

## **Chronolapse – First Mage**

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**Contents**

<b>CHRONOLAPSE – FIRST MAGE .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Contents .....	2
<b>PART 2 – FIRST MAGE .....</b>	<b>3</b>
Chapter 1 .....	3
Chapter 2 .....	5
Chapter 3 .....	8
Chapter 4 .....	10
Chapter 5 .....	13
Chapter 6 .....	15
Chapter 7 .....	17
Chapter 8 .....	20
Chapter 9 .....	22
Chapter 10.....	24
Chapter 11.....	26
Chapter 12.....	28
Chapter 13.....	30
Chapter 14.....	32
Chapter 15.....	34
Chapter 16.....	37
Chapter 17.....	39
Chapter 18.....	42
Chapter 19.....	46
Chapter 20.....	48
Chapter 21.....	51

## Part 2 – First Mage

### Chapter 1

“Lilith!” a loud boisterous voice called out.

Lilith was at the fence, one foot on the bottom of the hand-hewn rails, with the other leg over the top rail, her bare leg visible under the hiked up skirt, as she halted her ascent of the fence.

“Lilith, get back here now!” the voice called out again.

Lilith looked forlornly as her only friends moved on down the dirt track that ran beside the family land. They waved, without a word, knowing that she couldn't come with them to the small gathering of other kids their age, to dance and just meet other people.

She was 18 cycles old, close to 19, and still hadn't been given away yet.

Her friends, two girls and a shy local boy, all her age had planned to go to the dance for the several ten days they had known about it, arguing, pleading, begging, and in Lilith's case, climbing out her window to get there.

But it was all for nought, now that her Father had seen her. She lifted her leg back across the fence, careful not to let the dress get caught on the rough splinters, to stand upon the ground. She stood there a moment, watching as her friends disappeared the rise of the hill, before turning back to the house.

Lilith stepped lightly, so she wouldn't soil her only footwear as she made her way back though the grass.

Her father was standing on the weather stained wooden porch, out the back of the house. He spoke with a normal voice, without turning his head. “I don't know what she was thinking,” her father said to his wife at the doorway behind him.

“You know as well as I do Boleslav, that she's grown.” Urai said, leaning in the doorway, holding her enlarged stomach. It was visibly stretched, with the pregnancy of eight moons. She stroked a hand across her stomach also absentmindedly. “Just look at her, dressed in her best dress, her sandals and her hair tied back. She's at that age.”

“At the age to cause trouble and mischief,” Boleslav grumbled.

Urai decided to keep her comments until later as Lilith approached the porch, carefully avoiding the muddied trail at the foot of the stairs.

“Best get that dress off dear.” Urai said, as Lilith stepped through the doorway.

Boleslav looked out at the sky with the sun close to the horizon. There weren't any stars visible, yet something caught his eye.

“The Angel of doom,” he murmured.

Urai turned to look at the white streak that touched the edge of the sky, burning bright for a few seconds more until it disappeared.

Boleslav followed his wife inside, wondering what evils followed such a sign.

Lilith went to her end of the room, the small portion of the open house that she claimed as her own. She put one hand on the drape that covered part of her space as her father called after her.

“Best leave that where it is,” he said, forestalling her from trying to climb out the window again without them noticing.

Lilith furiously hit the drape aside to show that she wasn't going near the window, and then turned her back on her parents as she changed her clothes.

“Light's starting to fail.” Boleslav said, ignoring his daughter. “Time enough to feed the fowls.” He said, stepping outside again.

Urai looked upon her daughter after she changed, noticing the difference the clothes made. In her best dress, with her long hair tied back from her honey brown features, Urai had been impressed by how Lilith had looked. Lilith had her golden skin, but she had her Father's hair, long light brown, almost honey coloured, and her Father's piercing blue/green eyes.

She had black hair and much less of a figure, still she half wished she'd looked so good at her age. But now... but now, Lilith didn't look so pleasant. Oh, Urai could still see her beauty underneath the torn and dirt smudged clothes, and her hair loose about her face.

She wished Lilith could wear her good clothes all the time, in case some good looking and land rich man came past their holding, but it was nigh impossible to keep such clothes clean and intact with the work they had to do every day.

“Help me put supper together.” Urai asked her daughter, trying to bend over to get a heavy metal pan from a shelf.

“Let me get that for you Ma.” Lilith said, ducking in to get the pan for her.

“It's getting awfully difficult for me these days.” Urai said, watching Lilith as she automatically started preparing supper.

“I know Ma. You're quite large,” Lilith said, manoeuvring around her to gather some vegetables from hanging sacks.

Urai laughed, feeling her belly wobble under her hand. She stepped back out of the way, as Lilith expertly organised supper.

She wasn't surprised, having taught Lilith everything she could, her cooking, herbal remedies, sewing. She'd even encouraged Boleslav to teach her how to read and count in her head. Though he'd become discouraged when

Lilith had surpassed him, she wasn't too surprised after going to Boleslav's mother behind his back, to give her extra tuition.

Mikhalea was a strange woman. Urai thought she must be close to sixty cycles old now, and yet she didn't look it. That and both her parents and Boleslav father was dead was several cycles now. It was unusual but not strange.

She knew of several other people in the region who'd lived a little past sixty cycles. But none of them had been like Mikhalea as far as she knew.

Still, she was a kind woman, still very smart even at her age, living in a small house in the town of Sancoote, running a business of all things.

Urai shook her head, looking upon Lilith who'd built up the fire in the centre of the room, rearranging the stones with two sticks so she could cook upon the fire.

Urai felt she couldn't do much. She moved about, keeping out of Lilith's way, only ending up lighting the single working oil lantern they had.

By the time Boleslav came back in, it was dark outside and supper was ready. Urai helped Lilith to serve it up. Each of them ate in silence in the half dark room, preferring their own thoughts than those of anyone else's.

Lilith's thoughts were only on the dance she was missing out on, meeting men her own age that might be looking for a wife.

Her father though, was thinking about the dance also, but about different things. He was thinking about the recent rumours he'd heard in Sancoote when he'd taken in part of their crop of Lowgulas and Jam berries for sale last ten day. He knew Lilith was of age, and if anything, she deserved to go to the dance. But he was worried for her safety. Not from the men, for he knew she was quite capable of handling herself, but this other thing, this talk of groups of people wandering about and indiscriminate killing of town and farm folk alike.

He was worried about her, especially now that he'd heard of a recent incident not half a day's walk from Sancoote itself.

Urai's thoughts strayed back to Boleslav's Mother. Between her impending birth, Lilith's efforts to become her own woman, and her husband's strange actions, she suddenly had an inspiration.

Before they finished eating, she broached her idea. "How about, we send Lilith to Mikhalea's in town for a couple of ten day." She said, getting both their attentions.

"Mother's." Boleslav said, his wooden spoon halfway to his mouth. "I don't know," he said.

"Lilith could do with the space." Urai said, talking to Boleslav as if Lilith wasn't there, "and it's not as if we don't need her for that long. The change of scenery is what she needs Boleslav. She needs to meet people. She can't do that here. If she's working for Mikhalea, she'll be around people."

"But what about you Ma?" Lilith interrupted, "And the baby?"

Urai smiled at her daughter, "I'll be fine for at least two ten day, and it's not as if I can't work now. Besides, Mikhalea is getting old now. Who knows how much longer she'll be around. She'll be starting to think of that business of hers, and who'll end up with it when she dies. Maybe, if you pay her some attention now, she might think about you keeping it Lilith."

Boleslav was silent, thinking as he emptied his bowl. He sat silent and thinking for a minute, considering how safe Sancoote was. There were many people there, business, and of course, Mikhalea herself. His mother was very strong willed, and independent. She'd given birth to five children, including him self and she still moved like a Kylath. He did wonder how much longer it'd be until she died, but not anytime soon.

If anything, Boleslav realised that Lilith would be better off to spend some time with Mikhalea, away from the farm. Maybe Mikhalea would knock some sense into the child, as she'd done him when he was growing up.

He put his bowl down coming to a decision. He nodded his head once, meeting both Urai and Lilith eyes. "She should go to Mikhalea's, the sooner the better. Preferably tomorrow." He said.

Lilith's mouth dropped open, suddenly wondering what her parents were doing, sending her to live with her grandmother for two ten days, with her mother close to giving berth to what may be her last child. Lilith knew about the previous attempts to make a sister or a brother for her, which had all ended in death. It was the will of the land. Several still births, and two babies that had died whilst sleeping. That she was alive was evidence enough for her parents to continue trying. But she knew the problems, having attended all the births since she was old enough to understand.

