local territory. He got his first real thought then. He needed a guide, someone to show him around, at least until he could work things out for himself.

Dillon turned to the woman. She hadn't been stationary whilst he thought, and had made her way back along the trail she'd taken, just past Dillon.

"Excuse me." He said, and she stopped to regard him.

"Sorry to trouble you, but perhaps could you lead me to the nearest civilisation?"

"A town?" She queried.

"If that's close by, sure."

She seemed to consider it for a moment. "I'm headed back to Carvargna anyhow. So I suppose you could come along."

"Excellent." He said, trudging after her through the damp undergrowth.

## Chapter 2

The trail through the trees led some distance, traversing areas both wet and difficult to navigate on foot.

Dillon found his shoes filled with water in the first hundred feet, and starting to perspire under the business jacket. He paused long enough to pull the jacket and tie off, shoving them untidily into the briefcase.

The woman glanced back at him.

"What is that you are carrying?" She asked, turning forward again to brush away a python that lurked near the trail.

Dillon held the case out protectively like a shield as he went past before answering. "A brief case."

"That does not make sense. How can it be brief if you do not wear it?" She said.

"Oh, no. It's like a bag, only with solid sides."

Dillon rapped the side of the briefcase for effect.

She turned about, again to get another look. "Ah, a case!" She said, as if understanding it. "But I still don't understand why it is brief."

"It's..." Dillon had to think for a moment, "Because it's smaller than a normal case."

"Good for carrying valuables then?" She asked.

"Sometimes."

She didn't make another comment about it, following the trail until it widened where they could walk side by side. This section was well worn, having had many a person wander through hacking away over hanging limbs, and killing off trees until the track was just a narrow strip of dry earth, hard packed by the many feet that been along it.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Dillon John LaCroix" He replied.

"You are one strange person Dill-on John La Croy." The woman said, dropping the rest of his name.

"Please call me Dillon, all my friends do."

"Okay Dillon. You must call me Shaanstar."

"Shaanstar." Dillon said carefully, to get the pronunciation right.

She nodded when he had it.

"Tell me. How did you know I wasn't a demon?"

"Demon's like to brag." She said.

"You've seen a demon?" He asked, shocked.

"They love to brag about how many people they've killed." She said, ignoring his question about having seen a demon. "That, and they love to prove their virility by showing their enormous penis."

Dillon coughed. He was surprised that she mentioned it, but was beginning to realise it was the norm with her.

"Mind if I ask, what you do for a living?" Dillon asked.

"Hunter." Her reply was.

"Hunter of what?"

"This and that. I track thieves and murders, kill monsters, and rescue handsome kidnapped Princes."

"Really?"

"Yeah, all except for the handsome Princes. They're usually some stuck up snotty kid who's too young to know when he's been rescued and not getting a new whore for his bed."

Dillon didn't think she was telling the truth, but she sounded on the level, as if she really meant it all.

"That guy back there..."

"A thief." Shaanstar supplied. "I was meant to bring him back alive for the trial before they executed him. But I guess I saved them the hassle." She said with a shrug, almost nonchalantly that Dillon had trouble not believing her.

"It's just as well I'm bringing back what he stole. Should still get a fair bonus out of it."

Monsters, thieves, demons, bounty hunters, and capital punishment! Dillon was beginning to get the picture that he'd somehow stumbled into an alternate reality of Dungeons and Dragons. Though that was just a game. All based on creatures of fictional myths and legends!

He kept his mouth shut for the moment, until he could understand more of what was going on, or until he had a good question for Shaanstar.

He didn't get the chance to ask anything, as he mulled over his predicament on the track, hearing water squelch in his shoes, and finding several tears in his once clean white shirt. Inspecting one sleeve, he saw his watch. It was barely past noon. He was late for that client, but no one would be missing him yet. People occasional didn't turn up to the office, and no one thought much about it until they arrived back the next day. But Patricia would worry if... when he didn't come home.

Patricia had been his wife of three, long happy years, and still going on strong unlike a lot of his old friends. He in the corporate banking, she in the advertising and marketing, they made a good couple, if not in each other's pockets, in each other's thoughts.

Dillon couldn't shake the feeling that he wasn't going to be home tonight.

### Chapter 3

The trail opened up eventually; revealing a wide sandy beach down to blue and somewhat calm water.

Shaanstar didn't head down to the water, but turned along the tree line, walking for some distance until they came upon a small wooden rowboat beached near the trees.

Without a word, Shaanstar grabbed the rope attached to the bow, and dragged the small boat around on the sand, and proceeded to haul it down towards the water.

She seemed to be doing quite well on her own, but Dillon felt he was been left out. It could also have been some subconscious thing about been outdid by a woman. He didn't give it a thought as he dropped the briefcase in the rear, and started pushing.

The boat slid easily down to the water, where Shaanstar climbed aboard once it was floating. Dillon grimaced as he slogged knee deep in the seawater, splashing it as he heaved himself over the stern.

Shaanstar had already positioned herself in the centre of the middle seat, with oars out and positioned in the cox, pushing the oars forward, before drawing them up and back to pull the small vessel along.

It took a moment for Dillon to extract himself from his face down position to find the seat. He sat up, facing Shaanstar as she heaved back on the oars.

Dillon had always been aware of woman when he was single, and after getting engaged to Patricia, he knew that he had to curb his sight seeing days. Those ones where he would crane his neck at the short skirts of office workers on New York streets, or find himself watching a jogger, or the occasional glimpse of a elegantly dressed woman exiting a cab with that difficult to ignore leg shift as she stepped out so gracefully.

But now, his view was somewhat complete. What he'd seen before of Shaanstar had been in the haze of confusion of not knowing where he was. It had just her side and back, with the armour most prominent. Now with her facing the back of the boat, both feet placed apart for stability as she leaned forward then heaved backwards, then forwards again. He noticed before what he failed to see before.

Shaanstar had on boots that appeared to be made from layers of leather, laced together with other materials, which only helped to keep them in once piece, especially with the wear and tear she put them through, like getting soaked as they were now.

She had two metal-laced shin guards that ran up to her knees. Above that her legs were mostly bare except for the two curved plates of leather and metal armour that appeared to protect the sides of her thighs. These were attached to a belt that rode up high on her waist, but in her seated position, were riding up higher than usual to display her more than bare legs.

It was hard for Dillon to move his eyes up further, seeing not a short skirt, or bike shorts, or even leotards. But a simple loincloth that wrapped between her legs, that flowed loosely under the belt, and ended underneath the corset.

Finally dragging his eyes up, he didn't see the corset as it was designed for; to protect her ribs, both front and back with the interlaced metal plates, and support her averagely endowed breasts. But all he saw was how they pressed up and forward, appearing to almost leap out every time she leaned forward.

He swallowed convulsively, blinking to make sure he was still awake, awake now and not dreaming as he had thought before. Patricia was gone from his mind now, as he watched nothing else, save the shifting cleavage until he felt the first real ocean swell, as it swept under the small boat.

Further up, she wore a ring around her neck, which supported the two-armoured shoulder pads and guards laced around her forearms.

Dillon didn't look any further than that, as he looked out around him, noticing now where they were going. The island didn't look so much like an island, but long coastline that stretched around from behind him, all around the right, and far down to his left. Out behind to his left, lay only ocean, broad and light blue in the light chop.

The beach they'd left behind them loomed still very close, a few hundred feet, but the direction they were headed, the coast was still a veritable haze.

"How far away is our destination?" Dillon asked, turning back to Shaanstar. He found himself face to breast once again, before willing himself to draw his eyes up.

She wasn't looking at him, looking instead over her shoulder. She turned her face back to reply. "Carvargna is about seven leagues, on the river mouth."

Leagues. Dillon remembered it was an old measurement, about three miles he thought. That'd be about twenty-one miles.

His mouth almost dropped open, when he figured out the distance. Twenty-one miles in a row bow, on an ocean.

He first wondered if they'd make it, twenty-one miles was so far to walk, let alone row. He knew they couldn't make much more than a couple miles an hour, but he had a look at how Shaanstar was doing. She was pulling the oars through the water at a reasonable rate, looking as if she was going to continue rowing at the same pace for at least another hour.

When he was sure rowing the distance wasn't going to be a problem, he started to worry if he would become sea sick. His honeymoon had been an island cruise around some of the paradise islands, including Fiji, but that had been a ship, not a boat that rose and dropped with every swell.

His stomach felt okay for the moment, so he tried to relax so he wouldn't stress himself about it.

He tried. Tried to relax. Tried to think about what had happened. Tried to ignore the woman in front of him. Tried to. Then eventually stopped trying. For quite a while he just stared at her without really looking. A sort of

conscious meditation, where the relaxant was the image of a strangely clad woman, wet from both from sea spray and perspiration.

There wasn't much else for him to look out there in the middle of the ocean. The sky also was a plain muted blue, slightly overcast with grey rain like clouds. There was strip of land close by on the right, but it lay some distance off. Not close enough to see anything, except the line of green rising beyond it.

Shaanstar never said a word during the entire trip, except when Dillon finally offered to do some of the rowing.

"I will row." She replied. Her face remained calm, without any sign of emotion.

He didn't offer again, not bothering to think about it, still finding that he was bored of sitting there. He had no other choice by to continue staring at her, though he tried not to stare at the drips of moisture that ran down her cleavage where it disappeared.

## Chapter 4

Eventually, Dillon was partially relieved to see they were starting to approach land. He had his eye upon the trees, which seemed to take forever before they started to loom over the water's edge.

Carvargna was not what Dillon expected. He didn't even know what to expect. But the town that rested along the bank of the river that emptied itself into the ocean wasn't something from the dark ages, but neither was it like any modern 21st century town. It looked more like something out of the mid 19th century.

The first thing that greeted them, were the half dozen wooden jetties, that had small sailing vessels and boats anchored along them. Nothing was much bigger than an 18-foot yacht.

Shaanstar worked the oars, drawing them up to the steep bank, where she tossed the rope to a boy who stood waiting.

"You caught the thief?" The boy asked as he dragged the boat into shore. "The merchants are going to be very relieved. Especially Gellman. He's been arguing with the Justice committee to have him drawn and quartered before been hung."

"Gellman's a loud mouthed fool." Shaanstar said, stepping out of the boat and getting a foot wet before she could get on dry land. "And he'll be sorely disappointed, because the thief's dead."

"Then that's..." the boy started to say.

"No." Shaanstar answered first, "This man was lost on the island. I've simply helped him back."

She took the rope from the boy, and hauled the small boat forward, unbalancing Dillon who'd moved forward in the boat to get out, before suddenly falling backwards between the seats,

"Looks like he needs plenty of help Shaanstar." The boy said. "I hope he pays well too." The boy ran off without another word, disappearing into the town.

Dillon extracted himself from the seats when the boat stopped moving, remembering the briefcase this time. The boat was up the bank, almost all the way out of the water, so he couldn't get wet as he clambered over the edge, almost slipping until a hand grabbed his already damaged shirt.

"Thankyou." He said, once he was solidly on ground, away from the water.

"So what are you going to do now?" Shaanstar asked.

"Um." Dillon had been able to formulate a few thoughts on the trip. He'd thought about hiring a guide to help him back to America, or at least back to somewhere where there was enough civilised technology to transport him back. An airport, ship, or something!

But his thoughts weren't on that. He'd heard the kid mention payment, and automatically his New York instinct came to the fore, drawing out his wallet from his trousers to pay her as if he'd just been given a cab ride.

His wallet was out, with several green paper bills in his hand before he realised what he was doing.

"Do you accept American currency?"

Shaanstar stared at the printed money in his hand, "Paper?" She asked.

"Money." Dillon explained. "This is a ten dollar note."

She shook her head, and pulled a silver coin from the pouch she still carried. Dillon leaned forward, examining the coin a little closer. It was real silver, minted with a picture of something on one side, and words on the other.

"500 crowns, Bank of Argandonia, Legal tender, Issued 45-839." Dillon read in English. "I guess my coins would be next to useless also."

Shaanstar put the coin carefully back. "It's fine, you don't need to pay me."

Dillon didn't heed her, itemising everything he had of value, from his watch to the calculator, and then he remembered something. "I know."

He put the briefcase down, snapping it open to search through one of the back pockets. He'd almost forgot it had been there.

A year ago, someone he knew at work had been mugged. It happened all the time, but this was the first person he'd known to have it personally happen to them. On an impulse, he went to a shop looking for self-protection.

Purchasing a gun hadn't been something he'd wanted, but eventually he'd been pressured into buying a knife; a small switchblade. The shopkeeper had said that it was small and light, and could stay in his shirt pocket. He didn't even have to use it if he wanted, but would be better having it than not.

At home he'd been examining it a little more closely, sitting on the bed and letting the blade snap out with a flick of the wrist, the way the shopkeeper had shown him. Then Patricia had come in. He hadn't even known she was home yet. He knew she wouldn't have approved, and hadn't wanted her to see it, and he was right. She told him to get rid of it. It had promptly gone back into the briefcase with the promise of it never returning. Except that he forgot. It stayed in the bottom of the back pocket, never seeing daylight, until now.

Dillon held out the small handle, the blade still folded away.

"What is it?"

Dillon flicked the blade out, and was stunned when she reacted just as quickly, her knife out before he could say anything. She didn't go any further, seeing that he had no intention of harming her.

"It's a switchblade." He said, folding the blade back again, and handed it to her.

She tried to flick her wrist out, but the blade didn't work, until Dillon demonstrated it again with an empty hand.

Shaanstar tried again, getting the blade to flick out. She examined the blade whilst it was out, running the edge across her bare arm, drawing a thin line that welled blood after she pinched her skin.

"A fine blade. But I can't take it." She said, folding the blade back and holding it out to Dillon.

"Why not?"

"Because... I already have a knife."

"Then have another. It might be useful to surprise a few people."

She shook her head. "Dillon. Do you have another weapon?"

He shook his head.

"Then you must keep this." She said, grabbing his hand, and closing his fingers around it. "I cannot take the only weapon you have. It would be wrong of me to rob you of your only means of defence, and I have already said I do not need you to pay me."

Dillon examined the knife mutely, but didn't feel like arguing against her.

"If you insist."

"I do. As I also insist on you being careful. You are an unusual man Dillon. But seem like a nice man. I'd hate to see you getting hurt by anyone."

Dillon felt comforted by it, coming from someone he hardly knew.

"But now I must go, and see some profiteering merchants to return their money. Maybe I'll see you again."

That would be interesting Dillon thought to himself, as she turned and left him standing there at the edge of the town. A town he didn't know.

Too late already, Shaanstar had disappeared around a building before he could catch up. Leaving him without a guide.

The sun was low in the sky, appearing as if it was a late afternoon. Looking at the time on his watch, it seemed to agree. Half past five.

With no choice as to direction, Dillon headed up the first street that Shaanstar had entered, looking at anything and everything that could help.

The first few buildings he passed looked like storage sheds, big wooden structures two stories high. Beyond this, buildings were made out of various materials, including lumbered wood, stones, and even some with bricks. The road itself he walked along wasn't dirt, but gravel, scratching under his every step.

He passed one building that appeared, and sounded like a bar. A few rough voices come from across the road, loud with excitement over something. Dillon thought it was a little early for drinking so didn't bother to approach.

He passed people, men rather, who gave him strange looks, but stayed away. The few that he tired approaching, either turned down the first side road, or ignored him completely when he asked for directions.

Down one road he turned down, thinking he'd find someone, a door clattered open just in front of him. He stopped to look; hoping someone helpful would step out. Instead there was a woman, lithe of limb, and completely naked except for something hanging around her neck and down her back.

She pranced around a few times like a ballerina, laughing lightly before a man came out the door after her, himself also in the midst of undress.

"Come back here wench." The man called, before catching her with one hand, and throwing her over a shoulder to carry her back inside, kicking the air with her feet.

When the door closed, Dillon shook his head, wondering what he'd just seen. It wasn't as if prostitution didn't happen in big cities, but this never happened. Unless they were married! He shook his head again, trying to put it out of his mind as he continued on.

Dillon had already walked some distance though the town, and was now beginning to doubt he would find anything like an information centre or a commercial district, when the road broadened out into a large open paved area.

## Chapter 5

The Merchants had been like greedy scavengers when she handed over the silver 500 crown pieces, almost fighting between them to count the coins. That is all of them save for Gellman.

He was waiting to know what happened to the thief. After telling him that he died accidentally, he didn't seem too concerned, but rather he wanted to know if he said anything.

Shaanstar told him the truth that he fell upon a tree root, and was dead before she reached him.

Nothing else was asked of her. No reprimand for not bringing him back alive. No congratulations either. One of the other merchants handed her a few thousand Crown pieces, and that was it.

She mentioned that she was available for any other work when they needed her, and the reply was succinct. "We'll call you."

She shook her head, leaving the merchants to their money, heading back out into the dimming daylight. The pay had at least been enough to cover her needs for a few days, until she could find another job. The likelihood of that happening here in Carvargna was minimal.

The place seemed almost dead. Just a fishing port of no real interest, except of course to the merchants.

She wandered across the plaza, wondering what she might be able to find to eat locally. Looking for some place to eat, a disturbance caught her attention, and she headed that way almost automatically.

A figure lay sprawled outside the door of a bar, and slowly getting up.

"And you stay away from my customers, until you find yourself some money." Yelled the owner from the doorway, who was a big man with a light but loud voice.

The man on the ground raised a hand to the doorway momentarily, and then raised his hands over his face as a black rectangular object sailed out the doorway, hitting him squarely.

The owner disappeared, leaving the figure lying on the ground again, a small moan escaping his lips.

Shaanstar recognised him without difficulty as she approached, and saw that he hadn't exactly been idle when she was with the merchants. He had new scratches and rips in his shirt, and a slowly darkening bruise around one eye.

Without a word she bent down, easing him up to wrap one arm around him, and grabbing the briefcase in the other to haul him to his feet.

"Thankyou for you kind help..." Dillon began, turning his head until he saw Shaanstar. "Oh, hello again."

"You look a mess." She said, "As if a goblin has used you for practise with a club."

"I look like..." he started to say, stumbling once as his head lolled to the side.

"Yeah, and I think it best I help you get cleaned up, before someone thinks you're an escaped slave."

Shaanstar led him through the streets, which were now lit irregularly by light poles, with large diamond shaped lights. She knew she had no choice but to lead him back to her digs for the night. She wasn't going to risk leaving him anywhere else, and she wasn't going to spend the extra money either. She was going to miss eating out tonight, but that couldn't be helped most times.

She'd rented out a small room in the local equivalent of a motel. A large dark weatherboard building, one story high like most buildings here, but well insulated from the cold nights.

Inside, she stopped momentarily at the first door, knocking on the wood. In a moment, the door swung open, a friendly female face peering out.

"Julienne, I'll be taking your special dinner tonight in my room. Two if possible." She asked the woman.

"Sure, that's no problem. Got a male friend tonight huh?" Julienne asked, seeing the slouched figure behind Shaanstar.

"Sort of. Just something I picked up in the square." She replied.

"You be careful with some of them, they like to experiment you know."

Shaanstar nodded.

"I'll bring it right over when it's ready then."

"Thanks." Shaanstar said, before continuing along the hallway to her room.

She wrestled Dillon's form through the doorway into the room, tapping the light switch with an elbow. It appeared austere at first glance, but really wasn't. There were a reasonable number of furnishings around the room, but it was the size that made it appear sort of empty.

Small rooms never really made her feel comfortable. They were confining, so she always looked for a place with some space. Open spaces, and large rooms.

She dropped the briefcase on the bed, and lowered Dillon down whilst she thought out what to do. The food would be a while in coming, so she looked at Dillon. His white shirt wasn't white any longer, except for a few spots on the front. It was blackened and dirty, and the pants and shoes he wore carried mud from as far back as the island. As for Dillon, he lay back on the bed eyes closed, unmoving except for a rare twitch.

He needed a wash, she thought. Part of the room's features, was its own tub and toilet. These weren't separate in another room or an adjoining room, but clear in the same floor space. They were considered one the normal features of this public house and any building, but patrons could also keep personal activities completely private, without having to stray some distance to wash. But the lack of walls wasn't necessarily a sign of cheapness on the owner's part, but a common trend in all buildings, as building small inner walls was difficult and overly expensive in supplies.

Shaanstar ran the hot water, filling the tub as she took on the job of undressing Dillon. It wasn't difficult, though she was surprised about the buttons and especially the zipper as she ran it up and down a few times, listening to the sound.

She was careful with the shirt, though it didn't look like it could be re-worn without some patching first. Dillon barely cooperated with her, lifting limbs to help, but otherwise did nothing to assist even after she pulled his underwear off.

With both arms she physically lifted him up, carrying him across to the tub; before lowering him in, leaving his arms over the edge so he wouldn't slide down. She stopped a moment to turn the water off, and looked at Dillon. He just sat there, still unmoving.

"You're going to have to help me a little with this." She said.

He mumbled something inaudible in reply.

This wasn't going to work, she thought to herself. He was going to sit there and stagnate like golem, letting the water get cold. She needed a wash too, to get some of the rotten vegetation smell off her from sleeping out on the island last night.

Reluctantly, she started stripping off, pulling off the shoes that were still damp and unstrapping the sword and armour. Last of all was her undergarment, which she unlaced. It smelt but wouldn't need washing quite yet.

A block of solidified soap in one hand; she stepped into the other end of the large tub, watching the water level rise significantly as she lowered herself in, been careful of her hair.

She washed herself first before starting on Dillon. One leg at a time, she worked up him without any help. It took some rearranging before she could work on his torso, sliding him forward and sitting behind him. At several points she heard him call out a name, Patricia, but she had no idea who or what it meant.