She was worried, worried for her mother, worried that maybe this one might kill her at her age.

"Ma?" Lilith started to ask.

"It's settled then. You'll be going to Mikhalea's in the morning." Urai said, looking at her daughter's worried frown. "It's okay Lilith. It'll only be two ten days. You'll be back way before the baby arrives."

It did little to relieve Lilith's fears, but she could only hope that this baby would be patient.

After the dishes were cleaned away, the fire was built up again so it would keep the small house warm during the night.

Lilith used the outside toilet before changing into her sleep shirt, a worn and faded piece of material that was all she wore to her small bed. She lay awake in bed after the lamp had been extinguished, not tired at all but wondering if she wanted to go to town. She hadn't seen Mikhalea since her mother had become pregnant, but it had only been a visit. Did she want to live in a town? Or take over Mikhalea's business after she died?

She cherished the security of living out here, amongst the trees, the nearby river to bathe in twice every ten-day, and the space.

## Chapter 2

Lilith walked along the pockmarked dirt road in her bare feet, her eyes squinting as she looked about at the farms in the bright morning light.

She carried very little with her apart from the clothes she wore. Only an untanned leather sack filled with a few items and her only sandals.

The walk to Sancoote took a few of hours from her parent's stading, of which Lilith used to think about what she was going to do once there. Her Mother and Father had already given her instructions on what she needed to tell Mikhalea, but she had to find the small shop which Mikhalea also used as her home.

Lilith pulled a small round fruit from her sack, and ate it as she walked along, seeing other families up and tending the morning chores. When some of the neighbours recognised her and waved their hands she waved back smiling.

The town itself was visible for some distance, with spiralling columns of smoke rising from the multitude of lit fires.

Lilith couldn't believe the amount of activity around Sancoote, people and horses moving too and fro, even small herds of cattle that were herded through the streets of town. She found it was a busy and bustling place, that she had to stick to the side of the roadway so she wouldn't get run over by something.

She'd been here before, but the sight and smells still amazed her. The clothes that town's people wore looked bright, with whites and colours together. She wandered through the narrow side streets trying to remember her parent's instructions.

She went down one street, amid a bustle of people moving around a street vendor looking for her grandmother's shop. She felt something trip her leg, sending her tumbling to the well-trampled ground amongst several legs.

"Look, its a farmer's girl here in town," a young voice said, drawing out the word town as if those listening had difficulty understanding.

There was mock laughter from the group standing around her.

"The farmer's girl is trying to lick my feet clean," another said, laughing as he shoved a sandaled foot in her face.

Lilith looked at the foot, and then slowly tipped her head sideways to look at her protagonists above her.

Four boys stood above her, each of them not much more than 3 cycles younger than her, but wearing fine white clothes and colourful sashes about their waists.

"That face looks a bit clean to me." One said, "Maybe it need a bit more dirt on it."

Lilith felt a foot pressed against the back of her neck, forcing her head down to the dirt. She didn't understand why these boys were picking on her, or why in particular they wanted to cause her discomfort, but she had no intention of getting herself any more dirty before meeting Mikhalea.

She'd stopped herself from falling into the dirt face first putting her hands out. Now Lilith shifted her arms, balancing herself so she didn't descend any further to the ground, but the foot kept pressing against her as the boy put more and more weight on her neck.

There was a grunt of effort as one of the other boys stepped straight up on her back, trying to force her down.

"Come on you bitch, eat the dirt!" She heard one call, as she struggled to keep herself from collapsing.

Lilith turned her head, as she felt the blow against her arm as one boy kicked at her straightened arm, to force her down. She turned her elbow as the second blow came again, barely stopping her arm from collapsing outright.

"Go down, damn it!" The boy almost yelled as he kicked her again.

She couldn't keep the arm in place, as she tipped sideways, sending the two boys on her back toppling into each other.

As she fell, she rolled on her back so she didn't get too dirty. There was a loud screeching and hollering sound, as she saw a figure pass over her waving something at the four boys.

"Get away from her you vermin!" The figure called, waving a broom as it chased the boys away.

The figure came back to Lilith, and stood over her. "Are you okay?" The figure asked, offering a hand to her.

Lilith took it, levering herself back to her feet, finding the four boys had disappeared all together.

"Those boys won't be back if they know better." Lilith's saviour said.

She turned to look at the person, finding a slightly wrinkled pale face smiling back at her.

"I didn't really expect my children in town, least of all my favourite granddaughter," Mikhalea said.

"It's nice to see you too Grandma," Lilith said, smiling back.

Lilith noted that she looked very clean and tidy, wearing a long embroidered dress with her long blonde hair tied up in hanging curls.

Mikhalea leaned over, and started brushing the dirt off Lilith's back with her free hand. "So what brings you to my small road. Your Father isn't hiding around the corner I hope."

"No, he isn't." Lilith explained, wiping her hands off. "They thought it best that I spend some time with you in town. Ma's getting on 8 moons now, and they thought some time away from home, amongst some other people might be good for me. But they thought it best, that I do it under some supervision."

"Ah, they want you to meet some boys, eh?" Mikhalea said, dusting the last dirt off Lilith's back, before leaning down to pick up her bag.

She handed it to Lilith. "Feels a little light for staying away from home."

"It contains all my clothes." Lilith said. "And my only sandals."

"I can see that," Mikhalea said, focusing her eyes on Lilith's dirty feet. "I guess I'll have to fix you up with something."

"There's no need Grandma. I'll only be here two ten days."

"Two ten days!" The old woman said in mock surprise, "All the more reason to get you something permanent to wear on your feet. But first, let's go back to my place." She said, directing Lilith almost to the end of the street, to a narrow shop front.

"First of all, wipe those horrid feet on that mat there," Mikhalea said direction Lilith. "Yes that one. Wipe 'em good. If you're going to stay with me, you might as well learn one thing whilst you're here, and that's how to stay clean."

Lilith wondered what she was talking about. She'd taken a wash three days ago in the river down near her home.

Mikhalea led her into the shop once she was satisfied that Lilith's feet were as clean as she could get without wearing the skin off. Inside Lilith was struck by the intensity of dozens of perfumes.

"What... is that?" She asked, wrinkling her nose trying to get a breath of fresh air.

"That my dear is the clean smell of soap. Hundreds of perfumed blocks of soap." Mikhalea looked at Lilith's distorted face. "There's no need to make a face like that. You look like you've smelled a stinker up close. Those herbs will help clear the nose, and when I've finished with you, you'll look clean too."

Lilith felt more than a little disappointed, especially after Mikhalea lead her through the rest of the soap making business, showing her how she boiled down animals fats in large kettles, mixing it in foul smelling concoctions to be salted and then separated by hand, before it was boiled again.

The whole process looked messy and a lot of hot work, and that was before it was finally mixed in with the oil essences of the herbs.

Upstairs, above the shop and away from the soap making, Lilith was shown where she would be sleeping.

"It's not big," Mikhalea admitted, "But you'll have it all to yourself. My room's..."

Lilith didn't hear the rest of what Mikhalea said, as she looked about the almost bare room. All she was thinking, was the room was all hers.

"Now don't argue with your Grandmother. I want you in that tub, and clean by the time I get back." Mikhalea said, leaving Lilith standing naked before the tub as she took her clothes away to be washed.

Mikhalea shook her head. The child was dirty, head to foot, and she looked to be dirty before those brats caught up with her out in the street. And the clothes! She held the single dress at arms length between two fingers, and wondered if it was even worth washing.

*Maybe they'll fall apart when I wash them, and then maybe I can get rid of them,* she thought to herself cheerfully.

She threw the clothes with Lilith's few other clothes into a big basin filled with the hot water she always had on hand from making soap. She threw in some of the powered soap that was always left over, and watched as the water became polluted with the dirt and grime from the clothes.

She worked at each of the items, scrubbing it furiously against a rough wooden board, slowing working stains out of the clothes.

The copper bell interrupted her a few times as she worked on Lilith's clothes, forcing her to break away to serve customers who'd come to purchase her soap.

Twice they were some of the town's people who regularly came to purchase her scented soaps, but the third time there was a new face at her counter, someone she hadn't seen in town before. The clothes also bespoke something else, the pleated tunic and dyed leather armour of the Telseca Guard.