She drained the tub from where she sat, allowing all the water to exit before she reached for a towel. This was more difficult without the water supporting him as she attempted to dry them both, without spreading the water around a second time.

He didn't move but she noticed that he did react. So he wasn't totally out of it. He was barely aware of her. She remembered feeling like that herself many a time in the past. Some situation or something happened, where she'd been knocked out, or fell down something or that one time she almost froze to death.

There was a soft tapping at the door, followed by a quiet voice. It was Julianne with the food. Shaanstar dragged herself out of the tub, drying the last of the water off as she opened the door.

The hallway was empty, but a tray lay on the floorboards, laden with two bowls and mugs, with some bread and cheese. Not rich fare, but still good and wholesome.

On the bed, she sat down; eating from one of the bowls a thick and tasty soup mixed with vegetables and small bits of meat. It was good, if a little rough on the throat, but a mouthful of the wine helped fix that, washing it clear and leaving a sweet aftertaste.

Dillon still lay in the tub, his head barely visible. Time to get him out, she thought as she hauled him out to drop him onto the bed, finishing the drying off with the towel. He cooperated a little, and ate the soup she spooned into his mouth like an infant.

"It'll help you to sleep." She told him, as she poured the wine down his mouth, along with the rest of her mug.

Once done, she rolled him into the bed, dragging the blanket over. Checking about the room, she decided to do something with Dillon's clothes. They looked horrible, but it wouldn't do to throw them out, because she'd probably have to buy him replacements. So she did her best, and washed the shirt in some fresh water in the tub, and washed off the bottom of the pants. The hung up on a rail on the wall to dry over a vent of warm air that circulated under all the rooms.

Now that everything else was finished, she arranged her clothes and armour on a chair then turned the light off before climbing into the other side of the bed.

Sleep came easily enough; though she drifted off with the thought that it was the first time she'd taken someone to bed and hadn't done anything.

## Chapter 6

Dillon awoke, sore and a little dazed. Daylight spilled through the open window, bringing in a cool breeze that promised a fine clear day.

He raised one hand up under the blankets, and felt his face, touching the soft tender spots delicately to measure the extent of the damage that he could remember receiving. Several punches. Including the wall and at least three floors. He'd been angry at first the first time, but three against one weren't good odds. The second time he was laughed out when someone tripped him up. And after that everything started to get hazy after the fist to the face and meeting with a hard floor.

Someone had helped him, he remembered, but couldn't straighten out his memory of yesterday. There was a blur of something, which he thought had been Patricia and then nothing after that.

Eyes open now, he turned his head from the window, over the ceiling to the other side, finding nothing familiar.

Drawing his hand back into the bed, he realised he was naked underneath. He wasn't cold, as the bed kept its warmth, but there was a large patch of warmth next to him, where he ran his hand through.

He felt a little uneasy about it. Sleeping in a bed with another person, naked. Had something happened? Had she or did he try anything? Or was she a he?

Dillon cringed at the thought of sleeping with another man. Leave it to the homosexuals, he thought, but leave me out of it. He wanted it to have been a woman, but not. Not with Patricia. He fancied himself as been honourable to his wife; in obeying the very words he'd said for their vows of marriage. "... A true and honourable husband whilst he lived upon this Earth."

He'd had some help writing it from an old English teacher who had a flair for the extravagant, but overall it was his words. It was his contract to Patricia that he abided to as long as he lived. Even if he had an accident, and technically died and was revived, it would still stay in affect. There'd been some trouble in court recently over that very issue, as someone tried to argue that death was still death with the medical records to prove it, even there was no certificate signed off by a doctor.

He pulled the blankets up as he sat up, completely naked, even slightly firm with warmth, but with an underlying urge that made itself evident as he got up, stretching his arms.

The unusual container in the corner by the tub, he found was the toilet and gratefully sat down to relieve himself. Automatically he looked for a roll of paper, which wasn't there. Thin paper leaves, stacked under a roller.

Finishing by washing his hands and face with cold water from a tap, he found his clothes neatly arranged on a chair with the briefcase next to it. On the small table near it, was a wooden tray with some fruit and bread, but there was no sign of any other habitation within the room. He was alone.

He dressed and ate, feeling a little awful at having to wear the same clothes, but they looked a little cleaner. There was no mirror in the room, so he couldn't check his injuries, and he wanted a shave. Maybe he could risk using a knife, if he felt like slitting his throat sometime!

His mysterious benefactor hadn't returned, so without any haste he opened the door. To the right, there was an open doorway leading outside. He headed that way hoping no one would surprise him with a bill. Maybe he'd find someone today who could help him.

The plaza wasn't as difficult to find this time, following people headed in that direction Dillon just followed the crowd into the central plaza area.

It was like the town had come to life. People had come from leagues around, to attend the Market place. The stalls of food that contained hanging animal carcasses, cooked meats, and pastries that made Dillon's mouth water, barrels of drinks, fruits, and many others. And food wasn't all that there was. There were wares or many types, tools, repairmen, and live animals for sale.

There were other stalls containing a mixture of things. One that Dillon passed was a small closed tent, where a woman sat hunched out front calling to passers by.

"Your fortune read for 10 crowns. A measly 10 crowns to know your future! Find out who that special one for you is, know when not to plant next season, or when your parents will finally die and leave you all their money."

Dillon heard the woman giving her chant. She sounded almost like some of the loonies back in NY, who'd stand on a street corner, preaching some weird church thing.

"You there!"

Dillon turned his face towards the old woman.

"Yes, you. You have the look of someone abandoned, lost from his rightful place. There's a woman you know now, and another you will know in the future. There is great power ahead."

Dillon didn't have 1 crown, let alone 10. Neither was he interested in fortunes, palm reading or tarot cards. He really didn't believe in that phoney stuff anyhow. It sounded like the general crap in horoscopes. Two women? How many men had trouble with two women? A fair percentage he thought.

Figures, stocks, share market, and anything to do with money were his sort of thing. But he was kind of short of it at the moment. It was holding him back almost, from getting any help. What he'd do just to know where to find an American Embassy, but that was half the confusion.

Of all the countries he knew that spoke English, all of them were reasonably large first or second world countries, with a well-educated population. They all knew what and where the United States was.

All his attempts so far to get anything, had either been met with blank stares, or spurned. The latter had been mostly from shop owners who hadn't liked his presence.

Dillon had to think about it. Change his strategy, because it just wasn't working. Simple and direct just didn't cut it at home, so why would it work here? First of all, he needed to find a person who could answer his questions. Someone well connected, and knowledgeable.

He picked the smaller traders and started asking questions, like, "Do you know who around here hires out people?" or "I need a guide, someone who knows the area west of here," and "Who's the best person with information, like maps and other things?"

The answers he got weren't always helpful, but they led him eventually to a man who sat at a shaded table away from much of the loud traders, drinking something from a crystal glass.

Dillon knew he'd found someone important. He had money at least, and that usually meant status and or power in a place like this.

He'd gotten a title, Master Merchant but no name. With trepidation he approached, hoping he didn't look too untidy.

"Master Merchant, could I have a moment of your time?"

"Don't bother me." The Merchant replied with a low voice, not looking at Dillon.

"I've travelled a fair distance, and I'm simply a little lost..." Dillon tried to explain.

"Do I look like a guide?"

"No..."

"Then go hire one and stop hassling me."

That wasn't exactly what Dillon wanted, but it didn't seem like he was going to get any further with the Merchant otherwise.

"That is exactly what I'm trying to do, but no one..."

"You're still here?" The Merchant turned to face Dillon this time.

Dillon took a breath, knowing he was at the limit of the Merchant's patience.

"I just want a recommendation. Because you would know better than I of the people around here."

The Merchant looked at Dillon for long moment, silent as if considering something.

"Someone who knows the land, could be trusted not to let you get killed or rob you blind between here and the next town?" He said.

Dillon nodded in agreement.

"Well, maybe there is someone..."

The Merchant lifted a hand, and waved someone over.

Dillon thought this might have been the guide at first, but the man approached the Merchant directly, bending over to whisper with him.

The Merchant looked up at Dillon when he was finished. "Tristian here will show you someone. If they don't suit you, that's your problem. But don't come back here."

"Thank you Master Merchant." Dillon replied.

The Merchant waved a hand, signalling dismissal before returning his attention elsewhere.

"This way please." Tristian said, leading off.

Dillon followed, as they led a winding course through the plaza, stopping once in a while as Tristian asked questions of some people, before continuing on.

Inside a tavern, Tristian told Dillon to wait just inside the door.

"Let me check if they are here first." He said.

Dillon watched him as he approached the bar, asking the man behind the counter who raised a hand, and pointed across the room.

Dillon looked in that direction, but the room was filled with any number of people, talking, drinking and otherwise. He couldn't make out who was pointed at from the doorway.

He looked back at Tristian, who waved a hand at him. He wasn't sure of the sign, but it looked insistent. Like he wanted him to join him.

Leaving the security of the entrance, Dillon eased through the crowded tables, watching the direction Tristian took, hoping to intercept him at the appropriate point.

Tristian was already leaning over a figure, talking to someone. Dillon only saw their back as he approached, finding it vaguely familiar.

"Master Merchant Gellman sends his regards, and offers you a job suitable for your skills." Tristian said, "A man seeks a guide for our fair realm, and Master Merchant Gellman is most insistent that you help this man. Here are 50 crowns for you to consider the offer."

Dillon saw Tristian drop a coin onto the table, which rattled briefly before it settled. He reached the table as the person turned about, and instantly recognised the face, the chest, and the rest of the body that sat under the table.

"You?" Dillon said.

"If you already know each other." Tristian said, starting to reach for the coin.

Shaanstar's hand snapped out, covering the coin. "An offer's an offer." She said to Tristian.

"Quite right." Tristian said, "As long as the Master Merchant does not have to set sights upon this man again." He added, before turning about.

"Nice to see you're awake, and in one piece. I wasn't sure if food and rest was all you needed last night."

Dillon was still trying to understand how he'd been lead straight back to her, as his brain caught up with his ears.

"You..." He repeated, coming to the conclusion that it must have been her in the bed, but he still couldn't remember thing.

"Sit down." Shaanstar ordered, "You're beginning to sound like gabbling fool."

He had his lips wrapped around, ready for another "you", when he shook his head once without moving from the seat.

"What happened last night?" He asked.

"If you take a seat, I'll tell you. I might even buy you something to drink also."

Dillon eyed her suspiciously, but eased a chair out to sit upon.

"Your face still looks like a mess, but it'll heal." She said.

With one hand he reached up, touching the skin around his eye. He remembered that much. The skin felt fine, if a little tender.

Shaanstar leaned back in her chair, signalling someone. In a moment, a mug was brought over, and placed in front of Dillon.

Unsure, he picked it up to sniff at it. A little early for alcohol he thought. A glass of juice or coffee would have been better, but he didn't want to decline anything if it was free, so sipped it slowly.

"Now then, what's this about a guide? I thought you didn't have any money?"

"I don't. But tell me about last night first. Last I clearly remember, was been ejected from a bar."

"Well, yes. I think the ground was a bit harder than the fist that hit you. That, and that thing when they threw it at you."

She pointed at the black briefcase which Dillon had place on the floor beside him.

"That's about when I found you. I took you back to where I was staying, gave you a bath, fed you some food and put you to bed. That's about it. You were still asleep last I saw this morning when I left looking for some work."

"You bathed me?" Dillon asked, surprised.

"I wasn't going to push you into a bed covered with dirt. The inn keeper wouldn't have me back if I did that."

"And you slept next to me?"

"I only paid for the one room, so there was no way I was sleeping on the floor!"

"You slept clothed?" Dillon asked.

"What do you take me for?" She said. He started to breathe a sigh of relief. "I don't sleep in a bed clothed. It's too bloody uncomfortable, and it stinks up my clothes."

Dillon didn't know what to say. He lifted the mug to his mouth, and swallowed down a mouthful, and started coughing.

"So we only slept in the bed?" He asked after he regained control of his throat.

"That's all. It was a little unconventional, but you were dead asleep as soon as I got you in."

Dillon swallowed another mouthful from the mug, and found it suddenly empty.

"Why is it so important that we only slept?" Shaanstar asked.

"Because I'm married." He replied. "And because I made an oath to keep faithful to my wife."

"It's never stopped anyone before." She said. "But it's your decision."

"Yes it is." He said.

"Tell me about this guide." She asked.

It took him a moment, to pull his thoughts back from Patricia. "Oh that. I was just trying to find out who could have access to a map. Find out where the main cities are, so I could somehow work my way back to the United States."

"Just a map?"

"A guide would be okay I guess, but I wasn't getting anywhere until I started to pretend I had money."

Shaanstar was silent as she thought.

"Well?" Dillon asked. "Do you have a map?"

"Ah, no. No map." She said, "Everything I know is up here."

She pointed to her head, displacing a few hairs.

"Do you know who might have a map?" He asked.

"There might be one of the local area." She supplied.

"Too small. I'd need one that showed all the towns and cities."

"I... don't know." She said. "I've never seen one that big. And you'd need a lot of them to cooperate to make one like that, and you know how difficult that is."

He didn't know, but he was beginning to think that finding a map was impossible.

"Then I'm stuck. I don't have any money to hire a guide."

Shaanstar resumed her silence for a moment as she thought.

"No, you can still get a guide." She said finally.

"How? What do you expect me to sell? Myself?"

"Yes." She replied almost instantly.

Sell myself, Dillon thought. What was she saying, that I should... "No way! I won't do sex for money!"

He was a little loud, but she controlled herself from looking around at the faces that would be staring their way.

"No." She said quietly, trying to bring the volume of the conversation back down again. "Sell your skills. What can you do?"

"Oh." Dill said with realisation. "I'm an investment banker. I work with money. But there's little need of that around here."

"I suppose you could work for it directly. A contra trade."

"A what?"

"Contra trade. You work for me as I work for you." She said.

"That doesn't make sense."

"Okay then. Lets try this then. Let's say I'm a baker, who makes bread, and you're someone who wants food. I can't give it to you for free, and I can't hire you to make your own bread. But you can help in other ways, like milling grain, or collecting supplies to help me make the bread. Then I could pay you for that labour with my own bread. You help me to help you."

"How would I help you for real then?"

"Well, I'm not too sure yet. Normally I take on jobs whist I travel to pay for expenses, so you could assist me in those. We'd be travelling to wherever I guide you, so you could end up doing anything."

"But we'd be going where I want to, right?" He asked.

"Your destination would be the primary concern. Anything else along the way is only to help us. Or you rather."

"So this could work?"

"Absolutely. We only need to agree and make an oath on it."

"That's all? No contracts to sign, or blood letting?"

"No." She gave a short bark of laughter. It was the first time he'd heard it, but it wasn't displeasing to the ears. "Just grab my hand."

He put his hand out, clasping hers.

"And promise that you'll endeavour to assist me in all ways, as I guide you to where you wish, to the best of my ability."

"I promise." He said.

"That's all there is to it." She said disengaging his hand. "As long as you or I don't break it."

"And if it was broken?"

"I wouldn't break it. Though I said I'd guide you to the best of my ability. If you wanted to go to the bottom of the ocean, I'd only be able to take you so far. But if you broke it, and I was still alive, I'd tell everybody I could that you were an oath breaker, and nobody would ever take on a job for you again."

"Thanks for telling me in advance." He said, a little angrily.

"Well, you wanted a guide, and I needed a job. And I do believe that you angered Merchant Gellman."

"Him? I didn't do anything to him."

"His assistant was a little insistent on you not ever seeking him again. So breaking a promise I'd say is the least of your worries and getting out of Carvargna a high priority."

## Chapter 7

"Tell me again, how we ended up as escorts for a caravan?" Dillon asked Shaanstar as he sidestepped a pile of fresh dung.

Both of them were walking together behind the trailing end of a long column of horse drawn caravans headed in land.

"Out of Carvargna there isn't much place to go, other than straight to Unaquay." She explained, "So I found us a job on the first outgoing caravan. Unfortunately they were only looking for escorts and cooks. I can't cook, can you?"

"Unless it's with a microwave and an frozen meal, no."

She didn't know what a microwave was, but the answer was clear enough.

"So we're escorts. We get paid, food, and somewhere comfortable to rest our hunches whilst we're guarding during the night."

"Do we get to sleep?" Dillon asked.

"And hour or two maybe." She said.

"Oh god. How many days will it take?"

"Usually it'd take me a day and a night. By horseback, two days. But the caravan will take three days."

"Three days!" Dillon complained. "I'm gonna reek without a shower. That's if I'm still on my feet, and they're in one piece."

Dillon looked down at his already dirty shoes. They looked scuffed and worn, and probably stank worse than the manure he'd been avoiding all day.

"We'll get a chance to rest in turns," she said, turning her head to look behind them as they walked.

"That's the fourth time you've done that." He said, taking a glance behind them also, but not seeing anything except the dirt track, which they'd been following all afternoon. The trees that reached over the road creating a mix of shadows that reach back on either side. But nothing moved that he could see.

"Just making sure there isn't anyone following. We have to make sure that we aren't surprised from any direction. Bandits sometimes try to capture a caravan like this, but not often."

"Bandits? What do they look like?"

"Like you and me, but not as well fed. Maybe less clean too."

"Yeah right. Tell me that when we reach, what is it again?"

"Unaquay. It's the ruling centre for Argandonia. From there, we might be able to get a map, and plan our next destination."

"I hope so."

"You've got your knife?" Shaanstar asked.

"Right here." He replied, patting a pocket.

"Just making sure, since you aren't carrying that brick."

"Briefcase."

"Whatever. Just so you're not unprepared."

The caravan continued up until the daylight was failing, and the ground was becoming hard to see. Lanterns were broken out to see by, but not to continue the journey during dark, because it was hazardous, instead to bring the caravans into an open area, well used by travellers.

Dillon helped break the mounts from the caravans, bind their legs together in a small pen of rope, so they didn't wander.

There was water in a nearby creek, which fed the river that ran past Carvargna, providing a moment for him to wash his face as he dragged two heavy pails of water back to the camp. By the time he got back, he found the camp already set-up around two fires which were not been lit and where food was been prepared.

Dillon quickly delivered the pails to fetch water again before finally sitting down to ease his feet. Rest didn't last long, when he felt the urges of nature pulling at him.

He looked around, wondering what to do. There was no toilet out here, and what he required was more than a tree to duck behind. Unsure, he started towards a set of trees when he noticed Shaanstar across the camp.

She was talking with one of the other escorts about trade routes from Unaquay, which he didn't want to interrupt, but had no choice.

"Shaanstar, where about can I take a shit?"

"There's a trench about 20 feet behind those trees." She said pointing, "Take some ash with you."

"Ash?" He asked, getting a little edgy.

"Yeah, to cover the smell."

"Ash, okay." He said, turning about. There was a shovel close by which he grabbed, and levered some ash onto from the edge of one of the fires.

Grabbing a lantern in the other hand, Dillon went through the trees indicated, watching carefully where he stepped for the trench.

It was easy to find the freshly dug ground piled around the 6 foot long and 1-foot wide trench. A little hastily he put the lantern and shovel down, before dropping his trousers to lean back. He almost overbalanced and fell into the trench, until he put a hand back across to stop him from falling.

It was a relief once he was finished, using leaves from pile that had been stacked nearby. The ash he carefully spread over his addition to the trench and turned to leave.

"Don't forget to spread soil over that."

He was jolted in surprise of the voice, as a figure quietly stepped from the shadow of a nearby tree.

"You gave me a fright."

"Sorry." Shaanstar said. "Just thought I'd check up on you. You didn't seem to know what you were doing."

"Don't I ever." He said, using the shovel to spread some soil over the ash.

"That's evident enough. You might find it a little easier next time, if you put one foot on either side of the trench."

"On either side... You saw?"

"Well, it's better that you don't venture out here alone. If bandits were to attack us, they'd work best by picking us off one by one. And what better place then when we're a little occupied. And you are my responsibility."

Dillon nodded, though he held a few doubts. He was not holding much belief in these bandits that she kept mentioning either.

He turned to head back to the campsite.

"Stay a moment would you?" She asked. "I'll need some light."

Turning back, he saw her astride the trench, squatting over it. Dillon averted his eyes, not wanting to see. Been there was simply enough as it was.

He finally turned back, after he felt her hand pull on the shovel.

"What about ash?" He asked, breaking the uncanny silence.

"You've spread enough down there to choke a dead body." She said, tossing soil into the trench. "Let's get some food."

Dillon led the way back with the lantern, avoiding some of the dead branches this time in an attempt to be quieter.

The activity around the camp was more relaxed when the smell of food drifted around, bringing everyone in to grab a bowl of food. Dillon wasn't sure what to expect, but the substance he received, looked more like something served in an English prison from two centuries ago.

It was dark, of little taste, and ran off his spoon, except for the lumps of meat and vegetables, which were undercooked.

Immediately Dillon wanted to spit it out, but with a little will power, forced himself to swallow after seeing everyone else digging in without pause. He had to wonder how qualified the cook was that this stuff could be called food. He'd tasted better stuff cooked by his own hand without the help of conveniences. But still, he'd used prepared packets and followed written instructions.

The bread also tasted stale, which he used to wipe his bowl out with. The only thing that went down okay was the mug of ale was that given out. It went down a little quickly, leaving a slight fizzy sensation in his throat which passed away leaving a sour aftertaste.

The caravan leader stood up, breaking the temporary silence that had been whilst they ate. "There'll be three watches this evening. You, you, you, you and you first watch." He pointed at particular individuals, receiving a few groans. "You, you, you, you and you second watch."

Dillon had been selected in this group.