"May I help you with something?" Mikhalea asked politely, putting on her most congenial smile to the armed man.

"I heard you have the best smelling soaps in the area." The man said in a pleasantly charming voice, allowing Mikhalea to inwardly sigh.

"Yes, I use the best oils, and the soaps are reputed to be the only ones that don't leave the taste of salt." She told the Guard, coming around the bench as he showed interest in several of the barrels of scented soap.

She went through each barrel, explaining each type of soap as she went, what its scent was and what the oils were supposed to do, how they revitalised the skin, softened old injuries, and cleared up acne.

Over her own voice, Mikhalea heard Lilith calling her name, but ignored her for the moment as she concentrated on the Guard.

"Are you looking to buy soap for a girl, or for yourself?" She asked.

"For a girl." He admitted quietly with a cough.

"Ah, so then maybe you'd consider Jasmine. It's a pure white soap as you can see," she said holding one up. "Very smooth on the skin and the scent is said to please any girl."

"Mikhalea!"

She turned at the suddenly loud voice, to see Lilith's wet form push through the beads that covered the doorway to the back of the shop.

"It seems to have drawn this one from her bath." The Guard said, grinning.

Lilith ducked back out of view, leaving Mikhalea with the Guard.

"If all your soaps are that effective, then I think I'll take three," the Guard said, taking the one from Mikhalea and picking up two more. "One for my girlfriend, and some extra for myself." He said smiling.

She could only stare blank faced as the Guard paid for the soap with silver and left. She jingled the coins in her hand as she stepped into the back, finding Lilith hiding around the corner, dripping water all over the stone floor.

"He's gone?" Lilith queried meekly.

"Yes he's gone," She replied in an admonishing tone. "But not before buying extra soap. You haven't started working for me yet, and already your earning you keep." She added in a softened voice, jingling the coins.

"You didn't leave me any clothes." Lilith said, stating the obvious.

"I know. But you should have used the towel I left you. You're leaving water all of the floor." She said, depositing the coins in a cup, before walking back to where the tub was.

"I didn't see it." Lilith said, following her back.

Mikhalea found the towel on the floor, where it had fallen off the table. She handed it to Lilith. "Dry yourself off, and I'll find you some clothes." She said heading out of the room. She stopped for a moment before she was out of sight, "Don't leave this room. I don't want you giving the neighbours the wrong idea about what sort of business I run."

Lilith stayed where she was told, drying herself off with the towel, to end up standing around waiting for Mikhalea to return.

She found herself looking at her clean skin, seeing clean fingernails for perhaps the first time in a long time, and found it vaguely satisfying. She found her skin as soft from water immersion, almost to the point of wrinkling, but not quite.

When Mikhalea returned, she found Lilith sitting on the floor, examining her knees.

"Here, these should do you for the moment." She said, handing a pair of leather vest and breaches to Lilith as she stood up. "They used to be my clothes, but they should fit you alright."

Lilith pulled the vest and breaches, securing the laces carefully.

"Much better." Mikhalea said, walking about her, checking how clean her hair was. "The only thing missing are these."

"But they're my only sandals!" Lilith said.

"Hush. Put them on. I'll get you some better ones for wearing out."

Mikhalea held out the sandals, until she took them, tying them onto her feet.

"Now. I think it's time I teach you some of the business."

### Chapter 3

Mikhalea taught her the front end of the business first; making sure Lilith understood the basic soap fragrances, how they were priced and how to talk customers into buying more than they were interested in.

It took a day, considering she already knew how to count money, add, subtract, multiply and divide. Interacting with the customers came easily too, remembering what Mikhalea had told her about how to handle customers depending on their attitudes, if they were just the type who was looking, the customer that was in a hurry, the one who knew exactly what they wanted, or they one who wandered in by accident.

She handled each and every one during the course of a few days, before Mikhalea started her into the serious part of soap making.

"It all looks like very hard work." Lilith said, over her supper one night.

Mikhalea had made it that evening, leaving Lilith to continue working at the kettles as it began to darken. She'd cooked some mutton together with some mixed vegetables, adding a few herbs from her private store.

"You'll get used to it. It not as if it's much more difficult than ploughing and harvesting."

Lilith savoured the taste of the stew before replying. "It's not the lifting, it's the heat from the kettles."

"Ah yes. They do have to be kept burning all the time. It is possible though to put the heat out of your mind, and make believe that it's only as hot as water fresh from the well."

Lilith looked at her stew, wondering what Mikhalea was talking about. She put it out of her head as a whimsical notion.

She continued working hard the during the ten day, learning all she could from her Grandmother about business, communicating with the people of Sancoote including acquiring barrels of waste fat from the local abattoir and pure hardwood ash.

Lilith was carrying a small barrel of fat, when a crowd of people rushed down the main road, yelling and screaming. She was forced to step to the side of the road as men and women alike ran in front of a party of mounted Guards, escorting what appeared to be a wooden cage on the back of a cart.

Many people came out of their homes and businesses to look at the spectacle, wondering as she did, what was happening. Standing up on her barrel, she caught a glimpse of a man inside the cage. He looked like a caged animal, carrying a fearful look upon his face.

The crowd of people swirled ahead of the horses heading towards the residence of Sancoote's Council Chief. When crowd had dissipated enough, Lilith picked up her barrel, and returned to Mikhalea's soap shop.

Mikhalea looked up when Lilith came in the shop. "I hope you got that really cheap. You were out so long, you must have haggled the price right down."

"There was a crowd of people following some Guards on horseback down the road," Lilith said, rolling the small barrel carefully off her shoulder onto the counter.

Mikhalea looked at Lilith with sudden interest, "And what were they doing, these Guards?"

Lilith lowered the barrel to the floor, turning it about towards the doorway.

"They seemed to be taking some man somewhere." She said, rolling the barrel through the beads. "Oh, and some people in the crowd were shouting something about an evil master and the apocalypse," Lilith's voice echoed back.

Mikhalea looked through the doorway where Lilith had just gone, a stricken look appearing on her face at the words. She thought quickly, as she went after Lilith.

She found her working at opening the barrel with a hatchet.

"I just remembered I have to get something, so you'll have to look after the shop by yourself for a while."

"Okay." Lilith said, concentrating on opening the barrel without making a mess.

Quickly Mikhalea ducked out the door, grabbing her shawl as she went. She had to guess where the Guards had gone, moving as fast as her old body would take her.

She wasn't young any more, and living a hard life as she'd chosen had taken its toll, but she wasn't a weak old lady by far. She surprised a few people nearly knocking them down as she sprinted a short distance down the street.

She slowed to walk several times finding herself short of breath, but moving on to eventually catch up with the Guards stationed outside of the Council Chief's house.

There was a crowd of people was there, but they weren't as vocal as they were listening to the conversation between the Council Chief dressed in his toga and the Guard in their armour. There were some other people in the crowd, which Mikhalea only noticed when she got closer.

"So what do you want me to do about it, hmm?" The Chief asked, hands on hips.

"We want a Trial of possession!" A deep voice boomed from the crowd.

The people seemed to part as a figure stepped forward into everyone's view, dressed like a commoner in ill fitting clothes and a belt about his waist to keep his long legged pants up.

The one thing that marked him any differently was the staff he held in his right hand. It was a long thin piece of wood, with a carved skull upon the top, a carved human skull.

Mikhalea heard a few breaths drawn inwardly at the sight of the man, one of the Order of the Apocalypse.

"This man is from the Sancoote area," The man said directing his staff with the skull at the figure in the cage. "And by law you have to submit him to a Trial of possession."

There was whispering between some of the crowd, but Mikhalea ignored it trying to concentrate on the conversation out in front.

"Isn't that a bit harsh?" Said the Chief, looking a bit unsettled at the suggestion.

"It's the law, and can be requested with due evidence." The man said, still standing his ground.

"Then where is this evidence?"

Two Guards hustled a woman forward from the crowd, seeming more to intimidate her than protect her from harm.

"Tell the Council Chief what you saw," the man asked of the woman in a simple tone, undemanding and empty of any emotion.

"I was..." The woman stammered. "I was only walking by, and in the dark... it was dark you see... and I saw him out in the field, with a glow around him," the woman finally finished.

"She probably saw a flame." The Chief said, looking to the man. "A fire on the ground."

"N... no sir." The woman said, by herself. "It... it followed him around. There was a light, but... but no fire."

The Council Chief looked between the man and the woman, as if weighing up everything.