"And finally is you, you, you, you and you. If the choice of watch is unsatisfactory, then swap with someone. The next watch is to be woken by the previous. If anyone is caught napping, your pay will be docked. Those of you who aren't on first watch, better get some sleep."

As soon as he finished, there was instant arguing between the men as they switched watches. It was like the sales of a popular toy at the toy store, before Dillon realised it had began, it was already over. Men and women were separating, most finding a bed roll to sleep on, whilst a few.

Dillon moved to take one of the bedrolls when a hand landed on his arm.

"I've arranged for us to be on the first watch together." Shaanstar said.

"Oh good. I hate breaking my sleep up."

"Yes, I thought you might agree." She said.

"Yeah, but you didn't need to do the same."

"I'd feel better staying awake whilst you were on watch." She said.

"You think I might fall asleep?"

"No, but I'd feel better knowing where you are all the time."

"You're taking this seriously aren't you?"

"Life is always serious." She said.

The sound of conversation slowly died around the camp as people got to sleep. Dillon arranged himself against one of the caravans, half sitting to rest his feet whilst he kept his eyes open.

The darkness was all ensuring around them, a soundless cover for the sounds of wildlife that chirped, slithered, croaked or rumbled. Apart from that, the only noise was the fires crackling with slowly reducing intensity. Occasionally Dillon felt the grip of sleep pulling at him, but he resisted by moving about.

Eventually Shaanstar joined him, "Time for the second watch." She said quietly.

"Oh good." He said, keeping back a yawn as he checked his watch. It was only a little past 11, but he felt tired to the bones from the afternoon of walking.

"Who's my relief?"

“Her,” she said, pointing to a woman curled up near a fire.

Dillon approached the figure quietly, not to disturb the other sleepers. Leaning over he touched her shoulder, shaking her lightly as he whispered. “Time for second watch.”

Her eyes snapped open. Stretching her limbs, she got up from the bedroll, eyeing Dillon silently for a moment before moving off to the edge of the camp.

Dillon turned his head to find the bedroll he’d been aiming for before the change in watches, and found it occupied. Looking about he found most of them already filled, except for those settling down from the first watch.

The only one empty was the one next to him that the woman had just vacated. With a mental shrug, he slipped into it, shifting only slightly when something on the ground dug into his back. He was only a little aware of the smell of the woman in the roll, before drifting off to sleep.

## Chapter 8

The morning was loud with the sound of yelling. The caravan leader brought all those who'd been asleep, quickly to wakefulness. Everyone gathered about, taking in a pre-dawn breakfast before breaking camp. The sun wasn't up but the sky was well lit now.

Dillon had the task of helping carry ashes to the latrine trench, before burying it with the mound of soil. It stunk, and the ash irritated his nose, but the work helped somewhat to bring him awake.

Once on the trail again, he marched, if a little unsteadily in the middle of the column with Shaanstar, working out his cramped muscles as the bright morning sun broke between the trees.

"How is it I can get more than 6 hours sleep, and still feel tired?"

"Are you asking me?" Shaanstar queried.

"No. I guess I'm feeling out of joint. I'm not used to sleeping on the hard ground."

"It takes a little practice."

"So we've got a full day's walk in front of then?"

"Yes, then another tomorrow to reach Unaquay before nightfall."

"How'd you get us on first watch? Wouldn't it be more preferable than others?" Dillon asked.

"I promised them that they could have it tonight if we were given it. So we might get second or third watch tonight."

"It's not so bad I suppose, if we get third watch instead tonight."

They day wore long for the caravan, stopping only a few times to water horses and for a brief break to eat and toiletries. The only other people they saw were travellers going in the other direction on foot, showing no interest in the caravan.

Dillon had to wonder how important it was for people to travel about this country, moving by foot everywhere, when a horse or even a simple bicycle should improve travel greatly.

He felt sore down each leg, and in both feet by then end of the day, and wanted more than anything, to sit in a nice high-pressure spa and a masseuse to work on his aching joints. It would have been better still if he could have just dropped to the ground, and gone to sleep to awaken after the sun was up. But after helping dig the trench for the latrine, and eating something gruesome for dinner, he found himself on the second watch for the evening with Shaanstar.

He more than obliging took one of the bedrolls, feeling each and every ache under his body screaming out as he fell asleep eventually.

The hand shaking him was a little too rough, rousing him from the so short sleep that he deeply wished to continue. The shaking continued, with a voice.

"If you do not get up, I shall knife you where you lie."

Not a familiar voice, one of the other men. Dillon wondered briefly if he meant it. The guy would make a mess of the bedroll, and then where would he sleep?

"I'm up." Dillon said, turning about and raising himself up.

The man glared back at him in the dim firelight, his eyes looking like deep hollows.

Dillon covered his mouth, repressing a yawn as he got up from the bed, leaving it in disarray. Stretching his arms over his back, he looked about the camp, seeing who was up and where.

One or two figures were trying to wake up like he was, but they were already making rounds of the camp edge.

Shaanstar stood, almost immobile to one side. He thought for a minute she was sleeping on her feet with her eyes open, till her head turned towards him.

She was looking directly at him, but there was something else. He noticed her hand, which was on the hilt of the small knife she wore at her waist. The same one she'd used when he first saw her.

Her hand wasn't merely resting there, but slowly drawing it out. He knew then there was something wrong. Fumbling, he reached for the shirt pocket where the switchblade sat, pulling it out, but dropping it. He grabbed for it as it fell, barely missing it once as he bent to catch it with the other, when something stung across his back.

Dillon gave a small yelp, both from the stinging pain, and from falling to the ground on one of his arms.

His voice wasn't the only one that was uttered, as a scream lit the air.

Of the three other escorts who'd woken for the second watch, one now lay crumpled upon the ground with an arrow protruding from a chest. A second sat on the ground and clutched at their neck which was sprouting blood, and the third who had cried out, collapsed on the ground away from the fire, but with a smoking wound in their back.

Dillon was only partially aware of the sudden calamity that broke out within the camp, as he rolled off his arm and found the switchblade, and looked up at Shaanstar. She had shifted a few feet, and vaguely he saw that her hand was empty of knife now, but she didn't remain where she was for long. In a moment she'd leapt over a few of the things scattered around the camp, drawing her sword as she disappeared into the darkness between the trees that surrounded this side of the camp.

Drawing his attention back to the camp, he saw with clarity, that they were been attacked. Two more men, those that had been of the first watch who'd roused again quickly at the sounds were struck. One by an arrow, as the other was hit by ball of fire no bigger than a baseball.

It flew out of the darkness around them, like flying torch, striking him the face. The fire burned the flesh on his face instantly as the man screamed horribly.

Dillon was no coward, but the unseen arrows, and the balls of fire that flew through the camp above his head scared him enough, to warrant staying down. The caravan leader had awoken when the second man died, but only now stood up, almost defiantly in the middle of the carnage that had started around him. Dillon wanted to call out, tell him to stay down, but he just stood there as the next fireball came flying towards him.

One moment, it looked like he was going to die, the next his hands were raised, and the fireball as if it was on a rubber tether, changed direction, and returned to its origin. A figure was lit within the trees for an instant before a scream, and then the light disappeared. A moment later the scream stopped, and no more fireballs came from that direction.

Dillon kept his mouth shut, as the leader turned about to face the next fireball, repelling it with equal ease, but this time a second ball appeared within his own hands, which he cast after the first into the forest.

The first returning fireball stuck a tree, missing the figure that had moved after throwing it, but was now clearly lit as the second fireball flew in, hitting the figure. The form crumpled, almost soundlessly.

The next object to hurtle out of the darkness was an arrow, which burned like a moth as it struck the ball of fire that hit it.

Dillon was impressed by the spectacle, and turned to get up, feeling a little safer with the leader dishing out fireballs. That was when he saw the figure emerge from the tress close to the caravans.

A smallish man, wearing animal skin breaches and vest, carrying a drawn sword as he walked straight into the camp towards the unprotected back of the leader. Dillon urged himself up, unseen by the man for the moment from his position.

It was almost too easy, as Dillon approached the man, who was almost upon the caravan leader. The switchblade in one hand, Dillon was prepared to stab this man, but not kill him. It was the sudden wavering of courage which Dillon thought he had, which gave the sword bearing man enough warning.

The man swung about, seeing Dillon for the first time, raising his sword to sweep down him.

Dillon hadn't even been more afraid in his life. He may have even pissed his pants, had he had less control, but maybe some basic instinct, some little bit of courage, or the small time he'd spent practicing with the knife. With a short flick, he brought the blade out, and swung it across the man, catching a bare arm with the sharp blade.

The man howled stepping back for a moment, until he realised the only wound he'd gotten was a minor cut. Not enough to make him drop the sword. With a glower, he raised it again, stepping forward to cave Dillon's head in, and then promptly fell over, the sword barely missing to the side of Dillon. A smouldering hole blackened the man's back, giving off the smell of charred flesh.

"I thank you for delaying that man." The leader said to Dillon. "I think that was the last of them."

Both Dillon and the leader turned quickly, when brush shifted. A figure emerged carrying a sword, and Dillon sighed with relief.

"That was reckless." The leader said as his hand glowed momentarily.

Shaanstar approached, quietly sheathing her sword.

"We were lucky." She said, surveying the damage. Seven lay dead, excluding the bandits. Four were injured, either with arrows or non-lethal burns. Only five of them were able to stand on their own.

"I think I left half a dozen of theirs amongst the trees, but the rest were frightened off." Shaanstar said.

"Half a dozen?" The leader queried.

"There was about sixteen of them." She said.

"Then we were lucky."

None of them were able to get much sleep after that. Their own dead was arranged in the back of one of the caravans, as Dillon helped retrieve the horses which had been frightened off during the fire fight. The bandits' bodies were simply stacked together away from the camp, stripped of anything of value, and left to the scavengers of the night.

The cut on Dillon's back, and wounded were tended as best they could, because no one in the party had the healing arts, so much was left until they could reach Unaquay in the morrow.

Everyone was able to settle for the remainder of the night; getting what little sleep they could after such a bloody fight. So tired that Dillon was he fell asleep where he sat after the late night of work.

## Chapter 9

In the morning, after Shaanstar awoke Dillon from his tired slumber, the work for them didn't ease up.

The caravan leader informed them that one of the wounded died during the night, from the loss of blood. That only left eight of them to continue on the voyage that until yesterday hadn't seen any trouble at all.

Packing camp took longer, because of the lack of hands but wasn't stunted in any way. The fire had all but died out during the night, leaving them without the need to haul water to put it out, or to spend time cooking food. One of the dead now occupying the back of one of the caravans was the cook.

Dillon didn't feel too sorry for the man, finding raw fruit and fresh water much better than the horrid mess that had been called porridge last morning.

The only part that everyone got to enjoy was when the horses were finally hitched up. With so few people left, everyone was assigned to a caravan. One each to the six caravans, except for the two most wounded that rode with the leader and one of the others.

It was more than a thrill, to sit and travel without having to walk. With all the travelling, Dillon had worn his shoes and socks for two days straight, and more than willingly pulled them off, putting up with the smell as he wriggled his toes about.

He didn't find controlling the caravan awkward either. The horses responded easily to his tugs on the reins, but he didn't have to do much, as they followed the back of the caravan in front without much prompting, giving him the chance to actually rest.

He dearly would have talked to Shaanstar about last night, but she rode one of the other caravans, so he was left to his own devices until they stopped for lunch and to rest the horses.

"What is that hellish smell?" She said wrinkling her nose as she approached from around the side, having unhitched her horses to let them water.

"It's my feet." Dillon admitted hesitantly.

"They smell rotten." She complained. "Go down to the water. Down stream from everyone, and I'll bring you something."

Dillon complied, carrying the smelling shoes and socks with him. He sat on some of the rocks by the water's edge until Shaanstar appeared.

"Wash your feet with this." She said, tossing him a block of something that looked like soap. "And those too." She added, pointing at the socks and shoes.

He scrubbed his feet clean, both soles, and between toes until the skin couldn't look cleaner. The socks he rubbed together and pounded against the rock like a washerwomen in a third world country then rinsed them out to watch the dirt and grime flow away into the water.

"Don't forget those." Shaanstar admonished him.

With some distress, he dipped the shoes into the water, then ran the soap around inside, before rubbing it in with his hands, then rinsed it all off.

Shaanstar held up one of the shoes, and sniffed it carefully. "Much better. When it's dry, pour some of this in each."

She handed him a pouch as she took back the soap.

Dillon opened it up, and peered in, seeing nothing beside some dried vegetation. One sniff told him nothing, other than it held no smell.

The break didn't last long before they were on the track again, Dillon resting a little easier now that his feet didn't smell.

They didn't stop again except for lunch before reaching Unaquay.

Dillon wasn't able to see much at first, only the fields of farm land that passed by on either side, that is, until the wall appeared, stretching from far on his left, across to the right; most of it been blocked from sight by the caravan in front. It wasn't until they were much closer; almost to the wall itself that Dillon saw how big it was. It wasn't just a simple wall but a battlement that stretched more than 30 feet high, and across the landscape like the Great Wall of China.

Dillon knew of no walls like this in America, but there could have been some in Europe. He didn't really know, but the sight of it impressed him.

There was a brief moment as he sat looking up at the wall before passing under a wide arch within the wall, and beyond it.

There weren't any more fields, but open ground filled with people, tents and animals. It was like the market back in Carvargna, though Dillon couldn't see anyone selling anything in the chaos.

It wasn't where the caravan stopped either. They continued forward, passing the people who didn't pay any attention to them, and passing through another arch under another wall, where the hoofs of the horses clicked upon a paved surface.

Here lay the real Unaquay. The streets were bricked, not the rough blue stones, but well laid bricks that interlocked, and lay flat under the wheels of the caravan. Along the streets were buildings, not one story, but two and occasionally three decorated by beautiful architecture reminiscent of ancient China or Japan.

Wooden buildings painted bright colours; adorned by tiled roofs that curved downward around each neatly spaced building, white plastered walls, with framed wrought iron windows, and brightly decorated gardens around each building.

The people also were better dressed than those behind the previous wall, brightly decorated and dyed clothing, dresses, laced shirts, shawls, and many assorted styles. Nothing remotely civilised like a business suit, but the styles were similar, almost like something from the 1960's.

Dillon followed the caravan in front, quickly glancing at whatever passed him, and at the buildings that remained in view above him.

A few times he saw people leaning out of windows looking at the caravan, some children who were waving, or a woman who was hanging clothes out on a line that was strung between buildings.

The caravan came to a stop in a small courtyard, where a man helped array each caravan into a line side-by-side, where the horses were unhitched and fettered in stalls where they were supplied with ample hay and water.

The room was a mix of sights and strange odours. Clear bottles and jars on shelves filled with strange coloured liquids and powers. A woman attended them, wearing a simple unadorned grey gown, first seeing to the other three who had more serious wounds from last night.

Dillon would have called the woman a doctor, but the name that the others used was Healer. It was all the same to him, the way she fussed over their most minor of wounds, telling them to smear this or that upon it, and leave it cover for a day or two.

He stared a moment, as the healer directed the woman with the shoulder wound to remove her tunic. She didn't show any inhibition at baring her breasts to the others as the healer applied something to the damaged tissue where an arrow had been lodged and removed last night.

"Let's see your hurt." The healer said, approaching Dillon now.

He removed his shirt, showing the scratch he'd gotten. It hadn't really been bothering him, but the Lord's adjunct had insisted that any injuries obtained during the job be healed at their expense. So here he was, getting a scratch looked at. Something he was sure would heal over in a few days.

"Hmm, nice straight line. Sharps arrowhead. You were lucky." The healer said, touching something cool to his back. "Any slower, and you wouldn't have an intact spine."

Dillon shivered involuntarily at the realisation that he could have been paralysed.

"Now just stay still for a moment more." She said, as something else was applied on his back. "Okay done."

Dillon turned to the Healer, who was closing one of the jars. "No water on it until your ready to sleep, then you can wash it off. It'll heal without scar, so you won't have anything to boast about your skill of speed with."

Dillon wondered why he'd want a scar, but looked at the others. The years of battles, skirmishes, and other encounters were markedly evident on their uncovered skin. The white marks of scars curled and pitted their otherwise faultless skin here and there, on faces and bodies.

He pulled his shirt back on when the Healer said she was done, directing them towards the door when they were all dressed again.

Shaanstar waited with the others outside in the fading dusk of early evening.

"You are all well?" the aide said. He was a short man, who'd met the caravan to check it over. He'd already congratulated them on bringing the caravan through safely, as well as dealing a blow to the local bandits.

"Good, good. It's nice to see honest hard working folks."

The aide started handing out small pouches to all, who were there, "There was a bonus for the elimination of the bandits."

There was a grumble from the caravan leader as he checked out his pay.

"You'll also find that eighty percent has been deducted for your current debts to Argandonia, bringing some of you much closer to clearing yourselves with the Lord."

"Whatever we can for his Lordship." The caravan leader said.

"That is the way He likes it." The aide said.

Dillon watched as one after another of the small pouches was handed out, until there was one left.

"All except for you sir, who doesn't seem to have a debt," the aide said, handing a very full looking pouch to Dillon.

He still held the pouch firmly, as he looked directly at Dillon. "The Lord would enjoy the company of thyself at sometime within the near future."

Dillon wasn't sure if the aide would let go for a moment, when another hand pulled the full pouch out of both of theirs.

"His services are already owed to me, under binding contract." Shaanstar said.

"Ah, well that it is. Then you should be sure to register it with the Magistrate. We wouldn't want you unlawfully soliciting his services."

"I will." Shaanstar said, giving the aide a hard glare.

"I bid you all a good evening then." The aide said at last, before departing.

There were a few glances towards Dillon and to the large bag of coins from the others, but they departed in their own directions.

"What was that all about?" Dillon asked, as Shaanstar lead them away from the Healers.

"Argandonia laws and taxes." Shaanstar said. "All business in Unaquay itself is regulated, and must be approved by the Magistrate. If it isn't, then you can be fined heavily for unlawful employment."

"Sounds simple enough." Dillon said.

"Then you haven't seen how difficult it is to get a business, even something as simple as selling flowers on a street corner." She explained, "I heard of one girl, not much more than 13 cycles old, who applied to do such, collecting flowers from the wild forests outside the city, to sell them in the streets. She waited to see the Magistrate two days before she could see him, and then only told her to fill out forms, which she couldn't read. She had to pay a Lord's adviser to fill out the forms for her, and spent another several days before seeing the Magistrate again, and paying for the permit."

Dillon kept listening to Shaanstar's tale, thought it sounded somewhat similar to any government agency in the US, especially anything to do with welfare. Though the way Shaanstar was explaining it, it sounded like a personal story.

"The form was accepted, and a job permit granted. Three days later, early in the morning she'd gathered herself freshly blooming wildflowers to sell, and was doing well on one of the street corners, when one of the constabulary happened by, and asked to see her permit. It was all perfunctorily, except when she showed them the document signed by the Magistrate, they arrested her on the spot for illicit trade."

"What happened?" Dillon asked.

"She was fined 7000 crowns at the time for the act. She had to pay up or face..."

"How!" Dillon interrupted, "I thought she got the job to sell flowers!"

"She hadn't been able to read the form which she'd had the Lord adviser do, but neither was she able to read what he'd written. Apparently he'd written her down for another line of trade."

"Another trade?"

"The Magistrate made a deal, that since she couldn't pay up now, that she pay up with eighty percent of her future earnings, until she'd paid back the realm, including interest."

"So she did get her job?"

"No, she didn't." Shaanstar said. "It had already cost her time and money to get the current permit, and now she couldn't afford to get the right one. It was either work the job that the current permit was for, or be imprisoned into slavery."

"Slavery?"

Shaanstar continued, as if he hadn't said anything. "She agreed readily without even knowing what was on the permit, since she didn't want to become a slave, and signed her name on a piece of paper which had been read out to her, stating that she would work off her fines. When that was all done, she had the Magistrate read out her permit, so she could at least find out what she was supposed to do. She didn't care if had been a scullery maid, or a shoe shiner, or even a timber cutter, so long as she tried to pay off the debt. So he gave a leering smile when he read it out, which shocked even her. Of all the things, she hadn't expected even this. To become a prostitute, at barely 13 cycles."

Dillon was slightly stunned. He'd heard the words slave, and prostitute. Slavery had been outlawed not too long ago, and the taboo surrounding it made everyone, including the private wealthy people stop when they heard any mention of it.

Prostitution however had been around for ages, even in the civilised countries. But prostitution of young girls was shocking. He knew about it happening in Asia. It was supposedly possible for any white male with money to visit a place like Hong Kong, and find himself a young girl or boy for an evening. It had all been under the table type stuff. Illegal, but still not too well policed.

What Shaanstar was telling him though, was it was legal here. That with a work permit from the so-called government; a girl or boy of any age, even 7 or 8 could become a prostitute.

It was so damned amazing, he was having trouble believing it, but the deadpan face on Shaanstar said that she wasn't making a joke, or any attempt at humour.

"Was she... you?" he asked.

She looked back at him, eyes half glazed.

"No. She... died many cycles ago."

"I'm sorry," was all Dillon could say.

"It's fine." Shaanstar said, turning her face forward again. "She paid back what she owed, and learnt how to pay back those who had duped her."

Dillon had an idea what she meant, but didn't ask. He thought it best not to know. But he was beginning to wonder where they were headed.

"Where are we going?"

Shaanstar was quite a moment longer before answering. "A tavern. Some place with cheap lodgings and good food."

## Chapter 10

Dillon had forgotten for the moment his questions for Shaanstar, until they'd found the place she was looking for. He remembered what they were when they were eating in the busy downstairs tavern, in amongst other people who talk was loud enough to drown out the man playing something that sounded like an accordion.

"How was the caravan leader able to make fireballs?" Dillon asked, leaning across the small table.

It barely held the two plates and bowls of food that Shaanstar had ordered, and paid for with the money Dillon had earned. He didn't question her carrying it, though he still wasn't sure where she carried it. But the food was much better than what they'd been eating. Slices of roasted meat, baked vegetables, slices of sweet bread, and a handful of small cold things called Lowgula. They tasted like a local variant of sweet tomatoes, but were pink in colour.

"Better practice than most I expect, and more gifted." She answered

Dillon acted a little baffled, dropping his fork of food back to the plate.

"Practice? But that was magic!"

His voice was a little louder, and he looked about guiltily, but no one seemed to pay attention.

"Just magery." Shaanstar said.

Dillon's brows creased at the unfamiliar word, before he placed it.

"You mean a mage? A full blown mage?"

"Sure. Though I'm still not sure of if there were two or three with the bandits. Though he did kill them quite efficiently."

She didn't appear disturbed by the choice of conversation as she continued eating between talking.

Dillon was a little put off, suddenly losing his appetite as he remembered seeing the figures light up as they screamed. His stomach hadn't quelled after a moment, but his mind returned to what he was trying to ask.

"Tell me about mages."

"What's there to say?" She asked.

"They... there aren't any where I come from."

She actually paused as she looked at him in the face, to see if he was telling the truth.

"No mages?" She asked.

"We've got magicians." He said, "But they only do illusions. But..."

He stalled unsure what to say.

"Magery is real." She finished for him.

"How real? What can they do, besides fireballs?"

"It's a... are you going to finish that?" She pointed at his plate.

Dillon looked at the food, still feeling a little squeamish. He grabbed the chunk of untouched bread.

"No, I don't feel like any more now."

"Shouldn't waste it." She told him.

"Then you can have the rest." He told her.

She lifted his plate without comment, and scraped the rest onto her own.

"Magery is like a skill. Some people are naturally more gifted and some aren't, though it's possible to learn it. And then there are the few who are born powerfully gifted."

"The caravan leader?"

"Probably born with a little skill, and has learnt the finer points of it, so he can control what he does."

"And you?"

"Like most people. I have smidgen of ability."

"Like what?" He asked.

Shaanstar looked about the table for a moment, before settling on one of the mugs.

"Take a sip from your drink." She directed him.

He looked from the mug to her quizzically.

"Go on. It won't hurt you."

He picked it up, and sampled it.

"So?" He said, wondering what she was talking about.

She picked the mug up after he put it down, holding both hands around it. Intensely, she stared at it for what seemed like a full minute before putting it down again.

"Now try it." She said.

He picked up the mug, tasting it again in much the same manner, but pulled his lips tight this time.

"Nice and cold." He said, lowering it after drinking in more than a mouthful.

"It's about all I can do. Not very useful under most conditions."

"But better than nothing right?" He asked.

"I suppose, but I haven't had much occasion to use it. Except for, maybe once."

"It didn't save your life."

"Actually... it did."

She noticed that he was waiting expectantly for an explanation.

"I was caught in a blizzard up north, and lost most of my gear. A Sygran bear had been stalking me for three days before the blizzard hit, so I fashioned a dagger out of snow, which I turned into ice. I had it ready by the time the bear caught up me."

Dillon lapsed into silence, trying to imagine surviving in a snow-covered wilderness with a bear after him. He quickly concluded that the bear would have won unless he had a sports rifle to make up the difference.

"But some other skill, like moving objects would probably be better. I could have shaken ice crystals from the trees, or something."

"Telekinesis." Dillon said, a little awed. "How many types of mages are there?"

"A dozen, maybe two dozen type of skills. I don't really know. A person doesn't have stick to one skill."

"Might I be able to learn it?" Dillon asked, a little eager now as he bit in his bread.

"Maybe, though it's difficult to find out what natural skills we might have at our ages."

Our ages. Dillon kept thinking about what Shaanstar had told him as he lay on the bed.

Shaanstar was quiet on the other bed, except for the sound of her regular breathing.

The room wasn't big, but had enough space to swing a person around in, and still extra. The two beds separate beds made Dillon feel better, and they were even mildly comfortable after the previous nights of sleeping on the ground.

There had been one more surprise before going to bed. He'd washed the ointment that the healer had spread on his back, making sure it was all off when he took a bath. Feeling the skin on his back, he'd found the scrape gone. Completely healed.

He'd pulled on his underwear before Shaanstar entered the room.

"The scratch on my back, it's gone." He said, reaching back to touch the perfect skin.

"The Healer was a good Healer." She said, glancing at his back. "You're finished with the tub?"

"Yeah, sure." He said, still preoccupied with the miraculous healing.

When he turned about, to ask her another question, he found her with her armour half off, about to disrobe.

"I'll get out, so you can bathe." He said, grabbing his trousers to pull them on.

"You don't have to leave." She said unconcerned, looking about to Dillon as she arranged her attire.

"No, I'm going out to think for a while."

"Don't be to long, it's dark out." She said, reaching to remove her remaining clothes. "Be careful."

Dillon pulled the door closed before he saw Shaanstar do anything more, unsure what it was with her, and some of the other people. Were they sexually active, or just a relaxed morality on nakedness? It made him uncomfortable, but it was tolerable to a degree.

He stood now hand on chin, topless himself, in the chill air of the darkening night, staring out nothing in particular.

He considered for a moment that he was in need of that shave, and hoped to remember to ask Shaanstar about getting something.

With sudden need, he looked up at the night sky, searching for a recognisable constellation. It had been years since he'd done any serious stargazing with his uncle, but saw a few familiar signs. He remembered with a fondness that he'd met Patricia the first time after one particularly session up on the hill near his school, down at the local cafe. It brought up other memories of Patricia and their following romance.

The stars no longer his attention, Dillon found his eyes were closed and opened them with no sense of how long he'd been standing there, maybe five minutes or possibly half an hour. He stayed there another five minutes, just looking at the stars before he went back inside.

At the door, he knocked. "Shaanstar, are you finished?" He called, feeling a little obvious.

There was a voice from inside, "Yes."

It hadn't been too much to expect, but Dillon's sense of guilt hit him hard when he opened the door, holding it half open.

If his jaw could be detached from his mouth; it would have been rattling about on the floor.

"Much happening outside?" Shaanstar asked, not showing any concern about her lack of covering, as she dried the fringe of her hair.

Dillon didn't register the question in his consciousness, as she finished her hair, and tidied up before climbing into her bed.

He was still holding the door, eyes blinking when she called him again.

"Aren't you going to bed?"

"Huh? Oh."

He stepped in, closing the door and looked over to Shaanstar again, unsure.

She had her own bed, but things... He stopped the thought before it could go any further by imaging her in her armour, in her bed. It seemed more natural that way, as he removed his trousers.

"Light." She called.

Dillon turned, pressing the switch, sending the room into darkness before climbing into bed himself.

It took a while, but eventually Dillon drifted off to sleep, dragging his thoughts away from Shaanstar by thinking about Patricia. But his dreams weren't totally benign either, imaging an army of fire wielding men, and people who could heal wound's up as easily as some people could patch a hole in a wall.

In the morning, Shaanstar acquired for him a shaving kit, an antique looking one, complete with a razor sharp knife. With assistance from her, he removed the last few days of growth from his face before she led them on a quest to find a map.

"Something of the region, or regions. Coast line, and town names." Dillon told her when she was questioning him on what he wanted.

"A map. Still, I think it may be difficult, but we will try." She said.

Their first stop was at the Magistrates office. Not to see the magistrate, but there were other Unaquay officials who used the same building. One of which was local equivalent of a planning minister. He kept records of all the known residents of Unaquay.

"A map? You want a map!" he said, almost a whine in his nasally voice. "Ask the Magistrate, he knows these things."

So they joined the lines of waiting people.

The Magistrate's hall resembled a room full of refugees from Bosnia. People in worn and tattered clothes, screaming children running about, some half naked, animals and their droppings, all vying for the attention of the man through the large doors at the end of the room.

It took hours. Way past what Dillon considered lunchtime before they got through those doors. Once through, they saw the well lit, clean and modestly decorated chamber the Magistrate used.

There was a loud thump, and Dillon glanced at a man with a large heavy object like staff, resting on the polished floor.

"Declare your request to the Magistrate." He called.

Shaanstar replied, keeping her voice clear so the Magistrate could hear her from his seated position at the far side of the room. "We are after a map of the out regions beyond Argandonia, milord."

"A map." The Magistrate said. "Maps are the sole property of the Lord. If you are in possession of any, you must turn them over at once."

"We have none milord." Shaanstar said.

"Then begone!"

There was another loud thump from the man at the side, and Shaanstar turned to leave.

"But..." Dillon started to say, as she clasped one hand over his mouth, and pushed him towards the doors with the other. Two guards opened them, letting them back out into the loud and smelling room of waiting supplicants.

Shaanstar released his mouth several steps away, but kept pushing him along.

"But... he didn't even tell us..."

"You don't argue with the Magistrate." She said, "Or he's liable to fine you."

"But..." Dillon made an attempt to stop, his foot sliding on something.

"Don't argue with me, or I'll knock you to the floor."

Dillon half tripped, as he realised what he was stepping in, and not wanting to personally meet the stinking refuse on the floor. Out the front door, back onto the street, where people crowded pointlessly to get inside before the day was over, Shaanstar continued to direct him until they were clear out of sight of the building.

Dillon stopped when he felt her hand leave his back, and whirled about.

"It's obvious we can't get a map from the official parts of Unaquay." Shaanstar said. "They don't seem to allow maps of any type here."

"Then we can't find one."

Shaanstar looked about, checking to make sure they hadn't been followed from the Magistrates. "It doesn't mean we give up. There are still unofficial sources. Only we have to be careful in finding them."

"Oh." He said, getting the drift.

Dillon remembered also what the aide had said last night and told her.

"It's is pointless, there is no such law."

"But..."

"He only said it to waste our time, and possibly incur more debts."

Dillon didn't pursue it further, sure that she knew better.

She followed up on two acquaintances who knew how to get their hands on illegal information, finding the first one had disappeared for parts unknown, but the other was still running her business on the side as she sold crockery, pots, and anything ceramic in nature.

"Damn. You had to ask about bloody maps didn't you," the woman said.

She was a little waif like but tall and thin, with narrow cheek bones that held a face that looked like a finely carved statue made of dull white and pink marble. Her hair was blonde, pulled back into a loose bundle. She looked almost ghost like in the filmily white dress, and moved it also as she led them into a back room, stacked full of stock.

"Jessifer, you're about the only source I've got left to try." Shaanstar pleaded.

"Can't you find what you want without a map?" Jessifer said.

Shaanstar looked to Dillon, who replied. "Unless you can tell me where I can the United States of America, or where the nearest Embassy is. Even an international airport will do."

"He's not making sense." Jessifer said, looking to Shaanstar.

"He knows where he wants to go, so there's got to be a map or something."

"You don't seem to know what you're asking. Argandonia and Royan have been at it for cycles. They've learnt that any information can help them, and loose information can help the other."

"I know, I know." Shaanstar said. "But he's not after a map of Argandonia and Royan in particular, but the general... everything."

"Well it just doesn't exist. You should know that, and you should have told him. The Old Families just don't like to share things like that. They won't cooperate on anything, short of a war against one of the others. And even then, it wasn't pretty."

"Jothan's double cross." Shaanstar said, as if that explained the whole incident.

"Exactly. So finding a map in any of the Old Family cities is next to impossible."

Dillon has listened to the conversation, even when they spoke of him as if he wasn't there, but picked up something important.

"Then what about finding one outside the Old Family cities?" He asked, looking alternatively to the two women.

"He's crazy." Jessifer said, dismissing Dillon with a wave of a hand.

Shaanstar was quiet for a moment longer before speaking up. "No, he's got a point. There are some regions that are still neutral."

"Some, but not likely to hold anything of importance, like a map of the territories."

"Mage Watch." Shaanstar said.

"Mage Watch? You've got to be kidding!"

"It's older than any of the Family cities, and they're supposed to store old relics and things from the past." Shaanstar argued.

"You know how far that is?"

"I've been there. It's not as far as Pantuek."

"Yeah, I suppose your right, but you'll have to go through Royan, and they aren't been friendly with anyone who have come through Argandonia at the moment."

"That's no real problem, except for currency."

"Well, you know who to see for that don't you?" Jessifer said, hand on hips.

"Yeah, that crazy old bastard by the camp. I know him."

"I haven't been much help this time, have I?"

"No, not really. But it helped to make sure there wasn't any other way though."

"Next time you should stop by my place."

"I will, but..."

"Yeah," Jessifer said, glancing at Dillon momentarily. "You've got your hands full."

"I promise to stop by next time." Shaanstar said.

"You better."

Shaanstar turned to exit then stopped. "We should do something about that case."

Dillon held up his hand, holding the briefcase aloft.

"Do we have to?" Dillon asked.

"It is a burden. Does it contain anything of immediate value?"

Dillon thought, mentally searching through the contents. The records, the CD's could be replaced easily at work. The CD's were only a buck each according to the IT department, and paper wasn't his concern. His diary, it only contained planned meetings, which he wouldn't be getting to any time soon. A calculator, some pens, his tie and jacket.

He eased the case up onto a shelf, and snapped the lid open and removed the jacket. "I guess not."

"Jessifer, any way we can interest you?" Shaanstar asked.

"In this?"

Dillon handed it over.

"What is it?"

"A briefcase." Dillon explained, "A small hard carry bag. It has combination locks here... spin these little numbers for 347, then press these."

The locks snapped open, before he eased it open.

"Interesting. Might be worth... oh pretty."

Jessifer fingered through some of the items, holding up one of the CD's, letting the light reflect of its back.

"What's this?" Jessifer asked, touching the wads of records.

"Paper." Dillon said. The records were confidential, though several days out of date. He doubted the contents would be useful to anyone.

"I'll give you... sixty five hundred crowns."

Dillon looked to Shaanstar for approval.

She wasn't looking at Dillon, but at Jessifer. "Are you sure?" She asked.

"Well..." It sounded like she was questioning its worth herself. "I might be able to squeeze to seven thousand. But not a crown more! You'd be cleaning me out."

"It's worth seven thousand?" Shaanstar asked.

"Maybe more, this paper is pure white. The local paper maker would pay me a fortune for this alone. It shouldn't be hard to sell the rest."

"I guess seven thousand is okay." Dillon said.

"A deal then."

Jessifer put the case down, to remove a pot from a shelf. Where the pot had been, she loosened a brick in the interior wall, and reached in, pulling a large bag out.

She opened the bag up, and counted coins into one hand.

"Seven thousand crowns." She said, handing them over to Dillon.

He looked at the crowns, checking their value as she put the bag back into the wall.

"Fine." He said, more to himself.

Jessifer returned her pot to the shelf.

"Tell anyone about the wall, and I'll kill you myself."

"We won't." Shaanstar said, keeping a smile on her face.

Jessifer poked a finger at Shaanstar, and then they embraced before pulled away.

"I'll see you next time." Shaanstar said, as they exited the shop.

Dillon didn't offer a comment upon what he thought he might have witnessed. It didn't bear upon him at all, except that Jessifer hadn't been of much help.

"So this Mage Watch..." He began.

"Shh." Shaanstar hissed at him. "Don't speak it."

Another issue, Dillon thought. "Okay, just tell me how far it is we have to travel."

"A few ten days, down the coast."

Shaanstar offered the pouch of coins from earlier, holding them open as Dillon emptied his hand into the pouch. The crowns could have stayed in the jacket pocket, but he thought the money should stay in one place.

"By boat?"

"No. I wish we could, but they usually don't carry passengers. We'll have to cross by land, down the major road that goes south from here. Then we'll turn inland for some distance."

Dillon was still trying to figure where he was. A coast. The east coast! He'd half imagined he was in South America because his watch seemed to be on time, but that would place him in Brazil or Argentina.

But that it couldn't be right. The natives or residents there round there didn't speak English so fluently. And he'd never heard anything about magic, unless it was the type practised by some African countries like voodoo.

Something was decidedly wrong, and he wouldn't find out what until he got an overview of everything. And this Mage Watch sounded intriguing also.

"When do we leave?" He asked.

"First we need to find a means to pay our way."

## Chapter 11

"A horse?" Dillon asked, looking up at the animal.

"He's still in good condition." The horse trader said, from the other side of the rails, as he patted the neck of the horse in question.

"Then why is it... he so cheap?" Shaanstar asked.

"Well, you see. He's been put out to pasture. He's had a good working life, and then worked as a stud. But now he's starting to get a little old."

"He can't get it up." Dillon said, with a laugh.

"Hey! Don't make fun of pecker!" The trader complained.

Dillon snorted with restrained laughter.

"He can get it up all right, just that he has a little trouble with the... ah fillies is all."

Shaanstar tried to ignore Dillon, "So he's still a good horse?"

"Absolutely. A bit slower now, but he can still run a fair distance when necessary. Very obedient too."

The trader patted the horse, as if it were one of his favourite children.

"So how much?" Shaanstar asked.

The trader released the horse, and came over to the rails, leaning his stocky frame. "Four thousand."

Four thousand. Shaanstar wasn't sure if that was a good first price or not. She wasn't too familiar with buying horses, but she'd had a quick look at some before, and they needed one to get where they were going in any reasonable time. And she knew that Dillon wasn't going to walk the distance.

"Four thousand with the saddle, reigns, blanket and stirrups. In good condition."

The trader coughed, and turned to spit at the ground. "For four thousand, that's pushing it."

"You said it's an old horse yourself. It won't have any resale value." She argued.

"I'm sure I could get better for it."

"Not even if you tried to sell it to the butcher." Shaanstar said. Horse didn't taste too good, especially old horse.

"Four thousand, I don't know." The trader said, hedging.

It probably wasn't even worth four thousand, Shaanstar thought suddenly. "Thirty five hundred." She said, trying to drive the price down.

"Hey." The trader said indignantly.

"Are you sure yet?" Shaanstar said. "We'll find one elsewhere easily."

"Look, make it four thousand, and I'll through in some saddlebags and make sure the horse is reshoed for you."

Damn, Shaanstar thought, remembering the horseshoes. She knew they were important to the horse's well being. She thought one last time on the price.

"It's a deal." She said.

The trader hawked loudly, and spat into his hand before offering it to Shaanstar. She grabbed it without hesitation, shaking hands to seal the deal.

"Be back before the dusk, and he'll be ready." The trader said, stepping back to the horse.

"We will."

The trader led the horse away, toward the building that joined the pen, as Shaanstar turned in the opposite direction with Dillon.

"That is disgusting." Dillon said.

"What?"

Dillon pointed at his open hand.

"Oh, a Horse trader custom. A few other places use it too."

Dillon was a little relieved when she did eventually wipe it off somewhere down the street, on their way to make a few late purchases for the journey tomorrow.

They returned to the horse trader after finalising a job to transport a bag of rocks south to some man. It was something important apparently, but none of the usual messengers or couriers would touch the package claiming evil ghosts. Shaanstar wasn't much of one to believe in ghosts, so had taken the job after confirming they had a horse. It was to pay well too, if the rocks were delivered.

"There's your horse." The trader said, pointing.

Though the horse was now technically theirs, even though she hadn't yet handed over the money, Shaanstar made an effort to check everything over.

The saddle was in good condition, not patched or worn. The blanket she could see was good too. No holes or fleas. She checked the strap holding the saddle as she checked the stirrups, making sure they wouldn't break any time soon. The bridle looked intact, with the bit loosely placed in the horse's mouth, but secure.

With some assistance from the trader, they had the horse lift it's feet up one at a time so she could check the shoes. She had no idea what she was looking at, but all the hoofs looked clean and intact, with the shoes firm.

"I'm satisfied." She said, as she handed over the crowns.

"It's good doing business with you." The trader said, counting the coins.

"One last thing I have to tell you. A word you shouldn't ever say in the Pecker's hearing."

"What?" Dillon asked.

"Give me your ears." He said, getting them to lean forward as he whispered it into their ears."

"Girls?" Dillon said loudly as he drew back.

The horse, Pecker, reacted instantly, rearing up with both fore hoofs swiping at the air.

Shaanstar and Dillon backed off from the swatting hoofs, as the trader went for the bridle strap.

"Whoa boy. Easy." He called out, barely missed by the hoofs as he pulled the horse back down again.

"That's bloody dangerous." Dillon complained.

"It is not." The trader said, turning about. He had a line of perspiration across his face, which he tried to wipe off. "And you've already bought him."

"Then we'll return him!"

"You can't, there's nothing wrong with him." The trader said.

"Then what was that?"

"I said he had some trouble with the fillies. It's because he's a bit..."

"What?" Shaanstar asked.

"He doesn't go... he's not attracted to the... fillies." The trader finally said. "So his owner had him trained to rear when a word was spoken, to get him to mount. It worked a few times, but... they gave up eventually."

The trader patted the now sedate looking horse. "Pecker here is okay, just be careful what you say is all."

Shaanstar took a deep breath. She'd wished the trader had told them about this first, but then maybe they wouldn't have bought it. Maybe. She wasn't sure. It didn't matter now, since they shaken on it, and paid the agreed price. It was their problem now.

She stepped forward, taking the reins from the trader. "Come on Pecker." She said, leading him out.

Dillon shook his head, annoyed that the horse might kick someone's at any moment if someone blurted out the word girl, and that it had the most stupid name.