"That should be enough," the man said.

"It is." The Chief replied almost with regret. Out loud to the Guards he said, "The prisoner is to be submitted to a Trial of possession. Upon sign of guilt, he is to be burnt at the stake."

There was loud murmuring now from the crowd. Someone called out the man an evil harbinger. It was all that was required, as the rest of the crowd joined in, hurling abuse and dung from the ground at the caged figure.

Mikhalea departed as quietly as she could, so she wasn't noticed by anyone, in particular the man with the staff. Several times on the way back to the shop, she looked behind her just to make sure she wasn't been followed.

She knew it wasn't good, having someone from the Apocalypse Order in town. They tended to act like a natural magnet, pointed out North almost intuitively.

She thought about Lilith suddenly, wondering why her parents had sent her to her now of all times. It was dangerous for her to be here. But then, maybe it was dangerous to be anywhere near Sancoote at the moment. News was sure to travel fast about the Trial, and then everyone would be looking for unnatural phenomena.

She could only think that it might be best for Lilith to stay with her in town then. The best place to hide is usually right under the noses of those looking for you.

Following the news of the Trial didn't take much effort, as everyone was talking about it, especially those who came in looking for soap. Mikhalea couldn't stop Lilith from finding out and she knew she had to worry, if not for Lilith's sake then for her own.

"They had him all night in stocks. Apparently the Guard had to take turns during the night beating him with whips." One customer said to the wide-eyed Lilith.

"They say he's the devil's spawn. That he's here to lead us all back to another Apocalypse," another told Lilith.

Though she hung on every word about this person under trial, Lilith remembered to sell the customers soap, sometimes even talking one into buying more than they wanted.

Mikhalea worried. She worried every day they held the man in trial, torturing him night and day, to show his powers.

## Chapter 4

It was after the second night that word spread around town like wildfire that a stake was been erected out in front of town, along with piles of kindling.

Mikhalea knew that somehow they'd done it. Somehow the Guards must have gotten him to show his powers during the night. It was literally over for the man.

She knew when the time came, as the town seemed to quieten as most people went to watch the execution. Mikhalea didn't want to go, but she knew that she must. She had to at least to appear in agreement with the decision of the trial. But she didn't want Lilith coming, and told her so.

"I'm going to watch them burn that man," she said trying to act righteous. "So I want you to look after the shop."

Lilith frowned. "But everyone else will be there! Who's going to buy soap if they're all there?"

She had to thin fast to come up with a reason. "Some of the kettles will need tending, and maybe you can chop some more wood."

"I've checked them already. There's only one on at the moment, and it'll be fine by itself. And I did some wood yesterday."

It was starting to sound like she was arguing that Lilith stay. She didn't want to come off like that, so finally she relented.

"Okay. Come if you must. Most of the town and country will be there. Maybe you'll meet some boys," she added with regret.

That was all the encouragement Lilith needed. She disappeared quickly upstairs, changing out of her everyday work clothes into something more presentable, and even brushed her hair.

Mikhalea waited for her at the front door as she came through the shop wearing her only dress. It was a short undyed skirt with a single blue strap around her waist.

"You look much better," Mikhalea said, thinking that Lilith wouldn't be paying much attention to the execution if she were looking for boys.

She pulled the wooden door shut behind them; to walk through the almost empty streets with a half excited Lilith beside her.

Just a short distance outside the west entrance to town, Telseca Guards were already carrying the man from a cart towards the waiting pyre when they arrived. He'd been stripped of all his previous clothes, as was wearing only a coarse sack with open slashes across the front and back.

There was a huge gathering of people surrounding the site a little off the roadway, but most of them stood some distance back, allowing room for everyone to get a view.

Mikhalea turned about to find that Lilith had already disappeared within the crowd. She could only hope that she didn't get into any trouble.

The Guards carried the limp form of the man towards the awaiting pyre. His face looked battered and bruised, with fresh welling scars all across his body where the Guards had tortured him non stop.

Lilith moved about the crowd, only half glimpsing the man been tied to the stake. She was on her own hunt of sorts, prowling for men.

The crowd had been talking as the man was secured, but they quietened down when two figures emerged on one side, heading towards the pyre.

The Council Chief and the man carrying the staff of the Order of the Apocalypse stopped just short of the pyre, both of them looking up towards the limp figure.

There were a few words said between the two before the man with the Order spoke up.

"As decreed by the laws of this realm, you have been found guilty of supporting the acts of the Apocalypse, with your sentence to be carried out immediately."

The Council Chief waved a hand, and a Guard came forward with a lit torch. He walked around the pyre, touching it at spots where oil soaked rags had been left, lighting the edges of the pyre quickly.

The three of them stood back as the fire moved through the wood, working its way up to the taller sticks around the man in the centre. The fire grew as everyone watched, evolving into an inferno that greedily wrapped around the man burning him alive.

A few screams escaped the mouth of the man, before the fire took him completely.

The crowd stood around for a lot longer than expected, watching intently until the body of the man on the stake crumbled from view into the fire.

Mikhalea stood around, watching as people started to disperse, looking for Lilith. She spent several minutes looking, until she found her off to one side, talking to someone, a man of all people.

She thought it ironic that Lilith would find someone at an execution. It wasn't her place to criticise what her Grandchild did, but thought there were better places and better times for such things.

Lilith was standing with her feet together, twisting her body to and fro with her hands clasped behind her as the young man talked to her.

He'd been standing within the crowd, very much to himself when she walked through, tall with not so short brown hair, serious eyes that seemed to take everything in, and a voice that could drown a person in joy if he could sing. She'd spotted him about the same time as he'd spotted her. She'd given him a demure smile, which he'd appreciatively returned, before asking her if she was looking for someone.

It hadn't taken much effort on her part, finding out that Segen worked in his uncle's beehives just out of Sancoote, collecting honey and wax. It was a living he professed wasn't as dangerous as most people thought, as the bees were very docile most of the time.

Lilith heard Mikhalea call her name. She turned to see Mikhalea approaching out of the corner of her eye.

"I think my Grandma is coming," said Lilith, scuffing her sandals together.

"Maybe I'll see you again," Segen said leaning forward. He touched her chin lightly, as he planted a short kiss on her cheek.

She drew a breath in, thinking she was very lucky. "I'd like that."

Segen smiled, and moved off into the dispersing crowd before Mikhalea reached Lilith's side.

"I think I like him," she told Mikhalea as they started back to the shop together.

"But does he like you?" Mikhalea asked.

"He's got beautiful eyes," said Lilith not listening.

Mikhalea tried again. "Your serious about him, aren't you?"

"Do you believe in love at first sight?" Said Lilith, unaware of any other conversation.

Mikhalea realised she couldn't distract Lilith at all; she could only answer her questions.

"All things are possible darling. Even love at first sight."

Mikhalea was aware of the amount of time Lilith was spending with the boy, and truly hoped that it was real affection between the two. Her Granddaughter continued working with her at the soap shop most of the time, but when there was a moment, Lilith wasn't to be seen. She was off in an instant to see Segen.

She wondered if this sort of thing would have driven Lilith's parents wild, but remembered her own children at Lilith's age. There was a sense of commonality between them that said something about finding love in strange places.

With the business doing well with Lilith's help, between spending time with Segen, Mikhalea had time enough that she could spend for herself. She went shopping on a whim of all things, with a sudden feeling of just wanting to buy something.

She thought it was a good idea to be out, and maybe she'll find those new sandals she'd promised Lilith.

She was looking at new sandals when it happened. Yelling and screaming broke out down the street. Several people rushed by as screams continued.

It was when a troop of Guards jogged past in the opposite direction, that her curiosity was piqued.

She left the sandals, to watch the commotion like many other people.

The Guards entered a building down the street in formal arrangement.

The screams lessened shortly, but the Guards came out again, taking with them an old man under guard. He walked behind one Guard, between two more Guards with his hands bound by a length of rope, as a second set of Guards following close behind with their pole arms held forward in case the man should try to make a break for it.

The sixth Guard came last, helping an old woman along who was crying heavily on the Guard's arm as she was led after the others.

Mikhalea had a strange sensation, like a bad premonition. She didn't want to follow this group, but she had a bad feeling down in the pit of her stomach. She wasn't the only one to follow either. A small crowd of people followed, that seemed to grow in size as it went, as if word were been spread ahead.

The Guards lead the man and woman with the crowd along street to the Council Chief's house, as like last time.