## Chapter 12

Dillon sat in the saddle; a little uncomfortable with Shaanstar behind him riding double, and wondering what would happen if someone mentioned that word.

They'd left Unaquay as soon as humanly possible, retrieving the horse from its overnight stay in some stables, and then picking up the intended package.

"So what's in it?" Dillon had asked after she'd returned with a closed leather pack.

"A couple of rocks as far as I know. I was told not to open it, with threat of death."

"A little cynical of them."

She packed it into one of the saddlebags. "We deliver it, we get paid. We don't really need to know what it is."

"And how much are we getting paid?"

"One thousand crowns in hand, six thousand on delivery. Enough to cover the horse and supplies." She answered before climbing up.

Dillon had thought that he might sit behind her, but she lifted him in front instead as they headed out of town.

No delays, no problems with the constabulary. Just straight out, and down the road south.

The horse moved along with little command, not galloping but trotted briskly.

Dillon sat thinking when he could, when he wasn't thinking about the bouncing around in the saddle that was giving him sore legs.

After the night before, he was a little more mindful about Shaanstar and her lack of concern about bathing.

And that wasn't all. He had to wake up with her also, to have her dress and toilet in the same room.

When he'd asked her to leave the room that first night so he could bathe, she'd acted a little obsessive, but complied. Then last night, when he'd asked her again, this time she hadn't budged.

"Do you have a problem with me?" She'd asked.

"Uh, no." He said, wanting her to leave so he could get undressed.

"Then why do you not want my presence?"

"I'm..." What had that phrase been, "A little conscious about my appearance," he said.

"Do you have a horrible defect or something I didn't notice last time?"

"Last time?" He thought suddenly, "No, no!"

"Then there's no need for me to leave." She said, taking one of the chairs. "I need to clean my sword, and check our money."

Dillon had bathed aware that she'd been there all the time, but every time he glanced her way, she was concentrating on whatever she was doing and not looking at him.

He worried about her intentions, and her feelings all the while, starting to feel his own desire for her. A cold shower would have been useful, but he had to make do with diverting his mind just so he could get some sleep.

The journey on the horse helped at times to get his attention on other things. The fact that it was uncomfortable helped. The hard edges of the saddle, holding onto the horn so he wouldn't slide off and the rough up and down motion helped to not think about Shaanstar's right up behind him, both her legs against his and two points of stiff armour against his back.

Thus they rode like this for a day, stopping only to eat, drink and rest the horse, and when the sun was below the visible horizon, leaving them barely enough light to make a camp.

It was rough, was all Dillon could think about. Even the caravan trip had seemed easier, as now they had to clear out a camp site, dig their own trench for the latrine, and collect wood to build a fire.

The food they brought also wasn't much, since they could carry very little, but Shaanstar had promised there would be towns along the way to stop by and get more provisions. They wouldn't starve, but Dillon still felt hungry afterwards and relished the cane stick she gave him to chew on to help clean his teeth and freshen his breath.

Hard ground and thin bed rolls to sleep by night, and more riding the next day. The fact that it rained whilst they rode depressed him. His previously expensive suit was now a sodden mess.

The rain stopped much later, but the fire helped somewhat to ease his feelings about life been against him. Whether it was the rain or the riding, Dillon felt nauseous, forcing himself to eat the food they had.

They barely stopped in the town the next day, picking up food supplies for themselves, and getting the horse properly fed and watered before continuing.

The next two days, Dillon felt worse, vomiting several times from the horse. Shaanstar also wasn't feeling good. When they stopped for the night, neither of them was felt like putting the camp together, though Shaanstar strained to get some firewood for a fire.

"I don't want anything." Dillon said, as she lit the fire.

"We need to eat something." She said, dragging a log across to sit on.

Neither of them had tied or hobbled the horse, but it stood there anyway, not looking healthy either. It didn't seem interested in the grass or plants.

"I wouldn't be able to keep it down." Dillon complained.

"Something foul is at work." Shaanstar said.

Dillon agreed, but didn't feel like advancing the conversation.

"It's like we've been poisoned."

"Something in our food." He suggested meekly, feeling his stomach turn at the mention.

"The horse isn't eating either." She said, looking at the horse just standing there. It looked sick just by its appearance.

"Then maybe the last town gave us something."

Shaanstar blinked, feeling weary. She wasn't sure what it was, but something was nagging at her. "Some of the other couriers said the rocks were haunted."

"Haunted?"

"Some tale about one of them touching the rocks, and dying in pain."

"You think the rocks are haunted?" He asked.

"Ghosts don't exist." She stated.

"Well maybe it is the rocks then."

Dillon knew that rocks couldn't just kill a person. Though there were a few naturally occurring minerals that could make you sick. Dillon didn't know what could cause what he and Shaanstar were feeling.

He thought it was a bit stupid anyhow, carrying stones. Nothing could be so important unless it was... suddenly he wanted to look at these so-called stones.

With a heave he stood up, wobbling slightly as he went to the horse.

"What are you doing?"

He didn't bother answering her as he pulled the small pack from the saddlebag. It was small and innocent looking, carefully closed with two bucklers so the contents couldn't get wet.

Dillon sat down next to Shaanstar on the log, rather than back on the ground, pulling at the first buckle.

"I was told not to open it, on threat of death."

He got the first one undone, and worked on the second one.

"How will they know, unless we tell them?" He argued, "What could they possibly do anyhow?"

"Send some bounty hunters after us."

Dillon didn't seem to be worried, he felt half dead already with the rising feeling of wanting to chuck up again, except he doubted he had anything left in his stomach.

The last buckle slipped, and he opened up the bag. There wasn't much light to see in it, so he up-ended the bag, tipping out the two objects.

"Two rocks." Shaanstar said.

He looked at the two grey cylindrical rocks with chipped surfaces, wondering at first how small very artificial looking objects could be called rocks.

He remembered why he wanted to look at the rocks, and thought for a moment what sort of object like this could make someone sick.

"Shit!" It suddenly hit him, and he scrambled back from the log, falling over backwards as he tried to push himself away.

"What! What." Shaanstar called, looking about with one hand on her sword.

"They're fucking radioactive!" Dillon said, slumping to the ground as his energy left him.

"What?" She said, looking over to where he lay.

"They're not rocks, they're Uranium Pellets. It's amazing we aren't dead already."

"Huh?"

"Pack them back into the bag quickly." He said trying to push himself up again. "Don't use your hands!" He yelled as she started reaching for them.

"Use your knife, no... a stick. Just don't touch them whatever you do."

He stood up to watch but kept his distance none the less, knowing that it should be a little safer at that range, but still, he wondered how much exposure constituted as a lethal dose.

She'd closed the bag up, closing the buckles firmly.

"Now toss it through those trees over there." He said, pointing to the furthest point from the camp.

"What?" She said, hearing what he was asking. "We have to deliver this!"

"I don't care. Those rocks are what's making us sick, and could quite possibly be killing us right now."

She looked at the bag with puzzlement.

"Believe me in this. If you'd slept with those next to you tonight, you'd be dead inside a week. Guaranteed."

"Not ghosts?" She asked.

"No. Radiation. Though you can't see it either. Just put it as far away from us as possible."

Shaanstar walked slowly, carrying it across the road behind a particularly large tree she could identify in the dark, and put it down on the other side of its trunk, then walked back again.

Though the source was some distance away, Dillon still felt sick to the stomach. He knew the radiation sickness would last for some several weeks, if it didn't get worse and he died.

The saddlebags where the bag of uranium has been had held some of their food also. He knew it wouldn't be fit to eat, and it would be emitting some of the radiation it had absorbed. Best to get it off the horse. Shaanstar watched as he emptied the bag, and threw the food out into the forest.

"Anything the rocks have been close to would make us more sick." He said, before returning to remove the saddlebag. He didn't want to throw it away, but everyone would be better, the horse included if it wasn't nearby. He put it down, at the edge of the clearing where they could find it in the morning.

“That’s about all we can do.” He said, slumping down on the log, wanting more than anything to curl up on the ground.

“Nothing?”

“Short of dunking ourselves and everything we have in the nearest stream to help absorb some of the radiation, no.”

## Chapter 13

The river nearby was cold as Dillon surfaced, spraying water.

"Bloody hell." He said.

The horse had gone in reluctantly, but hadn't submitted to their efforts at getting him to lie down in the water. It had to be enough to toss water across the horse's flanks, hoping to reduce any latent radiation they could, letting the water carry it away to be absorbed into the surroundings.

He had them spend half an hour in the water, not as long as he wanted, but long enough that he couldn't keep splashing the horse for very long in the cold water.

Shaanstar had built the fire up as soon as it was daylight, dragging whatever deadwood she could find towards the fire, and it was burning large now as they spread their things around the blaze.

"I'm am feeling better." Shaanstar said, dragging off her water logged armour.

"It'll take more than a day to get over it. A week or two to know for sure."

Dillon watched her for a moment in his wet clothes before doing the same thing. He had less reservation about it now, knowing he'd feel better once he was warm. But they'd gotten everything wet on his recommendation, leaving them with nothing else to put on. The horse stood nearby, with saddle and blanket also hung up on propped up branches to get them dry.

There was little said between them, as they stripped right down, squeezing what clothes they could to get the water out and hanging them close to the fire.

Dillon was most aware of the proximity of the flames to his skin, but sat close to the fire anyhow, not wanting to let any of the warmth get away.

Before Shaanstar sat, she pulled at some of the thin branches in the fire, lifting two out by their uncharred ends. She laid them out along the ground, around them in a square, one on the other side of Dillon, and the other a short distance the other way before sitting down next to him.

Dillon didn't object to the extra warmth, as they sat embraced for a little while waiting patiently for everything to dry, until Dillon felt it best to separate.

"What are we going to do?" Shaanstar asked.

Half the day had gone, and most of the clothes were dry now except for a vague dampness. The horse blanket was still wet, but she hoped it would dry as they moved along.

"We can't carry the rocks with us." He said. "We'll only get more sick."

Dillon rechecked some of the items, hoping they could stay at the camp for the rest of the day. His stomach still wanted to heave though they hadn't eaten anything except some river water.

"We should move on. It's only another two days journey to the next town, where the rocks are supposed to be delivered. We don't get paid unless they get them."

Dillon didn't argue.

"Someone else must carry it then." Shaanstar said.

Dillon looked about, thinking she was talking about someone else that he hadn't seen. "They'd be risking themselves. I just wish we had some lead."

Shaanstar was on her feet, moving towards the horse. Dillon thought for a moment that she intended the horse to carry it, but she pulled some rope out of the saddlebag.

"I bought this for the horse." She said, slowing unwinding a few coils.

"Brilliant!"

"You haven't heard my plan yet." She said.

"I don't need to. We pull the bag along behind us at a distance!"

"That was what I was thinking." She said, with a little hesitation.

Her plan had actually been to let the horse carry it, and to lead the horse from far out in front with the rope. But she liked the new plan better, and it got some improvement from her before it was finished.

She trimmed a small sled from part of a trunk, which the rope was tied to. The radioactive bag, was strapped on top, and was pulled along, the sled serving to stop the bag from been destroyed on the journey.

It took the remainder of the day, the next, and most of the following day before they arrived at Zhandan.

It was a large town, bigger than Carvargna, also the last major town in Argandonia.

They drew some attention dragging the small sled through town. The bag would have gone through town no matter what then had done, but they dared not carry it with them.

Shaanstar got directions from a constable and without trouble found the whitewashed building that was the destination of the stones.

They both dismounted; Dillon untied the rope as she knocked on the door.

There was no sound within, so she knocked again on the hardwood door. In a moment, it opened. A woman stood inside, comely looking.

"Can I help you?" She asked.

"Pfeostun?" Shaanstar asked.

"Come in, he's expecting you." She said waving Shaanstar in.

"Please, it would be better if Pfeostun came out."

"Well, just a moment then." She disappeared inside, leaving the door open.

Shaanstar had a look through the doorway at the house, seeing the unusual amount of hardwood that decorated the inside of the house, panels, floors, ceiling, and furniture. As if the place were made entirely of wood.

A man approached from inside, coming through the door. He was short, with greying hair that framed a face lined with some years of age.

"You have a package for me?" He asked politely with hands behind his back.

"Yes." She said, "But we had some trouble getting it here..."

"Where is it?" He asked, aware that she didn't hold it.

She pointed at the package down the street, just past the end of the house.

"We dare not stay near it." She said.

"Ah, so it is dangerous."

He stepped forward, seemingly unconcerned as he retrieved the bag from the makeshift sled.

Dillon stayed away with the horse, not wanting any more exposure than necessary for either of them as Shaanstar waited.

"Our pay, we were promised..."

"Yes, yes, just a moment," the man said, his attention on the bag and its contents as he went inside.

Shaanstar waited again, thinking they might get robbed, but the woman returned instead.

"Thankyou. He's been waiting for those for ten days."

She counted over a dozen coins, totalling almost eight thousand crowns.

Shaanstar opened her mouth to protest but the woman answered her first.

"A bonus. You look like you need it."

"Thankyou," she replied, turning back to Dillon as the woman closed the door.

"Bonus?" Dillon asked, having heard the conversation from across the street.

"Evidently. Very unusual."

"That package was unusual."

"Hmm. I suggest we stay in town for tonight. Get something to eat."

Dillon felt okay, but the radiation poisoning had occurred. There was no way to tell at the moment how bad, but he was feeling ravenous now which only food could cure.

The night was particularly uneventful. The horse was left in the care of a stable owner, with careful instruction about what words not to say around it as they stayed in an Inn.

Dillon was able to stomach a thick soup, after turning down a wonderful looking roast that the Cook tried to serve them, unable to trust his stomach after its recent disagreement with food. Shaanstar followed suit, restricting their beverages to water only, so as not give any reason for their stomachs to heave what they'd eaten.

"We aren't dead, so I think it's a good sign." Dillon told her optimistically.

He wished to stay another day in the town, more or less so he could sleep comfortably and try to build up his stamina again, but he was sure Shaanstar would have wanted to get under way the next morning.

For some reason his wish was heard.

"We'll be staying in Zhandan for another day." She said returning from outside.

"Any particular reason?" He asked.

"I've organised us to serve as guard on a family travelling south." She said. "They're leaving tomorrow, so we get another day."

"Sounds fine. How far are they going?"

"They weren't very clear." Shaanstar admitted, "But they promised us good pay."

"You're the expert at this." Dillon said, dismissing the subject now that he knew. "How about some breakfast?"

## Chapter 14

It was a small family, a man, his wife, and their daughter. The daughter was young, a little more than 10 or 11, but she hid in the back of the caravan with the woman as the man, Duante rode up front with Shaanstar.

Dillon's anxiety about the radiation disappeared with the symptoms, becoming a bad memory of the trip so far, but it seemed as if their luck might be changing. He rode Pecker by himself, since it was easier for Shaanstar to ride on the caravan instead.

She'd worked the deal with the family, who intended to travel south, relocating themselves in Royan, apparently because of disputes with the local population. They'd had enough, and they wanted to move.

The fact that she and Dillon had arrived in town, and her asking about any work for transporting or guarding anything going south, had gotten the family's attention, and with suddenness, they pulled up all their roots and belongings to head south.

The first Royan town that accepted them was the tact agreement Shaanstar made, with payment to be made at the end.

It was agreeable, since she wanted to stop at a small Royan town on the way, where she could get their Argandonia currency converted.

The family appeared friendly enough, talkative about their life in Zhandan. Nadinne the man's wife was skilled in sewing and weaving, showing them some of the things she'd made, and a beautiful quilt she was currently working on.

The daughter Cearra was starting to grow into a tall girl from what Shaanstar saw inside the caravan. She was also very talkative, asking Shaanstar many questions, about what places they seen and how many people they'd killed. Shaanstar tried to be cooperative and friendly, but it became hard to talk to the girl behind her, forever opening her mouth until her father bade her to be quiet.

Dillon smiled to himself. He wouldn't have minded having a daughter like that, reasonably pretty, intelligent, curious about most things and not afraid to ask, and she listened to her father.

It was very quiet thereafter for the rest of the day, peaceful almost except for the birds and the horse's hoofs.

Night time was almost an anticlimax. They all slept around the built fire, but there wasn't the seriousness Dillon had expected from the previous caravan as he and Shaanstar alternated watches. She actually took most of them, but he didn't question her on this, knowing he needed the sleep if he was going to stay in the saddle the next morning.

The scenery wasn't ideal, trees, overgrown bushes, and lots of dead leaves and branches from last fall. Dillon found it boring whilst Shaanstar found her attention drawn to everything, weary of anything that moved under the cover of the forest.

Dillon was glad when they stopped, resting his sore legs as he waddled about, helping to water the two horses. It would have been better had they stopped when they had lunch, but neither the family or Shaanstar wanted to, keeping them all moving whilst they ate.

The horses both ready, Shaanstar looked about for Duante the father. She been more concerned about bandits, had been watching the far bank of the stream as well as along the road, but had missed where the father went.

"What has Duante gone?" She asked Nadinne in the caravan.

"To relieve himself." She said.

Shaanstar would have believed this, if not for the fact that the woman was looking agitated, as she looked out from the caravan.

"I'll look for him." Dillon offered looking around for the most reasonable spot a man would use to relive himself.

"He shouldn't be too long." The woman said.

Dillon was already halfway to the thick shrubbery, "Don't worry."

Shaanstar was suspicious, but if something was to occur she knew that the woman and the girl would need more protection and that might leave Dillon unprotected against trouble. She knew who was the priority if Dillon should ever be in danger, but she had to trust him to be careful.

After waiting around tensely for about 10 minutes, neither Dillon nor Duante had returned.

She wanted to know where they had gone, but...

"Nadinne, where has your husband gone?" She asked, mounting the back of the caravan.

"I've told you..." The woman replied.

"If anything were to happen to either Dillon or you husband, I'd hold you responsible." She snapped.

"I can't." The woman replied, seeming more afraid of something else.

The girl spoke up instead "He's gone to rescue Marieus."

"Hush." The mother called.

"Marieus?" Shaanstar asked the girl.

"My brother." She said, "Some slavers took him a ten day ago."

"Cearra!" The woman called. The girl looked a little apologetic, but Shaanstar didn't stick around to find out any more.

She stepped off the caravan, and ran towards the spot where Dillon had gone searching for Duante.

Dillon pushed through the branches, calling Duante's name. He had to be here somewhere. A guy wouldn't wander too far, unless he was taking a squat. Then again, maybe it was a personal dilemma.

The branches gave way, as Dillon found a large clearing, occupied by a settlement, if that was the word. Some distance from the tree line, there was a ring of less than a dozen buildings, well spaced out in places, showing some activity.

At first glance he thought it was a small town, though it didn't rate that much, but more like a permanent camp the way the buildings appeared almost prefabricated and temporarily put together. Dillon looked, taking in the detail, and saw motion in the centre of the site, where dozens of tall poles were ringed in a large circle inside the ring of buildings.

What he saw caught his breath. The motion he saw, were people, all them naked except for a few leaves some of them held. There were perhaps more than a hundred, sitting on the dirty ground, all chained together between the poles.

The image percolated through his brain before he realised they were slaves.

"Get down you fool!"

Dillon turned to the voice, finding Duante crouched down.

"You make enough noise for a woman in birth, now get down!" He called in a horse whisper.

Quickly he squatted down, not sure why yet. Dillon glanced back at the site through the low foliage, and saw the other people, who were dressed, wandering about the site freely.

Duante moved over to Dillon, "So you're helping me?"

"What?" Dillon asked.

"Nadinne didn't tell you?" Duante scowled. "She still thinks I should do this alone."

Dillon was trying to figure out what he was talking about. They'd been hired on as escort to protect him, and the family. "Do what alone?"

"Marieus is in there." Duante pointed to the camp. "My son. He's barely younger than Cearra."

Dillon looked back to the site, wondering where a boy would be, his eyes going to the huddled slaves. It looked like they were grouped separately. On one side he could see men, on the other were young boys. He couldn't see the opposite side.

"He's a slave?" Dillon asked.

"My boy." Duante said with an edge to his voice, "Slavers took him a ten day ago. Cearra was there when it happened, fortunately she hid otherwise they'd have taken her too."

"I suppose I'll help you then." Dillon said.

He couldn't imagine what it'd be like to have a son stolen from him. He'd had a dog as a pet when he was younger, and could half imagine it been stolen, but a son... it didn't seem like a comparison. "Do you have a plan?"

"No." Duante replied. "I hadn't thought that far. I hadn't seen the slaver's camp till now. It seems very open."

"Very." Dillon replied, looking about. "Let's try that direction."

They edged along the tree line, keeping hidden until they were concealed from general view by one of the buildings.

It had two open windows in the back, but no one was near them as they skulked across.

Dillon pointed at one of the windows, and Duante nodded back. It looked like a good idea, as the climbed through, finding a small dark room filled with jars, pots and crates.

There was a noise and a door opened.

"Find us a couple of them sweet roots too." A voice called out.

"Sure." A voice called back within the room.

Dillon couldn't see the person in the dark, so pushed Duante back into a corner trying to hide them in the darkness.

There was rustling of movement as the man searched for something, followed by a muttered comment.

## Chapter 15

She turned about at least half a dozen times, searching for any sign of the camp or the either man, finding her way back to the road once, before stumbling upon the camp.

She'd hoped to find Dillon before he'd reached the camp, but Shaanstar knew she must have wasted enough time for them to both to have been captured and killed by now.

Right at that moment, she heard a loud scream, and looked about trying to identify it, but all she could see was a cluster of men around some figures. Dillon immediately came to mind, as she jumped out of the foliage, walking purposely into the campsite.

She was all the way to the buildings before someone noticed her. Shouts brought the attention of everyone nearby.

Two of the figures from the cluster ahead, moved to intercept her. Looking about, a third one was moving in from her right.

"What do you want?" One of the men demanded, approached with hand on his sword hilt.

Their meaning was clear. They were unsure about her until she made her intentions clear. She didn't want to fight them, but she didn't want to see Dillon hurt.

She stopped barely a three feet from the two men. She didn't reach for her sword, making it clear that both her hands were empty. "I'm just looking for two men."

"There are plenty of men here. Any particular men you're after?"

Shaanstar tried to look at where the cries came from, but the clustered figures still covered what was going on.

"One's a tall man, dark hair, short, clean faced, wears funny clothes. The other's a bit shorter Argandonian..." Her eyes were wandering about the camp as she talked, evaluating the number of actual slavers there, and the possible places she stood a chance to defend herself. At one of the further buildings, she saw two figures slip out of one building, to move across to the next, in a manner not quite in keeping with slavers. She could identify Dillon even at this distance, with his very unique clothes.

She felt a slight wave of anger that she'd thought Dillon or Duante had been captured.

"We have a few Argandonian men." She brought her attention back to the Slaver. "But they're not exactly dressed."

She'd already seen that. None of the slaves had a scrap of clothes to cover them from the sun, or any other weather.

The slavers seemed to be taking her as a serious buyer, that she considered for a moment that she could try to buy the boy Nadinne had mentioned. Then she figured that that was what Dillon was going for. If he were after the boy, then she couldn't draw attention to them. If anything, they needed a diversion.

A quick glance towards the clustered slaves, to her she needed to draw their attention furthest from the bound boys.

"What about a woman then?" She asked.

There was a rising of eyebrows from one of the men.

"What are you after?"

"Something nice, firm, young and thin." She said. "Preferably untouched, for a travelling companion."

"Ah, I think I know the sort you mean."

She knew the sort he was thinking of, and placing her within the same picture. It was all the better to play the part.

"So you got some for me to look at?" She asked.

"Sure, right over here."

Predictably, the group followed them over towards the women, gathering two others along the way, who seemed interested in her interest in women.

The man who was talking to her signalled to two others, who yelled at all the sitting women to stand up, before hauling on leavers that were attached at either end to two poles.

The chain that was attached to all their necks was yanked upwards, alarming a few of the slower ones as they hung frantically by their necks until they realised they could stand up.

Shaanstar didn't react to this, keeping her expression neutral but scowled inwardly at the treatment.

"We've got a few here, nice and fresh. Some are still virgins, if that's what you're after."

Virgins. She had to wonder if they broke them in themselves. "I suppose. Show me which ones." She told the slavers.

The man seemed to know which ones by heart, pointing them out individually.

She looked at them each in turn, examining them personally, checking teeth, and looking at the number of scars.

They all looked reasonably well treated, making it hard to choose. She checked herself, remembering she was only trying to distract the Slavers from Dillon.

"Any chance I can get a personal inspection?" She asked, turning towards the Slaver.

"Personal? We'll, yeah. Usually it's only with non-virgins, but since..." he coughed, bracing of what he was going to say. "Well which one."

Shaanstar chose one at random from the better looking ones.

"A good choice." He said, waving someone over.

She was getting the impression this man was more like one of the Western lords, who tended to preach to their supplicants to keep their favour instead of forcing them.

The woman she'd indicated was unlocked from the chain at her neck, but she still had the large band around her neck as she was led from it.

"Over this way, we have some rooms for, inspecting." The man led them over to one building, having the slave led after them.

She was shown inside was a small comfortable room, that had the appearance of been used regularly for 'inspections'. There were a couple of chairs, a comfortable looking bed, but nothing else except for the open window. The slave was brought in, and then the door was closed behind her.

For all appearances, Shaanstar had to believe that they could be listened in on, as well as possibly watched, so she had to keep up the pretence as an interested buyer.

The woman remained standing after been led in, not moving from her position as Shaanstar walked about her.

"Can you tell me how old you are?" She asked.

When the woman didn't reply, she walked round front again, facing the woman. "Can you speak at all?"

The woman seemed to hesitate, blinking at first, before nodding her head slowly.

"So you can speak? But you can't?"

She nodded again.

"Do you know why?"

The woman raised one hand, slowly as if afraid of something at first, but when Shaanstar didn't make a move, she touched the collar at her neck.

"The collar? It's stopping you from speaking?"

The woman dropped her hand again, but nodded.

An enchanted collar Shaanstar thought. All of them must be the same; it probably helped stop the slaves from planning escapes if they couldn't talk to each other, as well as complaining about their conditions, or just making noise in general.

Shaanstar turned about, and walked to the door with short but clear steps on the floor, and pulled open the door. She'd expected possibly three of the slavers listening at the door, but instead there was only the one, standing well back.

"I want the collar off this slave, so I can hear her talk. If I'm to make use of her, then I've got to know what she sounds like."

"Yes of course."

The Slaver fumbled with some keys as he came into the room, fitting an irregular key against the small lock on the collar, before it released. He pulled it off, and tossed it onto the bed, before returned out the door without another word.

When the door closed again, Shaanstar turned back to the slave.

"So how old are you?" She asked again.

"T – T – Twen – ty c – c – cycles."

She waited patiently until the slave could get the words completely out. Twenty cycles and she looked like a full-grown woman, yet she was supposed to be a virgin?

"You're still a virgin? No one has been in you?"

She nodded before she remembered she could speak, "Y-Yes."

"What's your name?"

"T – Tefia." She said, her voice starting to become clearer with use.

"Tefia. That's a good name." Shaanstar said wondering what to do next, when there was some shouts from outside.

## Chapter 16

At first she thought that Dillon and Duante had been caught, and stepped out the building expecting to see them been dragged across the site. Instead, she found some slavers leading a single caravan in, as another one rode a horse in carrying a struggling girl.

“Shit.” She said under her breath, and then looked about to see if any of the slavers were near by.

“Look what we found waiting on the main road!” The one on the horse called, trying to hold Cearra still.

“Nice, she should fetch a wholesome price! But what were they doing there!”

There was more talking between the Slavers now, as they were starting to figure out that they had intruders. Shaanstar had no idea where Dillon was, but hoped he was actually making head way with whatever he was doing.

There were a few glances in her direction, before one of the Slavers came over to her. The same one who’d been seeing to her need in buying a slave.

“Where’s your horses?” He asked directly.

She pointed back over her shoulders towards what she thought was the main road. “Three of ‘em tied up some way off the road.”

The Slaver looked back towards the others, where one of them shrugged his shoulders. He turned back again.

“Where did you come though?” He asked.

“What are you asking?” She asked back, knowing where he was going with the questions, but trying to be difficult just the same.

“We’ve got a woman and her child, who say they came with two men, and a woman.” He said, looking distrustful of Shaanstar, “Looking to steal some of our slaves.”

“I’m here to buy.” She said outright.

She pulled out the money pouch from its spot in her chest armour, and shook it.

“I’ve got twenty thousand crowns to get me a slave.” She said. She had to make a quick figuring between Argandonian and Royan crowns. “If you’re going to ask me stupid questions, I’m leaving with my money.”

She turned about, putting the money away as she trying to make good on her threat to leave. She’d taken no more than five steps when a horse blocked her. Her horse.

“Not so fast.” The Slaver called.

Shaanstar turned about again.

“You came here looking for two men.” He said, starting to smile. “They’re already in the camp somewhere aren’t they?”

She didn’t react to his ploy.

“You look all wrong, and you’re acting all wrong.” The Slaver said. “You ain’t no slave buyer!”

Shaanstar reached back for her sword, and found it missing. A look back, showed the horseman holding it up with a grin.

“We’ll find the two men. Meanwhile, we’re going to have some fun.” The slaver said. “Get Jerino!” He yelled whilst keeping his attention on her.

Shaanstar stood there for the moment, since she was partially surrounded by at least a dozen Slavers, one with her sword to her back. Making sudden moves would be reckless. So she stood there as a giant of a man was led out from one of the buildings.

She didn’t see much at first, except he looked tall next to the Slavers, probably reaching almost seven feet. He wore nothing else other than a loincloth to cover his private parts. He could have been mistaken for a Slaver, except for the collar around his neck, the same as what Tefia wore.

Closer now, as he was led to Shaanstar, she saw that he was layered with enough muscles to make him look like a blacksmith, with clean scars across his body that said just as much, or as little since they could have been acquired in battle.

There wasn’t much to say, as the towering behemoth finally stood over her. His body almost rippled, as he stood there grinning, showing just as much intention to pulverise her as the Slavers directed.

“Show the nice woman some hospitality Jerino.” The Slaver said, pointing at Shaanstar.

Jerino clapped his big hands together, almost wringing them as he advanced.

Shaanstar thought it was ridiculous, but she saw that she could be in trouble unless she dealt swiftly with this threat. There was one good chance she realised, and went for it.

Moving forward to meet him, Shaanstar stepped forward, and swung her booted boot right between Jerino’s legs, feeling it connect solidly with flesh. She stepped back, ready to sweep in with her leg to knock him down, but it never came.

Jerino stood there still grinning, as he ripped off the loincloth. Shaanstar stared for a moment, thinking he should be cringing in agony at least as she looked at why. The man had been castrated. He had no balls, yet retained his penis.

She had one last thought to think she was in deeper shit than before, as Jerino advanced again.

“What the hell is she doing?” Dillon said, seeing Shaanstar walk into the Slaver camp.

“Quick, while they’re not looking.” Duante said, making for the next building.

Dillon had barely a chance to see what was going on before following. They’d been lucky already by not been caught, and now they were really risking it out in the open.

They ducked around the side of the building, to stand in the darkened shade where they were less visible, so they could watch what was going on.

At first Dillon thought she was going to attack all the Slavers, then when she was led around to the other side, Dillon got the idea.

“She’s distracting them.” He said.

Either the Slavers weren’t in view, or they were occupied with something at the moment.

“We make for the boys.” Duante said, pointing across to the centre of the camp.

Together they moved across, keeping low so they weren’t seen above the heads of the slaves who were sitting on the ground.

Dillon held a finger to his lips, so the slaves wouldn’t make any noise, but all the boys there remained unusually silent. Several heads turned to look their ways, but most of them didn’t respond.

“Where is he?” Dillon asked.

“I’m looking.” Duante said, shuffling sideways like a crab as he looked at each boy in turn.

Dillon followed, except he kept a watch out for the Slavers. He couldn’t see the opposite side of the slaves, where Shaanstar was, with a small structure in the dead centre blocking the view.

“Marieus?”

Dillon turned to look as Duante approached one of the young boys. The boy appeared to move his lips, but nothing was said. Duante seemed to understand, and held the young boy to him momentarily.

“We’ve been so worried.” Duante said.

“He’s still locked up.” Dillon said.

“I know, I know.” The father replied, releasing the boy to fetch something from a pocket. “This I was prepared for.”

“What?” Dillon asked.

“The Slavers use an enchanted collar.” Duante explained, “Stops the wearers from talking, makes ‘em more docile and controllable too.”

“You’ve got a key?”

“No, they don’t use a key. Too easy to pick the lock or break them. You need a lock stone, like this one.”

He pulled out the small ovoid rock and swept it across the collar, which snapped open.

“F – Father.” The boy came free of the collar, falling into his father arms.

“We’ve got to go now.” Duante said.

“Wait, what about the others?”

“What about them?”

“They might have father’s too.”

“I can’t help them.” Duante said, “And some of them might have been born slaves. They won’t have any parents.”

“Doesn’t mean they can’t be helped.”

“Look, we’ve got to go before we’re caught.”

As if his words were a signal, there were shouts from some of the Slavers.

Dillon looked about thinking they had been caught, but relaxed when he could see no one else near by.

There was some more shouting from across the camp. Dillon risked standing up to take a look, and saw a caravan and horse been brought in off to one side.

He ducked back down immediately. “They’ve got your wife and girl.”

“Dammit all.”

“Give me the locking stone.” Dillon said, with his hand out.

Duante wasn’t even thinking about it, just handed it over without comment.

Dillon worked quickly along the line of boys, running the stone on each collar in turn, telling the boys “I’m setting you free.” There was a line of over twenty men after that which he started on, finding them almost eager to be free when they saw him coming along.

He almost choked on the next section, finding the female slaves, which he hadn’t seen from his previous position. He looked up the line from the first one, which looked like an older woman, about the same age as his own mother might be, and down the line as where they appeared much younger, all as with the male slaves, naked to the ground, which they sat upon.

There was a couple of Slavers standing in view watching something, so he ducked around behind the women, and ignored his anxiety over the concerns of freeing them, by releasing each and every collar up until the next section.

He had to stop now, as he saw the commotion that had the Slavers attention. Shaanstar stood toe to toe with a huge man whom she’d just kicked neatly in the family jewels. Dillon cringed slightly, but opened his eyes wider to make sure he saw what he saw. The man ripped of the cloth that covered him, and moved forward again, both hands outstretched like a wind up Frankenstein doll.

Dillon thought she would have used her sword, and looked further behind her where it was held by one of the Slavers riding Pecker. He couldn’t help her from his position, especially not against a man like that, separated by a dozen Slavers. He looked down at the next row of chained slaves, a few of which were looking at him. Girls he thought. They all looked like girls.

Immediately he remembered something, quickly he moved across each and every lock in front of him, releasing them from the collars then yelled out loudly "Run girls!"

## Chapter 17

Shaanstar had backed away from the advancing Jerino. The kick they she had given him already hadn't done a thing. She was wondering what the man would do first. Punch her, or try to break something.

There was a yelling voice that yelled out something. Shaanstar didn't take her eyes off Jerino to look, but there was another disturbance behind her as the horse with the Slaver reared up, throwing him to the ground.

She heard the distinct ring of metal hit ground, and only one thought ran through her mind as she whipped around to grab her sword from the nearby form of the Slaver.

Pulling the Slaver up off the ground, she put the sword to his neck, "Ask your friend to back off."

The Slaver didn't respond immediately until she gave him a shake and pressed the sword against his skin.

"Jerino, go back to your room." The Slaver said.

She saw Jerino stop but hands still held out with a questioning look on his face, so she drew the sword edge a little closer.

"Jerino, back!" The Slaver called as loud as he could.

The giant of a man turned about, and headed in a straight line back to one of the buildings. Shaanstar now had time to look at the rest of the camp. The Slavers, who'd been watching the spectacle of her fight, were now running to catch the slaves who were running in all directions.

She looked towards where they'd been locked up, and saw a figure moving between each of them, setting them free. Dillon she thought, seeing the white shirt.

She released the Slaver she was holding, and gave him a hard shove with her foot, to send him face first into the ground. Looking about she saw Pecker standing idly by.

Mounting up, she had a good view of the action. Most of the slaves appeared to be free now, including all the men. Several of which were attacking the Slavers themselves with bare hands.

Two figures moved across the camp in an almost straight line, making for the caravan. Dillon was almost finished with releasing the slaves, but there was one small figure, not a Slaver or a slave.

Cearra stood alone now that the Slavers holding her was running after the escaped slaves, but seemed lost amid the action. Shaanstar kicked the horse forward, which obeyed readily until she reached the girl where she reached one hand down, and lifted the girl up in front of her. The horse followed the commands she gave with her heels easily, moving towards the caravan that was now busily turning about.

Dillon came running across, and mounted the side of the caravan before Duante gave the reins a good whip, yelling "Yah!"

Looking back, Shaanstar had only one last thought that she hoped Tefia got away with the rest of them.

Duante payed them a thousand Crowns in Royan coinage they'd recently acquired.

"Thankyou for your help." He told both of them gratefully, as he looked upon his son who was now dressed.

"Your welcome." Dillon said.

They were fortunate, Shaanstar thought to herself. "Try to stay away from Slavers." She said.

"We will." Duante replied, messing the long hair on his son.

Shaanstar turned Pecker about, sending him forwards out of town.

"We aren't stopping here?" Dillon asked from his position in front.

"Too early yet." She replied, "And we should be able to reach the next town by the tomorrow night."

"What about a job?"

"I think we could do with a short break, don't you?"

Dillon didn't reply, but she could feel him subtly relax.

At the next town, they were given a simple task of couriering a letter into Canduce, the Royan ruling centre. Shaanstar hadn't wanted to venture that way as it was off the main road south, but there wasn't any other offering headed south at the moment, and it was only a short job. Speed more than anything else was required to get it there as fast as possible.

She'd picked up the request very early in the morning, lucky to beat everyone else to the job, but it required that they immediately head south.

Dillon didn't even feel like he was awake yet, and stuffed his hands and face full of food before been subjected to the galloping ride on Pecker.

More than two days of fast riding; only resting the horse when they stopped for the two nights. They made it past the outskirts, and into the city itself before the sun had started on its final leg on the third day.

The letter was delivered with some complaint that it was late, but they were paid for the work done and released.

"No more travelling today." Shaanstar declared, looking at their tired horse.

"I agree." Dillon said, stretching his legs out, trying to work some life back into them.

"You are soft." She said, leading the horse off.

Dillon couldn't complain. He was a businessman from the big apple. Horse riding wasn't one of the usual job requirements of anyone working there, unless you were one of the mounted police. And then, you probably weren't required to ride double on a horse.

More than anything, he was glad of where she took him after she stabled the horse for the night.

The marble and stone rooms were filled with steam, making the air warm as well as the floor underneath. He stripped off his clothes; leaving it bundled for the washers that Shaanstar said would wash and clean them.

Through the doorway, the steam issued forth from the vast hot water springs that lay under a portion of Canduce. It was one of the original reasons the city had been founded there, so heated water could be gotten easily, with having to burn wood from the forests.

Since then technology had come in to make heated water more readily available, instead of having it piped, the springs are now used, as they once were, natural baths.

"Are you stepping in, or just airing yourself?"

Dillon peered past the steam, towards the shape in the water. He couldn't even see Shaanstar until he was at the water's edge, where the rising heat displaced the steam, making everything a little clearer. He had a brief glimpse of her before he submerged himself in a rush, hitting the bottom barely four feet down.

He lowered himself down, until only his head was just above the water.

It felt wonderfully relaxing that he soon forgot he even had a body below the water, becoming just something floating upon the warm bubbling waters.

His mind drifted, thinking about the few weeks. He'd actually lost count of the days, but could count more than two weeks so far. It was hard to tell some days apart when travelling.

"How much longer till..." He paused remembering Shaanstar admonishing him for using the real name, "... till we reach our destination."

"About thirteen days." She replied, her voice echoing off the ceiling close by. "But that's if we don't stop and rest the horse up. We need head south for almost a ten day, then we turn west before the ocean."

"All for a map." He said a little quieter.

So far they hadn't gotten anywhere near what he wanted, travelling probably the length of the country.

"Wasn't this place at war with the other one?"

"Royan and Argandonia." She supplied the names. "Yeah, but they tend to go up and down. Sometimes it's full on conflict with many dead, other times it's like it is now, with the appearance of nothing going on at all. No one can really figure it out, and those who work for the Lords never admit what's going on."

"Like a war that keeps going hot and cold."

"A cold war? I suppose you could call it that. They still refuse to trade with each other, holding secrets though nothing really is going on."

"Like a couple of big kids." Dillon chuckled.

Both of them lay quiet in the water, with only the sound of bubbles breaking the quiet.

"Why do you have so many baths?" Dillon asked, out of the blue.

She had to think for an appropriate answer.

"If there is anything I've learned, more than anything else a nice warm bath is the best around. Next to sex that is."

"Unless it's sex in a nice warm bath." He replied, and then wished he hadn't.

"That too." She said. "But it's a little difficult sometimes. But a warm bath doesn't require someone else, only you and hot water, and some time."

Dillon could see the simpleness of it.

"And just the fact that you can only have one per night, and only whenever you're in town, makes it something special. It's one reason I always come here when I'm in Canduce."

"It's that good?"

"Yes, and so is the massage afterwards."

## Chapter 18

Dillon felt so relaxed, that he didn't want to wake up from the dream he was having. Patricia would have objected, but he knew it was a dream the way everything looked fuzzy, he could see people but not their features. And when people talked to him, they sounded like they were underwater and nothing was clear, but he understood every word none the less.

He'd been dreaming of some woman couldn't recognise, but she'd been leading him by the hand. They were running down a corridor from something following them that seemed to frighten her more than it did him.

They ducked around this corner and that, seemingly with the threat just behind, until Dillon thought they should hide somewhere.

He didn't realise he'd spoken, but his thoughts were heard just the same like all dreams, and they went through a doorway, locking it behind them. The room was small, like a closet, that he was pressed up against the woman as they held each other for comfort at first.

There was lust and there was passion in each of them, and a rush of adrenalin pushing past his subconscious reason. A feeling of need overwhelmed both, that they felt a need to make love right there. His dream version was naked for some reason, which only made things easier, and shortly he was in her, holding her against the wall, driving himself with each thrust towards a strange sense of fulfilment.

The act ended after climax, bringing him back down to an emotional earth with the release. His dream girl kissed him passionately on the lips, before dashing out the door without him. His last thought was that she was sacrificing herself for him out of some deeper love, as the dream seemed to end by itself and a sleepy darkness enveloped him.

Hands were shaking his shoulders, and definitely he opened his eyes.

"Dillon, are you awake now?" Shaanstar asked.

"Yes, but I was having the most wonderful dream." He said.

"A dream?" She queried, "You have most definitely been in communion with one of the Adept's."

"Communion? I had a dream right?"

Dillon slowly sat up and found himself on the floor in a corridor, just as naked as he was when he was having his massage. But the open door to the right wasn't where he had his massage. It was a small closet.

"What happened?"