Amidst the noisy crowd, the Chief came out, demanding to know what was going on.

The feeling in Mikhalea's stomach seemed to drop into a bottomless pit when the man from the Apocalypse Order appeared out of the crowd. He wasn't puffing, but there was some perspiration under his arms indication that he'd come running as soon as he'd gotten word.

"Another has been discovered, with the dark influence upon him." The man said, direction his staff towards the old man been held by the Guards.

"I suppose we are to have another trial?" The Chief asked.

The man nodded.

"Evidence!" The chief called.

The Guard led the old woman forward, right up to the Chief. She still had tears in her eyes, but she spoke calmly.

"He did it right in front of me sir. First there was nothing in his hands, and then there was a fire right in his hand. He lit the fire in our hearth he did with it."

There was murmuring from the gathered crowd.

The chief took a breath, as he opened his mouth, "The prisoner is to be submitted to a Trial..."

"NO!" There was a yell from the old man, interrupting the Chief. "No trial! I can't go to trial."

Mikhalea saw him turn his head about, as if searching the crowd. She thought that perhaps he was searching for others of his kind, perhaps even looking for her. She wanted to shy away, but she knew that would only draw attention to her.

The old man turned back to the Chief and the man with the staff. "I can't go I tell you."

He held his hands forward with his wrists still tied and his arms still gripped by two Guards. Right there, right in the middle of the crowd of onlookers, he created a burning flame out of thin air in his cupped hands.

There was a sharp outcry, yelled words of evil, and the new apocalypse. Mikhalea was jostled forward as the crowd unexpectedly converged upon the Guards with loud yells.

She heard screams from several directions; before the crowd seemed to slow, then start to disperse. She had no idea what had happened until the centre cleared, leaving two of the Guards to stand up from the ground and stare at the bloodied form of the old man on the ground with a knife lying beside him covered in blood.

The old woman burst into fresh sobs, seeing what was left of her own husband, lying dead upon the ground. She'd been frightened like the rest of the frenzied mob that had just killed him.

Mikhalea turned from the sight, hoping that was the last. The killing had put her out of her shopping mood, as she headed back to the soap shop.

She thought she understood the actions of the man now. She had known the old man, perhaps not personally, but she had known him. He was older than what he made out, perhaps nearing the end of his life. He must have known it. The Trial would have been hard on him, more so because he was older. That was why he had looked at the surrounding crowd. Not looking for her, or for rescue, but gauging the mob, looking to see if they were angry enough to kill him before been tortured and burnt alive.

It was strange to think that a man would give his life like that, so he wouldn't put up with the pain at the end. And it was his wife of all people, his wife that had brought him here. A wife that after long years had submitted him to this agony that she would suffer alone now.

Lilith was almost lost in her attention to Segen that she didn't even pay attention to the news of the second killing. It was hardly worth the mention in her presence. Only when Mikhalea finally bought the sandals that she'd promised a few days later was she excited about anything other than Segen.

"They're beautiful Grandma!" Lilith said, kissing her on the cheek.

Lilith looked at her new sandals, made from the tough hide of a buffalo. The leather had been specially treated, giving it a green colour that shone in the sunlight.

"And to think you're going home in four days," Mikhalea said.

"Ma will be ready to have her baby soon," said Lilith, her eyes bright with happiness. "But I don't want to leave Segen."

"Your mother will need you at home for when the baby comes. She needs all the help she can get until she's well enough again."

"I know, I just wish I could..."

"Stay with Segen," Mikhalea finished, happy that Lilith was happy. "When your mother is better, maybe you can be with Segen and wed him."

Lilith smiled, almost dancing with joy with the sandals.

"I'll wear these tomorrow when I see Segen again," Lilith said.

## Chapter 5

Lilith met Segen near noon at the edge of town, close to his uncle's hive. She had her new sandals on to show him, along with the dress she'd worn when they'd met.

He'd cleaned up also, wearing an open vest and shorts.

"I need to speak to you about something," Lilith said, as she walked slowly back into town.

"Same here," Segen admitted. "But first, I want to show you something."

Segen took her hand, and without word, led her to a stall, which had freshly cooked meat, hanging ready to eat.

Segen indicated two to the man, who handed over two of the steaming sticks when Segen handed over his money.

Lilith blew on her meat, to cool it before taking a bite.

"Uncle's been experimenting at cooking meat in honey. I hope you like it."

She bit lightly into the meat at the end, pulling it into her mouth. The basted honey and other herbs flowed into her mouth in an avalanche of sweet taste.

"Umm," She echoed through her nose as she chewed on the meat.

"It's beautiful," she said once she emptied her mouth.

"I thought you'd like it."

They continued walking slowly together, eating the food.

"I've been meaning to tell you," Lilith said, "That I have to go back to my parents home in a few days."

Segen looked dismayed so Lilith tried to calm his concerns, "Its only until my Ma has had her last child, and then... and then I'll be free from duty. If you'll take me, that is. My heart will be yours."

"I'd pledge my heart to you," Segen said moving close to draw the binding kiss from her lips.

They drew back only far enough to get their breaths. Lilith touched his face lightly with her fingertips, feeling where he had some old marks from bee stings.

He was smiling back at her in happiness, when she saw something under her fingertips. Almost as she'd been bitten, she jerked her hand back from his face and stood staring at his face.

"What's wrong?" He asked concerned.

"I don't know," she said, not seeing anything on his face now.

He looked down at her hand, which she still held up, and saw little filaments of bright blue light leaping between her fingers like miniature lightning.

"Y... your hand." Segen said, backing away from Lilith.

She looked down at her hand, and saw the light jump and pulse by itself in a dancing display across her hand. She swallowed as she realised what it meant, and looked up to where Segen stood, watching her with his eyes full of fear.

When he saw her looking at him, he almost turned and ran. Instead he lifted his hand and pointed at her, "She's one of them. She's brought the light of the apocalypse in her hands!"

Her heart almost tore itself from her chest on hearing those words, as her eyes filled with tears. She'd been with Segen for a ten day, and felt it in her bones that he was right for her. But this tore out her heart as if he'd done it literally.

The food dropped from her hand forgotten as she stood there crying until the Telseca Guards came for her. She didn't resist when they bound her hands together carefully, and lead her down the street towards the Council Chief amongst a gathering crowd of people. Her mind was repeating the images of the sparkling light as she'd glimpsed it under her hands upon Segen's face. She wondered if perhaps he'd given it to her, that he'd somehow infected her with something dark and evil.

The Guards jerked her arm roughly, bringing her to a halt. Around her had gathered many people, watching on as they thought someone else was been brought in for a Trial of Possession.

"Where is the man from the Order?" The Chief called out to the group, wondering where the man who'd been closely involved with the last two Trials had disappeared.

Some people within the crowd looked about, searching for the figure but there was no answer to the Chief's question.

"I suppose this is for another Trial for Possession?" He asked of the Guards.

Segen stepped forward by himself unafraid of the attention.

"Yes. She had the devils light in her hands," he said. "It jumped between her fingers like it wanted to jump out at me."

"A light," the Chief murmured, thinking that the last two had also had mysterious lights. He looked upon Lilith, wondering how a girl her age would create such a light.

Though her wrists were bound, she opened her hands to full view of the Chief and some of the crowd, but there was no light there now.

The Chief didn't like this. A young girl, but a witness had spoken. It was his obligation. "Then there must be a Trial of possession," he called. "Submit the girl to a Trial..."

"Wait!"

The Chief halted, and looked at Lilith who hadn't moved.

"I said, wait!" A loud voice boomed from the parting crowd. The man from the Order of the Apocalypse strode forth, pushing one slow person aside with the skull on his staff.

The Chief stood patiently as the man came forth, looking at Lilith momentarily as he passed her.

"You were calling for a Trial of Possession?" He asked of the Chief.

"I was about to."

"Then I must ask you to relinquish her to us," the man said. "The Order has come across something recently in its quests, which may be more helpful in a Trial of Possession than the usual torture. We had hoped to have used it on the last man that was brought forward, but he, a' hem." The man looked about at the quiet crowd, wondering this they were about to launch themselves upon the bound girl. "Perjured himself before I could suggest it," he finished.

"You would take her from Sancoote?" The Chief asked.

"Only to the Order's dwelling a day's ride east of here."

"How would she be killed?"

"That is in the nature of what we have found. When an evil one uses their powers in its presence, it reflects their power, focusing it back upon themselves. Their power becomes their own death."