"I'd say the masseur you had was an Adept." Shaanstar said, helping him up. "You are... well... special to have been with one of them."

"Special!" He almost yelled, seeing now the truth of it. He was still damp from his exertions, and wet. "I've been raped!"

"They usually take something from you without you knowing, though in this case I think it was obvious."

"Obvious, right!"

Dillon tried to think about what the masseur looked like, but he couldn't picture her. All he could think was they were female, with a similar resemblance to the dream figure. But he couldn't remember any detail from the dream, except the feelings.

"This is the first time I've known someone who has met an Adept." Shaanstar said. "You should treat it as something special. It usually means something important."

There were several faces peering through doorways from either direction now at his raised voice. He shook her hands off, but stood there still feeling angry at the personal intrusion that he didn't much care now about been naked.

He turned, to look past Shaanstar than back again.

"Which way out of here." He asked.

She pointed past him, "Down there to the right."

He moved off, following her additional directions back to where his clothes were. She watched on as he dried himself off then dressed in his cleaned clothes. The shirt looked almost as white as it did when it was new, but he didn't comment, still enraged at having been taken by a woman.

Shaanstar led him out of the baths, but he stopped at the front to complain anyhow.

"I want to speak to some one in charge." He said to the short woman behind the counter.

It was the same woman who'd been there when they came in.

"I'm in charge." She said, with a small but audible voice.

"Then how can you let patrons get raped?" He asked.

"Raped! When?" She said loudly, her face showing shock that it had ever happened. "We've never had anything like this before I assure you we're sorry." She said, her hands becoming a little agitated.

"Sorry? Some women called an Adept rapes me!" Dillon said.

That was all he said, and the woman became motionless. "I'm sorry I can't help you." She said, her voice suddenly calm now.

Dillon was stunned by her sudden change. "What do you mean, can't help me? You've got to do something."

The woman looked at him and Shaanstar, "I'm sorry. You can go the constabulary if you want, but they'll probably say the same thing."

Shaanstar nodded understanding, and put a hand on Dillon's shoulder.

"You've got to do something. This sort of thing just can't happen!"

"She can't do anything Dillon." She said, trying to pull him away from the proprietor before she had reason to complain about Dillon.

He came, though not after complaining again that it wasn't right.

"Why did it happen, why me?" He was saying.

She would have been one of the first to demand action if it had been anyone but and Adept, but they had ways and means beyond that of anyone else. Even the Lords didn't have any control over them. The Adept's were a law upon their selves, though they never interfered with normal citizens. When they did, there was usually a reason though it was never to anyone's knowledge why.

She could only call it good fortune, or luck that they'd visited Dillon. That one had mated with him could mean anything, though she doubted the obvious reason was to beget a child, but it was the usual reason one had sex, unless it was purely for enjoyment.

Shaanstar controlled herself from bursting out, when she had the bad thought that, maybe Dillon was like a succubus, and the Adept's wanted to test the amount of pleasure they could get out of him.

No, it wasn't right, though she couldn't help but thinking over it again, mixed with images of Dillon walking about unclothed.

Dillon woke in a better mood then he went to sleep in, but still remembered the feelings from the previous evening.

Shaanstar had tired to help somewhat, by taking him to the local police. They listened to his tale patiently, confirming it was and Adapt, but they said just as much as the proprietor had said, that the Adept's were not something they could control.

They would have tried to follow it up if they could have, but Dillon could provide no description, beyond that of long blonde hair and a well-developed body. It was if his memory of her was gone, just a short hour later.

Sleep had been difficult, especially when Shaanstar hadn't stayed in the room, saying she was going to be back much later. He'd hoped she was looking for work, but had doubts that she was looking for any that time of night, after most people had eaten dinner and were going to bed.

He hadn't much worried, but she was there in the other bed when he woke up, still asleep, which he did find unusual.

"You're awake?" She said, stifling a yawn. "And the sun's up?"

"You were out late?" He asked, getting dressed.

"Quite." She said, throwing back the bedding to stretch.

He looked at her once before looking away, feeling resentful of her cheeriness.

"Did you find some work?" He asked.

"What?"

"Have we got some sort of job to take us south?"

"Oh, no. I couldn't find anything."

"Figures." He said, to himself.

"There's several caravans headed south, but the couple that have some open positions, are travelling further down the coast, more than a days ride out of our way."

"Can't we just tag along for part of the way?"

"Unfortunately no, we can't just tag along. They're only hiring for the full distance."

Dillon sat down, with nothing better to do until Shaanstar had dressed.

"I asked my contacts about anything else to take us so far south to contact us here, but since no one has come calling, I can only guess that there isn't any other jobs at this moment."

She finished strapping on her armour, and tightened her belt one more notch. "So I'm going to look again this morning, otherwise when we leave tomorrow we'll be running free unless something comes up along the way."

Dillon kept his last comment to himself, but was half glad that there wasn't some sort of job now. It made travelling that much better that he didn't have to worry about getting attacked by bandits, or Slavers. Two caravan trips where both times something happened were enough for the moment. "Let's look then."

"Some quick breakfast first," she suggested.

## Chapter 19

To Dillon it was way too early, but Shaanstar had insisted that they go into the bar. It looked and sounded like a bar, even at this time in the morning, when they would have been closed from previous late night trade.

Although he did consider that they traded 24 hours a day.

It was dark inside with none of the lights on except over the long counter itself until his eyes adjusted, where he could follow Shaanstar between the mostly empty chairs to where a group sat around a single table in the dim light.

"Jeez, looksee what the griffin dragged in!" One of the men said.

Most of them turned about to look.

"Shaanstar, when did you get back into Canduce?" One man asked, by the name of Remar. He was a rough looking man, clean-shaven like all the men were except for a thin dark moustache, the same colour as his hair. He had dark eyes, which could keep your attention on him as he spoke in his clear voice.

"Drag up a chair and join us!"

"Who's your friend?" A woman asked, whose name was Savitch. She had long blond hair, wearing a laced vest and a cloak

There were several looks at Dillon from the group, not offensive in any way, just curious.

"This is Dillon," Shaanstar introduced him, "my current engagement."

"Oh, sorry to hear that." One commented look to Dillon, "How she been treating you?"

Dillon was a little confused; he was already married, so how could he be engaged?

"Better yet, how's he been treating her?" A man called Aaren asked. There were a few snorts of laughter, which quickly subsided.

"Come join us," someone said again.

They both grabbed nearby empty seats, and sat themselves around the already fully occupied table, but some space was made.

"What brings you here, with your assignment?" Remar asked.

"We're looking to head south, but I can't find anything headed that way until the Watch road."

"The watch road?" A man asked, name of Nedruss.

"Most of the traffic's going all the way to Ballydin, it might not be possible." Savitch said.

"Nothing headed that way?" Shaanstar asked.

"It's not that often that a caravan goes there." Savitch asked. "It's not much of a thriving community down there."

"Any idea when the next caravan might be?" Shaanstar asked.

There was a short argument between Aaren and Meir, before Aaren replied, "About a ten day, nothing earlier."

"Nothing legal that is." The other said.

"Legal?" Shaanstar asked.

"They've got a hunt running down that way." Nedruss said, "Except you'd have to return successfully to Canduce for payment."

"Hey, she could always join us anyhow." Meir suggested.

"I'll think about it." Shaanstar said, trying to put him off.

"Some of us are headed south in a few days time if you just considering coming along." Remar said.

Shaanstar thought it was about the only thing they could do under the circumstance.

There was a scuffle of feet outside, before a man came running into the bar, pushing past the chairs towards the group at the table.

"We've been expecting you DeSande!" Aaren called.

"No time," he said coming to halt half panting. "There's been a sighting of the creature in the flat lands."

"The same one that's been attacking the farming stock?" Aaren asked.

"Yeah, and some Royan troops have already been sent down there."

"What are we waiting for?" Nedruss said, pushing back his chair, "Let's go kill us a monster."

There were several voices of agreement as they got up.

"Shaanstar you can join us too." Remar said. "There's been a reward on this thing for a while."

She looked to Dillon for a moment considering.

"We can lend you a couple of horses too." He added.

"Sure then, we could use the money." She said.

"If we're lucky." Remar said, "It's pretty hard to catch it."

All Dillon could see was a black speck in the sky. It could well have been an aircraft for all he could tell, except it seemed stationary in the sky, unmoving like a helicopter.

The only thing that said that the speck wasn't a man-made vehicle was its actions. It had dropped once already from the sky like a diving bird, disappearing behind the nearby tree-lined horizon before ascending again to repeat the same manoeuvre over.

Between looking towards the speck in the sky, he had to keep his attention between following the others, and watching where he was riding himself.

The horse he'd been loaned was a fine brown mare, a little skittish but very controllable, to the extent that it wouldn't follow the other horses unless he directed it.

Over fences, low walls and other obstacles, Dillon held on as the horse jumped over them. Following his directions as they ploughed through one field of uncut grain, then across another one that was empty before pushing through some wild foliage that separated many of the farming lands outside of Canduce.

Shaanstar had told him to stick close, but the rush of galloping horses made it difficult, to watch both her and the other riders. He looked up briefly to see how close they were to the creature they were chasing, and looked back the riders, finding suddenly that he was behind only two of them now.

Somehow the group had split up, and looking about he saw no one else in the wild forest growth. It was too late to turn back and look for Shaanstar or the others, so he stayed behind the two riders, making sure he didn't lose them either, because he might end up lost out here, with all the twists and turns and cross-country riding they had already done.

By some luck of chance, they happened upon a group of soldiers and their mounts in a small clearing, dressed in plate armour vests and helmets, with chain mail leggings.

Dillon saw one of their numbers lying on the ground, with large red gashes across his face where the open helmet hadn't protected him from the creature. On the ground near by lay the carcasses of two sheep, their fleeces blood red from their open wounds.

Nedruss brought his horse to a halt with Savitch, and hailed the armed soldiers gleefully. Only two of the ten were armed with anything but hand weapons, holding small bows, which they held at the ready.

"There it is," Savitch said, pointing towards the sky overhead.

Dillon dismounted as both Nedruss and Savitch did, preferring to stand on his own two sure feet.

The creature was still in the sky, hovering briefly, as Nedruss pulled a crossbow from his saddle, holding the stirrup down with a booted foot to lock the string back into place with his arming belt. He removed a short bolt from a quiver he pulled from his horse also, loading it into the crossbow.

Dillon had been watching Nedruss, and only now looked to see what Savitch armed herself with. Unlike the soldiers, she had a longbow that seemed to almost dwarf her as she held it up. What caught Dillon's attention was not the bow itself, but the arrow she had notched at the ready. It looked like any normal feathered arrow, except for the shaped arrowhead fairly glowed, like a living blue flame enveloped it.

He had time barely to look at it before one of the soldiers yelled, "It's coming again!"

Dillon looked up, seeing that the speck was no longer a speck, but a shape that was quickly growing as it descended towards them.

"Move the horses!" Savitch called.

Dillon turned, seeing her waving a hand towards him.

The horses stood, almost where they'd dismounted, in the centre of the small clearing. It seemed impossible; as he grabbed the reins of the two nearest, trying to stretch himself to grab the third as one of the horses pulled him back.

He yanked hard, trying to draw them out of the way.

"No time!" Someone called.

Dillon turned to see the creature descend like a dive-bomber, barely clearing the trees as it swooped down towards the horses and himself.

There was a sharp twang as Nedruss let loose, followed by the arrows of Savitch and the soldiers at the creature that came on seemingly immune to the projectiles.

Dillon didn't even notice that one horse bolted, tearing the reins out of his hands, as he watched the creature come straight at him.

He reacted as if the creature barreling towards him was a runaway car, by raising his hands, hoping to stop it from hitting him. Dillon hadn't considered how the sheep had died, how the flying monster could tear him apart as it flew past its prey, using the talon-like claws that hung outstretched.

With his hands up hoping the creature would stop, he didn't notice when everyone went silent around him.

He had the thought that it had somehow swept right on past him, and looked to Nedruss who stood off to the side, staring intently at the ground in front of Dillon.

## Chapter 20

"What did you do?"

It was Savitch. Dillon turned to look at her, as she stood with an arrow half strung looking at him.

He had the sudden feeling that the creature hadn't passed him at all, that somehow it had stopped. Both of his hands were still up, blocking most of his view. He dropped these down, swallowing with anticipation.

The creature lay before him, not much more than body length away, twitching in spasms and looking like a car had recently hit it.

"It's not dead," One of the soldiers cried as it flopped over, seemingly still alive.

Three arrows shot home, striking different portions of the creature, Savitch's arrow causing it to convulse once then lay still.

There was a loud holler as several horses rode in, coming to a quick stop. "Are we in time!" Remar called.

"Not quite." Nedruss replied over the shouts from the others.

"You got it?" Aaren asked, dismounting from his horse to look at the dead monster.

"Shaanstar's appointed friend here did it all by himself." Nedruss said.

Shaanstar came forward looking at Dillon first to make sure he was at least physically fine before looking at the monster that lay dead near his feet.

"You?" She asked, then "How?"

Savitch answered instead. "It just flew in, and stopped like it hit an invisible wall." She smacked two hands together to demonstrate, "Only he was standing there with both hands raised."

"Looks like a big ugly harpy." Remar broke in.

Dillon looked over to where he kicked at the corpse, not knowing what a harpy was. He didn't see recognise much other than the broken wings and large claws on a feathered body. The rest of it didn't exactly look intact, but thought he saw something else. He looked away, not enjoying the gruesome sight.

"Aye, its dead. The Lord will be happy that this one won't bother her lands again." One of the soldiers said, as they grouped around the body now.

"A short but good ride." Remar said, looking to the others.

"The Lord appreciates your efforts to help make her realm safe, and hopes you accept this token of her thanks." The small man said. He was dressed up in very fine clothes, something almost of the quality of silk, possibly a fine form of woven cotton.

"It was nothing at all." Dillon replied, only a little awed by the whole proceeding.

The soldiers had made sure of the creature's death by removing its head, and bringing it back to Canduce as a trophy. They'd all ridden back with the soldiers, but Dillon's presence had been requested inside of the large tower like edifice that looked like a small-fortified castle within the city centre.

Shaanstar had been worried, and had almost forced herself to come along before he their hosts that she was to stay with him.

That he'd been expecting the Lord to be a man; it didn't surprise him to learn it was a woman. Just that he... well he expected to meet them; instead they met one of her officials.

The man opened a small bag, and displayed some small gems to Dillon, before his closed it again and handed it over.

"Give her my thanks." Dillon said.

There was a quiet like cough from behind him where Shaanstar stood.

The man didn't seem to notice, keeping his attention on Dillon. "I shall inform her so. The chief watchman will show you out."

He pointed one sleeved arm towards the doors behind them, before turning around fluidly, and disappearing through a doorway.

Ten days later, Shaanstar and Dillon bade goodbye to Remar, Savitch and a few of the others, whom they'd ridden along with on the caravan headed to Ballydin. It had been eight days of riding either horseback or on the caravan itself.

Eight days of silent questions from all of them about what Dillon had done, following two days of not so silent questions from Shaanstar, who still couldn't get an answer from Dillon, or a repeat demonstration of his efforts at stopping the harpy.

He wasn't sure that he had done it himself or that if one of the others had done it. But Savitch's retelling of the whole incident to some of the other escorts on the caravan who hadn't been there, made it seem like he'd done the whole thing.

There had been mention of the meeting with the lord, followed by some questions about what she looked like, but Shaanstar was effective enough at putting these down, as Dillon wasn't sure how to respond after his talk with the Lord's first minister.

He hadn't used the correct words when talking about the Lord. It wasn't as if he'd had practise with Kings or Queens before, he thought glumly.

But eight days of riding and the distance itself helped to forget it for the moment, at least until he met with another one.

"Your Lordship, his or her Lord, or the Lord." Shaanstar said, trying to explain it now, after they'd separated themselves from the caravan.

"It's just as well it was the first minister who met us, and not an aide. They would have just as likely thrown us in the dungeon."

"They have a dungeon?" He asked.

"Of course they do." She said, "And it'll be well equipped with the tools of torture. You're distracting me."

"Sorry."

She went on as if she hadn't been interrupted. "If by some chance, you meet a Lord, or one of the senior officials, like a Magistrate, call them Milord. Other than that, use your grace or your highness with any female noble. Some of them dislike the term Lord, but permit it to an extent."

"Right, be more careful with female nobles. What about the minister?"

"If you're ever unsure, use their title. Most of them will accept it, but it is a sign of ignorance on your part, which they will pick up on. Sometimes it's good to look ignorant, but it helps to not look like a dumb backwater slave."

"No." He said, wondering why slaves were called ignorant and dumb.

Four more days it took to travel the almost deserted road to what was known as the Mage Watch. And to top it off, it rained steadily for the last three days of travel.

Though they couldn't see the sun for the dark grey clouds, it was mid afternoon when the narrow roadway widened out. They now walked upon it; feet and legs covered with mud picked up from the wet road, as the horse hadn't been rested since they began from Canduce.

Low outer walls and broken old buildings and structures that once made up the town that Mage Watch now stood in, stuck out of the ground like the remains of a lost civilisation of which it might once have been.

The town was in fact if not in spirit, a ghost town. No ghosts haunted it, according to most people, but the broken remains still lay there, a reminder of days in the past when things were different.

In the town's centre through the rain, only one structure still stood soundly, its walls of stone as grey as the sky, was the Mage Watch itself. It stood like a fort, or perhaps a stronghold, with large outer walls hiding the interior, and two large wooden doors that bared easy entry.

It was towards this that Shaanstar and Dillon stumbled through the rain, shielding themselves from the continuing rainfall under the edge of the wall as she thumped on the doors.

"Are you sure there's someone here?" Dillon asked, having seen the ruins and doubting that anyone was left in this place.

"There is." She said, "There was the last time I passed through here, though it might be difficult to hear us in this rain."

She pulled her sword out, and used the pommel to rap on the door.

It continued to pour as they stood there. Shaanstar was beginning to think that maybe no one was going to hear them, when a small peephole door opened about head height. She had time to see a figure behind it before it shut again.

"Hey." Dillon said, thinking they'd just been shut out.

"Give them a moment. The locks on this door take a moment to open."

They stood as something clunked within the door, a lock shifting, something releasing the door from its position before finally it began to swing open.

They both trudged through, the horse behind them, on into an open courtyard. A heavily cloaked figure took Pecker's reigns from Dillon as another beckoned them to follow.

Dillon saw something in the centre of the court, which took his attention until Shaanstar called him to hurry up.

They reached the shelter of the roof that ringed the court before Dillon looked back to the strange block that lay in the very centre of the court. It gleamed even from that distance, showing its nature to be not of rock, but more like glass.

He didn't have time to contemplate it as the cloaked figure had them wipe their feet before leading them inside, brightening the way with burning torches.

Down a large hallway, the walls they passed were covered with very old looking paintings, frescoes and tapestries, depicting scenes that looked like they had been taken from horror movies about the last days on earth. Dead landscapes, mutant creatures, boiling oceans, even one that looked like an orbital image of a meteor streaking down through the atmosphere. It was macabre also, the way some displayed images of dead people.

When they turned down another corner, he was glad at least when he saw no more pictures, but the stone passage narrowed and became darker. They were led up some stairs in almost complete darkness and through two more passages. As he followed the figure and Shaanstar, Dillon had the idea that this was a very primitive outpost. There were no lights to speak of, and the windows that he did see let in very little light.

Which was why he was a little surprised when the cloaked figure led them into a reasonably furnished room. Two oil torches hanging on walls were already lit, as the figure gestured around at the room with one arm silently.

The walls were the same grey rock as outside, but a high arched ceiling hung over the polished wooden floor, which was covered by a large rug. At one end of the room, a fire was burning in a hearth newly lit. At the other, lay a large four-posted bed, its top reaching into the darkness above.

As before, Dillon noted the room also had its own sanitary and bathing facilities.

Shaanstar didn't reply, but nodded back to the figure that departed the room, closing the door behind them.

"I suggest we get these mud caked clothes off first before we spread it around." Shaanstar said.

Dillon half agreed. Their wet footprints were easily seen on the wooden floor, three steps from the doorway. He wondered how much mud they had dropped off on the way up.

## Chapter 21

It had been more uncomfortable than anything he'd had to endure yet. All their clothes, if they hadn't been dirty or wet, had become quickly caked with mud as their hands made to remove those already covered in mud before removing the rest.

He was still cold, which he felt right thorough to his skin that was covered in goose bumps. He wanted more than anything to stand in front of the fire to warm up, but didn't want to drag mud across the room like a disrespectful guest. For guests they were at the moment.

Shaanstar hadn't paid a single coin to the cloaked figures, but they now made use of one of their rooms. She stood now, naked except for the mud that covered most of her extremities. Her feet were clearly mud free, so she was first across to the tub to fill it with warm water.

"Get over here now!" She called, "Before you freeze to death."

He moved reluctantly, trying not to leave footprints across the floor in doing so. Once across she directed him into the filling tub.

"In now." She said, pointing to the water.

He stepped in, sinking into the water, which scarcely covered his legs yet. She stood there for some time monitoring the slowly running water, telling Dillon to wash every time he paused.

"They have to pump their water up to the roof to get any sort of pressure." She said, explaining the slow water.

"It's barely high enough to wash with." He said, thinking she might be able to get it flowing faster.

"There's one way of fixing that." She said.

He had hardly finished thinking that she was going get some assistance, when she stepped into the bath, sinking down opposite him, causing the water to raise up to his chest.

He invariably stopped washing, wanting to complain or to tell her off, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. At least... not with her sitting with her mud free chest sitting clear of the water.

"Wash." She said, "Or I'll do it for you."