The Chief looked about at the crowd with his eyes, until they settled upon the girl held by two Guards. He didn't like this at all, but it was a chance to get this talk about evil out of Sancoote.

"Take her. Take her away from here and perform your Trial of Possession. But if she is found innocent, then you must return her body to us intact, so that her parents may bury her."

"It will be done." The man replied, bowing his head. He turned towards the Guards. "Bring her to the stockade, and we'll prepare for our journey."

The Guards turned about, and marched her through the crowd. There were a few boos and hisses, but more confusion about her been taken away.

Lilith didn't understand it herself, why the man with the staff wanted to take her away. All of it was confusing.

Down the street the Guards took her, and into the small courtyard used as a stockade. She stood there between two of the Guards, as other hitched horses to a cart that held a wooden cage. As it was been readied, another guard came forward with a sack and a knife.

She watched as he cut into the sack, opening extra holes in the corse material with the blade. He came forward when he was finished, slinging it over a shoulder as her advanced with the knife drawn.

She was frightened then, and tried to pull away but the Guards held her arms firmly as the knife wielding Guard cut into her dress, dragging the blade down her favourite dress as he sliced it off her body.

It came off in strips, dropping about her feet in a pile to leave her naked to the air.

Tucking the blade into his belt, then Guard took the sack from his shoulder and pulled it over her head down to her elbows. She couldn't see anything as they loosened the ropes on her wrists, freeing her hands.

"Pull your hands through," one of the Guards ordered her.

She tucked her hands inside the large sack, and pushed her hands through the two side holes. The sack came down tight over her head until the Guards pulled it down, popping her head through the last hole.

"You won't be needing these either." The Guard said, jerking the new sandals off her feet and tossing them aside.

A rope was bound around her wrists again, securing her hands before she was taken towards the open cage on the cart.

Roughly the two Guards pushed her up, dropping her into the light straw face first. Their hands pushed her legs inside before securing the cage shut.

The man of the Order appeared on horseback, pulling his horse alongside the cart. The staff he carried was secured across the saddle.

"We'll not wait for morning, and leave now. The sooner we arrive at the Hall, the better for everyone."

Two Guards appeared on the front of the cart, and took control of the reins as two more followed up the rear on horseback.

It was quickly done, as the group moved out of the stockade and through the town streets, headed for the eastern entrance.

Some people had gathered along the streets, as she passed they threw old rotten fruit and animal droppings from the street. Much of it hit the cage, but it splashed across her leaving a reeking smell.

Amidst the catcalls and abuse, Lilith heard someone calling her name. She looked around, until she found Mikhalea chasing after the cart.

Lilith knew she was old now, but she kept up her pace, running around the crowd of people trying to catch up. She thought her grandmother would have caught up too, but when they passed the entrance, the crowd disappeared and the horses broke into a fast trot, leaving Mikhalea behind.

Lilith gripped the wooden struts with her hands as she watched her grandmother stumble to a halt, and collapse to the road on her knees just beyond the entrance.

Tears came to Lilith's eyes as her grandmother disappeared from view around a bend of trees.

## Chapter 6

Lilith lay in the back of the cart sobbing uncontrollably, with her knees drawn up under the coarse material of the sack to keep her body warm, as the air got chilly.

The group ignored her as they found a campsite along the road soon after dusk, setting camp up for the night.

The smell of cooking food made her stomach rumble, so she turned about within the cage, to look at the burning fire.

Holding her sobs back, Lilith managed to work her voice, "Could I have some food?"

Neither the Guards nor the man from the Order seemed to hear her, so she tried again a little louder. "Could I have some food, please?"

"The devil spawn wants some food." One of the Guards said as if the others didn't hear.

"Should we feed her?" Another asked.

The man from the Order turned his head towards Lilith, his face unseen in the shadows from the fire. "Not tonight. We don't want her building up her powers too soon. But she should have some water."

One of the Guards looked at the others before he was nominated without word to take the water over. He took a sealed bladder of water over to her cage, uncorking the mouth.

Lilith reached her hands through the cage, having them stop at the rope.

"Hey, no hands!" The Guard called, stepping back from her. "Hands down or no water."

Lilith was afraid she'd get nothing, so she put her hands down, waiting for the Guard.

He stepped forward with the bladder, and pushed the mouth through above her head, tipping it up to pour the water into her cage.

Lilith leaned over awkwardly keeping her hands down, to drink the water as it splashed over her face. She got several mouthfuls before the Guard pulled the water back, corking the bladder as he returned to the fire without a word.

Somehow she knew she wasn't going to get anything else, at least tonight so she reluctantly settled herself in the thin layer of straw, aware of the rotten stench covering her.

She slept fitfully, sometimes not at all, just lying awake listening to the sounds of the night animals.

The Guards rose at dawn, breaking camp without much fuss, travelling east into the morning sun.

Lilith only got water twice more before one of the mounted Guards yelled that he'd sighted the Hall. She dragged herself up from the bottom of the cart, looking between the Guards in front of her at the Hall ahead.

The Hall wasn't much to see. A long wooden structure that stood high above the ground, surrounded by several other buildings in a clearing that had a tall wooden wall running all the way around it, as if separating it physically from the natural surrounds. Stones covered most of the ground within the wall, leaving no soil or grass visible.

The hoofs of the horses clattered over the stones as the cart was led inside the fort like wall and around the large yard, coming to a halt a short distance from the large doors on the front of the hall.

Lilith watched as the man dismounted, and greeted others who came out of buildings around them, wearing long robes with smiling faces, grasping hands as they met.

They talked amongst themselves for a few minutes before the man approached the still mounted Guards.

"You're welcome to stay the night and return to Sancoote in the morning."

One of the Guards spoke up, "We'd rather be on our way now. We have duties back in town."

The man nodded in understanding, "As you wish."

A trio of the robed figures approached the back of the cart, opening up the cage. Lilith sat frightened amongst the loose straw, so one figure reached in, snagging her ankle and pulled sharply. She came out amidst straw, thinking she was going to land on the ground, as other hands grabbed her, and held her tight.

The first figure closed the cage again, signalling to the Guards. "You can return now."

With a whip of their reigns the Guards turned about, headed around the light structures in the centre of the yard, and made their way back out again, heading back along the road they'd just come down.

"Is everything ready?" The man from town asked of the others.

"Yes brother. As you can see everything is set for the Trial." One replied, pointing behind Lilith's head where she couldn't see.

"Then proceed. I shall fetch the Mage crystals. Our first Trial may only take just a few short minutes if we are fortunate."

The robed figures holding Lilith turned about, and half carried her towards the light framework set in the middle of the yard. They stopped her in the dead centre, as two of the other figures pulled two long chains hanging from the frame towards her, securing them to her wrists with manacles.

Each of the robed figures let her go once this was done, letting her fall to the ground with the weight of the chains.

Lilith had thought she would just be chained in the centre of the courtyard, but the figures moved with purpose, gathering at either end of the frame, where the other ends of the chains hung loose. Simultaneously, both groups hauled on the long chains, dragging the chains down over the top the frame, taking up the slack.

The chains pulled at Lilith's wrists, lifting her hands off the ground. She wanted to ask what they were doing, but she was too scared to ask, too afraid of what they might say in reply. They kept hoisting the chains, until she was forced to stand up again, and even then they pulled the chains until her arms were held high in the air.

One figure came forward with a small stool. He eyed the framework above her head before placing the stool just before her feet.

"Up." He ordered, pointing at the stool.

Lilith looked at it only momentarily before she was yanked off her feet as they pulled the chains even further. She cried out in pain as the manacles cut into her wrists. Her feet kicked at the air until she found the stool with a foot, and put her full weight upon it.

She slowly came back to her senses as the robed figures gathered about.

The man who'd been in town had returned from the hall, now also wore one of the dark robes, almost unidentifiable amongst the other robed figures.

He held a satchel that he carefully opened, revealing five large crystals. Almost with reverence he handed out the crystals to five of the figures, which in turn carried them around Lilith, to five stone pillars set in a small circle around Lilith, just a metre out from her body. The figures set the crystals carefully in the top of each pillar, before returning to the others who had carefully placed themselves outside the circle of crystals.

"It is ready." One of them intoned.

"Then let us begin. Where is the scribe?"

"Here brother." One came forward holding a tablet with parchment affixed upon the top. He held a quill in one hand at the ready.

"Good."

The man from town stood directly in front of Lilith so she could see him easily, but kept outside of the ring of crystals just the same.

"You are committed to stand for a Trial of Possession. By law, you will pay for your crimes if you are found guilty. Now tell us your full name."

"Lilith." She replied, coughing with a suddenly dry throat.

"Your full name!" The man shouted.

"Lilith, daughter of Boleslav and Urai." She said.

"Make good notes," the man instructed the scribe. "People will be reading about this for many cycles," he said with a grim smile.

"How old are you?" He asked of Lilith.

He continued asking questions like this, and she answered them, sometimes two, sometimes three times until her throat felt raw.

## Chapter 7

"Water." Lilith asked, trying to clear her throat.

"What?" The man said, seeming to lean closer, but never moving within the crystals.

Lilith tried to wet her throat, but all she did was make it feel worse.

"Water." She said, still sounding like she was mumbling.

"I can't understand you." He turned about and spoke to one of the others. "You there, get some water."

Lilith waited, staring at the ground below her as the man ran to get some water. He came back carrying a splashing pail, and held it up to the other man.

"Give it to her then."

"Yes brother." The man kept the bucket, and stepped towards the crystal circle when the other man slapped him hard on the side of the face.

"You fool!" He yelled at the man, as if he'd done the stupidest thing conceivable. "Don't cross the circle."

The man looked from the circle of crystal back to other man, then up to Lilith. He looked down at the water in the pail before pulling the ladle hanging from the edge of the pail.

He scooped up from water, and flicked it towards Lilith.

Lilith stared at the robed man, and wondered how stupid he was, as he threw water at her several times. Some water splashed across her, but none of it reached her face.

"That's enough." The man said, putting a hand on the other shoulder, to stop him throwing any more water about. "I think we've finished asking questions."

The waterman took the hint, and left with the pail.

"It's time that you showed us your power. This devils light. We want to see it."

Lilith heard him, and slowly shook her head.

"No? What if I promise you that we won't hurt you? No torture. We'll even give you food. All we want to see is your... light."

"I don't know how." Lilith whispered, her voice inaudible.

The man stood staring at her, as if expecting her to comply with her request any moment. Instead he slowly got agitated.

"Please show us your light. It's all we want. Look, I promise you anything, just a glimpse. A small one." He said, holding a thumb and forefinger close together. "Please."

Lilith turned her face towards her right hand, and concentrated. She tried to visualise the sparkling upon her hand. She held her breath as she thought very deeply until she released it and, there was nothing.

She just couldn't do it. She wasn't even sure how it had happened in the first place, or if had been her. Maybe it had been Segen, planning some elaborate trick on her, but she saw no advantage in it for him at all unless it had been his own powers. She didn't understand why he would do such a thing, unless he was evil because of those powers.

But it still didn't help her. She swallowed against her dry throat as she faced the man in front of her again, and shook her head.

He stared back at her for perhaps another minute before he turned about to face the other robed men behind him.

"Our guest is proving difficult. We shall be moving to the next stage. Brother." He looked to one of the robed figure in particular. "I believe this is your particular area of expertise."

"Yes it is brother." The other replied with a deep voice of many cycles, coming forward to look up at Lilith. "I was hoping to get my chance. But brother, I will have to get close to her to do my work."

The first man looked around at Lilith then back at the other man. "If that's the risk you are willing to accept."

"It is brother. She must be made to prove her powers. I would give my life to make this work."

"Then so be it."

"Let me prepare." The other said, departing for some time.

Many of the other robed figures departed also, leaving Lilith also by herself.

She felt tired from standing there; her arms were already sore as her wrists kept pulling at the chains that held her up. Her stomach was no longer grumbling, long past the point of been simply hungry. She simply wanted to rest.

But Lilith wasn't given any rest as several of the robed men returned. One was bearing several tools.

Lilith watched as he scattered them around on the stone ground, emptying his hands before approaching the crystal circle. He eyed it warily before stepping across the threshold with no visible effect.

With eyes that seemed to bore into whatever he looked at, the man slowly let his gaze drift up Lilith's bare legs, past the sack that covered her body to her down turned face.

"I have only one purpose. And that is to give you incentive." He told her. "You will display your powers to us. If you do not, I will give you a reason. I won't ask you to try now, I think I'll just start with a demonstration."

He returned outside of the crystals, and selected amongst several items on the stonework.

"Let's start with this," he said, flicking out his wrist to unwind a long whip.

He stepped forward, swinging his arm back and forth a few times before letting the whip crack. Turning about, he swung the whip forward towards Lilith, angling it upwards where it snapped against her leg.

The shock of the pain shot through her quickly, and caused her to urinate and defecate on the stool between her feet.

"At least you are responsive to pain." The man said as a pail of water was brought at his request.

He tossed the water across the stool, washing away her faeces before continuing. He moved around her, snapping the end of the whip against her back and legs without pausing or letting up.

Lilith cried out in pain at every stroke. It eventually drove her to tears, which she let flow forth without stopping, if only to wet her dry throat.

It went on for an intolerably long time until the man stopped. He came around in front of Lilith to stand facing her.

"I guess you are not ready yet to show us your powers." He turned his head to look at the darkening horizon. "I would like to stay and continue this but it's getting late, and some of us must eat and get some sleep if we are to do a full day's work before the morning is finished. And I will be back. That is unless you wish to try your powers before then. I do wish that you don't however, as some of us wish to see them first hand."

He turned about and collected his tools from the stonework before departing with the few remaining men, leaving her alone outside.

Lilith felt dead tired. The exertions of standing all afternoon with her arms in the air had worn upon her. Without really wanting to she fell asleep standing.

Waking up was a shock, as she found herself drenched in cold icy water. It ran down her face and under the sack, making her colder than she should have been upon waking.

The same man from yesterday, who had tortured her with a whip for hours put an empty pail down on the stonework.

"I'm glad you're still with us. It does of course mean that I have more work to do, unless you're willing to try using your powers again," he said, staring at her from outside of the crystals.

Lilith's body wanted to curl up and her mind was barely awake yet. She had no idea how the powers worked, so she made no attempt to do so. She'd given up trying to fathom the powers they talked about. She simply wanted to be left alone.

But it wasn't acceptable to the Order of Apocalypse or the man in front of her.

"I had hoped for more cooperation, but it seems I will have to move on. I guess simple pain wasn't enough."

He tuned about momentarily to collect some instruments.

"I really wanted to use some hot pokers, but I can't keep a hot fire going near enough, so I'll have to resort to more extreme measures."

He rounded on her, carrying a sharp looking rod similar to a foil. Without a word, he kicked the stool out from underneath her.

The pain on her arms was jarring, as she hung a foot from the ground.

Without fanfare he slashed the rod across her back, causing her to wail as he inflicted more pain upon her already battered body.

He seemed to take his time between swings, as if plotting the position of each mark upon her back. The onslaught of his beating eventually slashed the back of the sack open, and broke her skin, causing welts that bled freely.

Lilith wasn't aware of anything around her except the pain that wracked her body for what seemed like hours. Eventually she woke again, finding that she'd passed out from the pain. She could feel the stool back under her feet, but had neither the will nor the strength any more to stand upon it.

Her torturer was standing in front of her again, staring at her. "I believe that this approach isn't working." He said, talking to Lilith as if she were an attentive audience. "I'm going to take a break and have lunch while I think about a new direction."

He left her hanging there while he disappeared for lunch, letting her drifting in an out of consciousness from the accumulated torment. She didn't want to live any more, yet her body refused to quit, seeming to barely hang on to life.

Eventually her torturer came back with the usual followers who watched the proceedings with interest. He bore a small bag that he carried up to her.

"I've been thinking about incentives, and I think I've been trying the wrong method. You see the human body has two methods of motivation. One is pain, and the other is pleasure. So first, we're going to feed you."

He waved a hand, and the group of robed men came up to the framework. The chains that secured Lilith were unlocked from their positions and slowly lowered.

As they lowered her, she lost her footing and swung towards the ground. She kept coming down until the man yelled a halt, giving her barely enough slack chain to sit upon the stool, but her arms were still raised above her head.

"I've only given you enough slack so you can feed yourself. But you'll have to stand upon the stool to do so."

He stepped up to her, placing the end of the bag within the grasp of her hand. She still had feeling in her hand as she felt the fabric on her palm, and closed her fingers about it

"Take your time eating it, as I don't want you getting indigestion."

Lilith worked her dry lips, trying to say something, but all she did was moan.