Dillon swallowed, but compiled for another minute until he had the sudden thought of what Patricia would do if she walked through the door right now. He could imagine her screaming at him, calling him names like a two-timing bastard as well as picking up something and throwing it at him. It wasn't hard to imagine her tossing the small jug that sat on a table at him, and following up with each of the metal cups. She was a good hand at throwing things too. She used to play woman's baseball in college, and swung a mean bat.

He felt something on his hands, and drew his attention back to Shaanstar who pulled the block of soap from his hands.

"You know you're hogging the soap." She said, soaping her hands heavily until they were full of suds before tossing the soap back at him, where it splashed in the water between their legs.

His attention had been on Shaanstar, that he wasn't aware of someone else in the room until he heard the floor creak. He turned and looked, almost afraid that his nightmare would be true and Patricia would be in the room. Instead it was one of the cloaked figures, carrying something in their arms.

Dillon didn't know whether to be offended by the intrusion, or guilty. Instead he could on sit and watch as the figure lay two light grey cloaks upon the bed, then laid out two rough looking towels on a small chair that stood near the tub.

The figured turned about without a word, not seeming to take notice of either of them in the tub together. But before they reached the door, the figure stopped to bend down and pick up the mud-encrusted clothes, all of them, including Shaanstar's sword.

"Hey!" She called out.

Dillon thought she was about to give the figure a tongue lashing about not touching the sword, instead she merely told them to make sure the scabbard was clean.

The silent figure nodded once before the door closed.

"They took our money too." He said, when she looked at his worried face.

"It's fine." She said, washing the soap of herself now. "They don't get many visitors here. I sometimes wonder how bored they get. They'll probably count and clean every coin, and mend those holes in your clothes too."

"Your sword?" He asked.

"They'll polish it."

"What if we're attacked?"

"The Mage Watch is pretty safe, and they don't let just anybody in."

What about me, he thought but asked instead, "I thought you always had a weapon!"

"I never said that!" she said. "But I guess I never go around unarmed."

She drew a small dagger he hadn't seen before, out from the dirty bath water. She turned it about her middle finger, before hiding it in the water again.

"Where did you hide that?" He asked, thinking back that he hadn't noticed her carrying anything, and he was sure to have noticed her wearing something like a sheaf after she'd gotten undressed.

"A woman's got to have her secrets," she answered almost predicability. She saw his expression and relented, "I would tell you, but these walls have ears, and I do want to keep it a secret from them."

Dillon's expression faded, before he went remembered the soap had gone under the dirty water, and went searching for it.

It seemed to take ages to get clean, and still there was caked mud clinging to their hair and Dillon found several spots he seemed to have missed completely after drying off.

Both of them put on the robes that were left for them, finding nothing else to put on. It was large enough, completely covering them down past their feet and up to their heads when they drew the hoods forward like the cloaked figures that they had seen, except they had been brown. They kept their hoods back anyhow otherwise it would fall over their faces.

One of the figures appeared in the doorway after they'd dressed, silent, without knocking. Shaanstar saw him or her first.

"Time to meet everyone." She said, as the figure beckoned them to follow.

It gave him a strange feeling to wear nothing under such a loose cloak, especially in a large building as this amongst many people. He had a strange notion that none of them wore anything under the cloaks, then suddenly feared that maybe it wasn't strange at all.

He worried about it as he followed both Shaanstar and the figure through the passages back downstairs, until they entered a large room, filled with many cloaked figures that stood bowed around long tables. The room itself was lit by dozens of candles, held in several chandeliers hanging from the wooden rafters.

They were led to an empty spot at what looked to be the head table. Dillon followed Shaanstar's example as she stood next to one of the other figures at the table.

He had a quick look at the table, which was covered in platters of various foods, before the silence got his attention. Everyone was deadly silent within the room, that Dillon wondered what they were doing until a bell chimed, echoing throughout the building, ringing out at least a dozen times.

There was a low murmur from all the figures present, then they all threw back their hoods and sat down.

"We welcome you back Shaanstar." A man said.

Dillon looked about to see she was already sitting down, and stepped across the bench to join them.

"And you brought a new face with you too." another voice said.

Dillon looked about, seeing all the faces that had been hidden by the cloaks. His first thought had been that they were monks, but the faces around this table were mixed. Men and women both, old and young alike, and they weren't silent now either. There was mixed conversation down all the tables, echoing around the room.

"Yes this is Dillon." She said introducing him.

He thought she should have used his full name, but no one seemed to have or use a second name.

"I must apologise for the lights, but our power-stone was overloaded by a lightning strike several days ago, and we've been making do since." The man said. He looked a little older than the others at the table, but he had a narrow clean shaved face, with hair that must have been shaved short recently. His eyebrows at least revealed that he his age, been a completely white.

Dillon listened to the conversation as he served himself from the food at the table. There looked to be some sort of roast, with baked vegetables, bread and mugs of watered down wine.

"It's fine." Shaanstar replied, "Though I did wonder why the water was a little slow."

"Yes, the pumps aren't working either. It's all been moved by hand for the moment until our power-stone can be regenerated. But what brings you here. Surely you've caught that giant tortoise you were chasing."

"Oh yes, that was ages ago." She said, "Turned out to be nothing more than something created by nearby towns to scare off the fish from another town."

"How needlessly human." The man said.

"Well." Shaanstar said without understanding. "But I'm here now to look at some of your records for Dillon. He's interested in seeing a map of the local territories, something big. We've already tried in Unaquay, and weren't well received. I made a couple more enquires in Canduce, but they were just as tight lipped over any sort of map."

"They would be like that." The man replied. "We should be able to find what you require in our records."

Dillon looked up hopeful.

"But it will be in the morning you understand, as it has gotten dark early. We can assign a Sentinel to help you tomorrow with finding whatever you require."

"Thankyou." Dillon said.

"It is good to be appreciated," the man said. "But meanwhile we'd like to be just hospitable hosts."

The man and Shaanstar talked for a short while until he spoke to Dillon directly.

"You may ask of us anything you wish during your stay here, and we will fulfil it to the best of our abilities."

He wondered what they might be capable of, but he had one simple question for the moment. "Who are you?"

"Who are we?" He repeated, raising his eyebrows as he looked at Shaanstar.

"We are the Sentinels of the Mage Watch." He said returning his soft eyes to Dillon. "We look after the buildings, and all its historical records that go as far back as the apocalypse, and some that might be even older though that is in dispute."

"The war?" Dillon asked, wondering by his meaning of the apocalypse. Some remote places still hadn't recovered 50 years after World War Two.

"That is one of its names, though any detail of it has been lost in time. But the Mage Watch was built long after that. Originally its purpose was as a fortress for the settlement that was here. Things change of course, and the settlement grew into a town, and eventually people left, mostly for better land north of here, others because they didn't

like been around the Watch itself. Whether they felt sorry for what happened, or guilty I don't know. Some of the records are mixed."

"What happened?"

"You are full of questions aren't you, I can see it in your eyes. It was the coming of Magery that changed everything, that and the results that stand in the courtyard at the moment."

Dillon remembered the cylindrical block that stood in the centre of the courtyard. He'd felt something when he looked at it, something he couldn't quite describe to himself.

"The block." He said to the Old Sentinel, "It looked like a... a..."

"A living statue? An ice prison?" A voice answered to his left.

It was a woman by the look of her features, except her hair was short like the man's, though it had several weeks of growth. "So you did see her as you came in. She is the first Mage. She is the reason why the Mage Watch was created."

The Sentinels continued talking to Dillon long after the food had disappeared, talking to him of the first Mage.

"It was many cycles ago, close to twenty six hundred." The man said.

"Twenty six hundred and thirty four." Someone interjected.

"Quite so, but as I was saying. It was many cycles ago, some time after the apocalypse, when the Earth was finally healing and man was returning to his lands. Much had happened, and much had changed according to the records. Many people had died, as well as many animals. Entire groups of animals were eliminated, but new things appeared in their places, sometimes taking up where they had left off, or creating new niches for themselves. By chance, humans happened to be part of that same change. It wasn't known at first, but a few people started displaying abnormal abilities. Those first few that had them kept quiet thinking it was nothing, that is until they were discovered."

## Chapter 22

The old man took a break as another continued.

"What followed became known as the purge. The people with new powers when found weren't welcomed by others, but feared when one after another were claimed to be evil tools left over from the apocalypse, and were killed by terrified mobs."

"What about the first Mage?" Dillon asked.

"We're getting to that." The woman said, taking her turn. "Some people were killed that were later found to have no actual Mage powers. Their deaths sparked the need for trials of possession. So they started locking people in stocks, chains or anything else, torturing them until they displayed their powers, where they were promptly killed by whatever was on hand, be it beheading or burnt alive."

Dillon was getting chills just from listening to them telling their story, but tried to remember how bad the dark ages really was, between the civil war in France, various plagues, or even when Russia's overthrew its King. America itself wasn't totally civilised with its war with the English, followed by its own civil war and black slavery. And still there were things that were purposely forgotten because no one wanted to remember.

"Thus the Mage crystals were discovered." The old man said, continuing the story now. "Where they actually came from, it's not said. But some feel that a Mage created them purposely for trapping another Mage. The crystals are, or were to be the ultimate form of detecting a Mage. The first time they were used was their last, at the trial of a young woman who had been accused of Magery. She was seized, and put on trial. The result was her permanent imprisonment within the ice column you saw outside."

Everyone went quiet, as if that was the end of the story.

"Was that it?" Dillon asked. "No one else got frozen?"

"Oh, no." The old man said, "They tried to use the crystals again after that, but they never worked again. They released several actual Mages because of this, before they caught up with them. But this practise went on for some time, perhaps a hundred cycles, when finally, everyone realised that almost everyone had Magery. Some of those that had themselves or their parents been involved in the purge found that they themselves could do things like create light, cause things to fly, or enchant animals. The purge in turn became an expulsion, as people left in all directions, from guilt or remorse for what had happened. But one thing remained."

"The ice column." Dillon said.

"Yes. Of the Mages who had been tried and convicted, she was the only one who hadn't actually been killed during those dark cycles. But her prison was more effective than previously thought. Stones, axes, large logs were used to break the ice, even those who had the Magery of fire who came later tried, but the ice, if it can be called ice, holds her firmly. It has held her thus, for that many cycles, as this fort was changed over to watch over her, and over the records that have been collected over that time, looking for a way of one day breaking her out, returning her to where she should be. Maybe even saying sorry for all the things our ancestors did."

Dillon looked to the old man, seeing in his eyes a genuine sorrow for what had happened long before either of them. The story had sounded very convincing to him when the Sentinels talked to him, but he had trouble believing any of it. He was still confused about magic, and Shaanstar's admission a few weeks ago. Hearing from these strange people dressed like monks that everyone could do magic, and the time references of a war before the birth of Christ didn't agree with him.

It was with little reluctance that he left with Shaanstar to return to their room to get some sleep.

One of the other Sentinels, another woman led them back to their room, guiding them with a torch along the now pitch black passages.

She lit one of the now extinguished torches in their room, before leaving them. "Please do not hesitate to ask if you wish anything during the night." She said.

Dillon didn't answer, turning towards the large bed before he remembered something. "Yes there is." He turned about, seeing her still there.

She stepped into the room awaiting him.

"Do you have something I could wear to bed?" He asked.

He was aware of Shaanstar's eyes upon him, but couldn't tell what she was thinking. He only knew that she wouldn't have cared what he didn't sleep in. He felt it would be more appropriate to wear something if they were to share the bed.

"You could wear the cloak to bed if you wish." The woman said, "But it may be too hot to comfortably sleep in if that is what you wish."

She seemed all to wanting to grant wishes. "Just, don't you have something more..." He shook the cloak. "Lighter, like some pants or something?"

She frowned as if thinking on it. "We don't have anything like that, but we could make it for you."

"No." He said, thinking she meant it. "But my underpants, if you've washed them, they should be dry enough now."

"What do they look like?" She asked.

Look like. He held back the laugh, thinking they were stranger than he first imagined.

"They're dark blue, about yea big." He answered, holding his hands out.

"I shall go fetch them for you now." She said, disappeared out the door silently.

Shaanstar had already gotten into the bed whilst he was talking, so he stood by himself as he waited. It wasn't long before she returned.

"There were two things the same as you described," she said bringing them over to him.

One was his handkerchief, which they must have pulled out of his trouser pockets. It was blue and about the right size, but fortunately the other was his underwear.

"Thankyou." He said, retrieved them from her hands.

She stood there waiting for something.

"That's all I wanted." He said.

She took the hint, returning to the door. "If you require anything else, just call out the door, and someone will come." She said once more, before she actually did close the door.

With some appreciation, he pulled on the underwear on underneath before removing the cloak.

"Don't forget the light." Shaanstar said.

It was the last thing he did before got into the large bed, sleeping comfortably in the heavy sheets that he'd wished for the last ten nights.

The rain had slackened off during the night, but continued down in a light drizzle, leaving dampness on everything it fell upon. Dillon stood out in the middle courtyard wearing the big cloak from last night but with the hood up now as he faced the column of ice.

He wanted to look at the first Mage for him self, at least to get an impression of what they'd told him last night. The column stood there, like a large multifaceted crystal. Inside he could see the outline of a figure, but in no way could he say for certain that there was anybody inside. It could well have been a stone statue, but with the rough surface made it impossible to see clearly.

He touched the back of one hand to it, finding the ice wasn't as cold as he expected. Not like ice at all. It wasn't warm either, more likely the same as the air temperature. Ice didn't do that, he thought, knowing that it would have surely melted even in this weather.

Dillon stepped back, confused about the whole thing. Confused about where he was. All along he'd been speculating on where he was, and every time he found out something new, he was less sure now of himself and his existence.

Home was in New York, 1999 AD. He told himself. Land of the Big Apple, freedom of speech, and computers, and a World Leader in civilised society.

But now, he stood at the brink of something else. Some place he didn't know about and didn't know how to describe.

His thoughts were interrupted when Shaanstar came out with one of the Sentinels. He couldn't tell whom it was with their hood drawn up, but Shaanstar had hers down a little.

"This Sentinel has been assigned to help you on finding the map you need." She said.

The Sentinel didn't say a word, merely stood there.

"Shaanstar, don't they speak during the day?" He asked.

"Not usually. It's a ritual thing." She explained, "I don't understand it myself, but they tend to relax it with visitors only at night."

"As long as he, is it a he?"

The cloaked figure nodded.

"...He can answer questions." Dillon finished.

He saw her turn about to leave him. "Where will you be?" He asked.

"I'm studying something with some of the others." She answered.

He watched as she made her way back inside, then turned towards the Sentinel.

"Show me your maps." He asked.

The Sentinel turned, heading for another portion of the buildings. Dillon looked once more at the figure in the ice column before following.

There were volumes of large bound books stacked in piles, and large scrolls that lay in racks.

Dillon thought it was a simple request, to see a reasonably sized map of where they were currently.

Scroll after scroll was picked up, its thick cloth like material rolled open, examined and rolled up again before carefully stacking it aside.

He saw what was on the first few maps as the Sentinel opened them up. Hand drawn reliefs, inked in a variety of colours by who knows what in what looked like reproductions from maps all around the world, except they looked incomplete. He could recognise places and regions, but their names were missing, as with the lines of borders and states. The colours had faded, leaving mainly the features behind, which had been drawn in heavy black ink. But for what it lacked in that, it more than made up for it in mountains, rivers, deserts and even roads.

Dillon would have opened up more scrolls himself, except only the Sentinel knew what he was looking for, so he sat around, waiting until something was found.

It seemed like hours later, though Dillon would have checked his watch to check, except he couldn't remember what he'd done with it. Possibly it was with all his clothes, wherever they were currently. But it was the cloaked Sentinel who had his attention now, as he turned about holding a scroll.

"You've found it?" He asked.

The figure nodded, and laid out the scroll for both of them to see. It showed a fair amount of land, and an expanse of water taking up a quarter of the map with what looked like a sea.

Dillon walked about it, trying to make sense of what he saw.

"Where about are we on this map?" He asked.

The Sentinel leaned over, as if working it out himself where they were before finally planting a finger down on a portion of land close to the sea.

Dillon looked at it, seeing the outline of a name beginning as T-A-L-L-A where it had faded from a darker background, the rest was washed out.

There were other things on the map, but none of them identifiable as anything like a country or a major city or river.

**Chapter 23**

"It's not enough." He said sighing. "I need one that's bigger. It has to show more."

He tried to emphasise more scale by stretching his hands.

The figure seemed to understand, and rolled up the map again before continuing to search.

It wasn't as long as before, when he came back with something.

Dillon caught his breath as the map was rolled out, seeing the familiar shaped coastline.

"This is where we are?" He asked, looking up at the hooded face across from him. "The United States?"

The figure didn't move, not signing in the positive or negative as before.

"You know the United States of America? The Star Spangled Banner?"

The figure slowly shook his head, making Dillon more confused.

The map was of America. He looked down at it again, seeing the black detail of mountains and canyons, faded areas of rivers, even though it lacked signs of cities. But the map continued more, showing areas leading into the bottom part of Canada, and down past Mexico almost to Panama.

"What about the Canada or Mexico?"

The figure shook his head again.

He didn't know whether the Sentinel was trying to confuse him on purpose, but it was getting to be too frustrating.

"Then where the hell are we?" He asked, angry.

The figure edged a hand out, placing a finger on the map, far down the Eastern edge of the American coastline.

"Florida?" Dillon said, half hysterical. "I'm in fucking Florida? How the hell can I be in Florida?"

Dillon turned about, looking about the dusty room. There weren't any windows inside the room, as it was below the ground level, deep under a portion of the buildings.

"Florida doesn't have mages." He said, "It's not exactly the place where you'd expect to find slavers operating out in the open either. God, the media sure would have field day if they found that out. No, this can't be right. I've got to ask Shaanstar, find out what she knows."

The Sentinel didn't even stop him as he rolled the two ends of the map up, and headed out the doorway.

"It can't be right." He kept telling himself, as he got back outside and headed across the courtyard to find Shaanstar.

The rain had stopped, and the sun was even showing through some of the cloud cover, but Dillon didn't even notice it as he stopped halfway across, thinking maybe the map was wrong, or something.

"Its crap, its all crap, lies. This is some big twisted demented scheme."

He let go one end, letting it unroll, as he had nothing to rest it on, as he tried to hold the other end up.

"A map, its a map. It's even written down right here on the bottom."

Dillon found some writing on the bottom edge of the scroll that must have been written in the same heavy black ink as the map itself, as the text was still clearly legible.

He read it out, "The map of the United States of America, circa 2210 A. D. See..." He yelled out, but there wasn't anyone else in the courtyard listening. "It's a map of the U-night-ed States!"

He sat down heavily, torn with sudden grief, letting the top part of the map roll away.

"Twenty two ten A D." He said, breaking into exasperated sobs.

"If this is a joke, I'm sick of it already. You hear me!"

The last words were yelled out.

He felt like lashing out at something, and rolled to his side, coming face up to the ice column.

"I'm sick of this shit. None of this can be real. I'm not lost, I tell you. I'm..." His sobs shifted into uncertain laughs. "In Florida.... Maybe. Who am I kidding! I'm basically lost. And you're frozen in ice."

His laughter continued, knowing he was talking a person frozen in ice, before he got control of himself again.

"I'm nowhere, aren't I?" He asked the figure in the ice, placing one hand flat against the rough surface. "I might as well be locked in there with you. I don't know what's happened. I don't know why or where. When? Do I know when I am? I don't do I? Do you know, how long have you been in there? Maybe you could tell me. No one around here wants to tell me."

Dillon looked up at the column. It was catching the sunlight now, the figure inside a little clearer now as the light shone through it.

"I wish you could come out of that ice. You might be able to answer my questions. Hell, I think the people around here might be happy if you came out. What do you say?"

Dillon didn't really expect an answer. He was just trying to focus his attention on someone who might listen to his problems without thinking he was a raving lunatic. The figure in the column was as good as anything, probably better than the silent Sentinels, because they offered too much obliging assistance.

He spoke for a while longer, asking the frozen figure what it remembered of the world without getting any answers, before he realised his other hand was cold.

Dillon looked down and saw water puddling underneath him.

"Huh? If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were melting."

Dillon looked up again, looking harder at the surface this time, and saw the water running down it in a constant rivulet.

"You are!"

He stood up; looking at the top for the first time, seeing that the ice wasn't the imperfect column any more. Even as he watched, it continued to melt.

Wondering where the heat was coming from, he put a hand to the melted portion experimentally, but felt no source of heat. But when he went to touch the ice, it suddenly evaporated from under his hand, splashing down the column.

"What the?"

He stepped back, stumbling on one end of the map.

"Damn."

He picked it up, rescuing it from the water, which was running in all directions now. He watched it happen like it was time-lapse photography, as the ice melted more quickly.

The column was no longer looked like a column any more as the ice peeled rapidly from it now, almost falling off as it splashed down.

He heard a shout from nearby, but ignored it as the figure that had been trapped inside the ice was freed. A short figure, a young woman wearing only a rotten sack with holes for her head and arms, stood precariously perched on a stool that had also been within the ice, and only now revealed.

Her arms had been lifted, and now dropped to her sides as she swayed momentarily. Dillon saw her topple, and dropped the map as he stepped forward, catching her as she fell forward, easing her to the ground.

Turning her over, he checked to make sure she was breathing. He looked at her face, pushing wet hair aside, seeing familiar lines and features that he thought knew all too well.

"Patricia?" He said, not thinking of what nature had brought her here.

Her eyes fluttered, then opened, taking a moment to focus on him.

"Who... who are you?" She asked.