"What did you say?" He asked leaning closer.

She licked her dry lips, finding sores. "Water," she said, in a dry croak.

"Yes, I've got that too." He said, picking up a pail. He ladled out carefully to her lips, only spilling a small portion, but she slowly got her fill until she couldn't take any more.

"I'm going to leave you alone for a while, and return later to see how you're doing."

He departed with most of the other men. A few remained, but they eventually left as she just sat there working up her strength.

When she felt ready, Lilith tried to stand up again, finding her legs shaky. She had trouble ascending the stool, until she used the chains to balance herself. The pain on her wrists was dull ache now, as she got one hand into the bag to pull out a bread roll. She stuffed it into her mouth, eating it quickly like a ravenous wolf, then pulled out another.

Her stomach complained loudly at the food, but she didn't care and stuffed the rest of the contents of the bag into her mouth, eating some fruits and a couple of sweet cakes that blossomed with sweetness inside her mouth.

It was uniquely satisfying that she sat down, allowing her stomach to settle. As the food started to break down inside her stomach and pass into her bloodstream, she started to get strange sensations through her body.

She thought it was just a bad reaction to eating too quickly on an empty stomach, as she started to feel quivers that shook her bodily. Her skin started to tingle at the slightest of pressure.

Eventually the man came back, followed by a group of the robed men.

He stood there quietly, staring at Lilith as she shook several times. He motioned to the others without a word, who moved to the framework. There was the clanking of chains, then the yanking of her arms as they pulled her up again.

She didn't care this time, as her stomach felt satisfied. She also had strength again to stand upon the stool, but she felt a curious sensation crawling across her skin.

"It's time to move on." The man said. He turned to the others and said, "Watch closely for any positive reaction from the Mage crystals."

They nodded in response, keeping their eyes focused upon everything.

She looked on, as he approached her not holding any instruments this time, as his hands were empty.

He placed a single finger lightly against her ankle, and slowly ran it up the bare skin on the outside of her leg.

Lilith felt something unusual at the light feathery touch, a thrill that followed wherever he touched.

Watching her reaction closely, he placed both hands on either side of her legs, and slid his hands right up under the sack to her hips, to slide them down again.

Lilith's skin almost itched in the sensation that crawled under her skin whenever he touched her, that she had trouble keeping her legs still every time he moved his hands up her legs.

The stimulation slowly built as he moved his hands up around her buttocks, almost massaging them as he moved his hands about her bare skin.

In her mind, Lilith knew she didn't like what he was doing, but she was finding it pleasurable anyway. It wasn't the torture of before, which she was also glad of, but something more that she hadn't expected.

Progressively he moved his hands around to the inside of her legs, running them up over her torso and down to her crotch.

He moved with a sense of surety, taking his own delight in the touch, but knowing it would be more pleasurable for the girl, having taken in a dose of drugs added to the sweet cakes she'd eaten.

So far she hadn't displayed the powers that had been claimed of her, and he was beginning to doubt they were true. The girl for all purposes seemed to have been falsely accused, but it wasn't his decision to determine. It was only his to persuade her by any means to use those powers. But now that he'd started, he was beginning to like what he was doing.

He readied himself to help her to a new plane of pleasure, when the other Brother of the Order yelled, "It's starting!"

Another called, "Look at her hands!"

He looked left and right at the crystals, and saw them start to glow. Immediately he realised he was in danger, and jumped backwards between two of the glowing crystals without any harm.

There were more shouts as more of the Brothers ran into the courtyard to see what was happening.

When the man's hands ran up around her crotch, Lilith finally released herself to the joy. She hadn't felt anything quite like it before, and it seemed to enclose her like a warm blanket.

She was all too well aware of the shouts from the men who pointed up above her. She turned her head to look up at her hands, which sparkled with light that arced and jumped between her fingers, and several arcs jumped to the chains that held her, making bright sparks that echoed with arcing sounds.

Lilith shivered with a sudden chilling sensation that ran up her back, killing off the pleasure like a doused candle. Turning her face back towards the men, the air about her seemed suddenly foggy, and her breath came out in visible vapour like a cold winter morning, except the sun was high and visible.

The fog thickened about her, draining the heat from everything. Her teeth chattered with the cold that slowly enveloped her like an invading mist, as her body seemed to die piece by piece, until she no longer felt anything.

## Chapter 8

She thought she'd died. Perhaps she was been reborn again as some of the old folk claimed happened. She only knew of the light that surrounded her, painfully bright in her eyes until she was able to focus upon a face in front of her that was surrounded by light.

Lilith worked her mouth open to ask the face, "Who... who are you?"

"I'm Dillon," he said with wide eyes.

Lilith felt wet all over her as if she'd just been out in the rain, and she shivered with unaccustomed cold.

"You're soaking wet." Dillon said looking at her skin, which was very pale.

He wondered if perhaps she might have pneumonia. He pulled off the grey robe he was wearing. He saw the manacles on her wrists, but he ignored them as he wrapped his robe over her carefully.

Dillon felt the cold air on his skin, and thought it best to take her inside where it was warmer.

He knew instinctively that it wasn't Patricia, but he couldn't help but imagine her a few years older, her cheeks a little deeper with brown eyes and a clear East Coast accent.

Dillon focused upon getting her inside, and bent down to pick her up in both hands as several brown robed Sentinels gather around him.

They suddenly stopped where they were when they saw the girl in his arms.

"The first Mage!" One called out.

Lilith saw the dark robed figures, and instantly thought they were from the Brotherhood from the Order of the Apocalypse, coming to torture her again. She involuntarily grabbed Dillon, holding herself tighter to him as he carried her.

When the other Sentinels arrived, they joined the others with their praises, "The ice prison is destroyed!" and other seeming words of joy, "She's escaped after all these cycles," and "The first Mage has returned to forgive us!"

They all seemed apologetic to Dillon, even making way for him as he made his way towards one of the stone buildings, trying to remember the way back to his room, because it was the only place he could think to take her immediately.

Word seemed to spread quickly in front of Dillon, as he headed along the almost dark hallway, more of the Sentinels appeared almost out of the stone work, shouting praises and apologies.

Their shouts seemed to make her hold him tighter, which made it a little difficult for him to carry her, but less fearful of dropping her on the stone floor.

"You're scaring her!" He called out to them, trying to quiet them, but it didn't seem to stop them.

One robed figure almost ran him down, and he was about to yell obscenities at them when he recognised Shaanstar.

"The first Mage?" She asked Dillon, amidst the babbling Sentinels.

"The ice lady, yes." He explained, as he felt her shift to look at Shaanstar. "But she's soaking wet and very cold. She needs warmth now!" He almost shouted.

Shaanstar saw the serious expression on Dillon's face. "Follow me," she said and immediately she turned about to find a room with a large lit fire.

Most of the Sentinels rooms all had fireplaces, but many weren't been used and most weren't very large. She checked two rooms along the hallway that had extinguished fires before choosing to skip the rest of them. Only the guest rooms on the second floor would yield large fireplaces, and the only one she knew would be lit would be the one in their room.

She headed upstairs with Dillon in tow, along with many of the Sentinels who followed them upstairs.

Lilith saw dark doorways pass by, as they turned down two passages, before passing into a partially lit room.

Shaanstar immediately ignited the other torches in the room, giving enough light to see by then proceeded to stock the fire with all the available wood.

Dillon sat the young woman down in front of the fire which readily began to blaze.

She looked about with her eyes catching the firelight as she saw more robed figures filling up the doorway to the room.

Dillon followed her gaze to where the Sentinels stood almost in chant as they praised the First Mage.

"Get them out of here," Dillon told Shaanstar. "I can't think with them making that racket."

Shaanstar obliged him as the ever-flowing promises of thanks and apologies were staring to annoy even her. She stood in front of the first few who stood inside the doorway and wondered how many had actually followed them upstairs as the hallway seemed full of the robed Sentinels.

It seemed like overwhelming odds, but she lifted her arm and pointed out the door, as she instructed them all the get out.

They shifted slightly as some of them tried to comply. It wasn't until she started pushing against them, that they started to flow back out the door. Only when she cleared the doorway of the last one did she close the door in his face.

Dillon was worried about trying to warm the woman up. He found the towels they'd used earlier and took them to the woman who still seemed to shiver in front of the fire that he could feel across his skin.

He knew first that he had to dry her off. She relinquished the robe as he tugged on it, dropping it upon the floor beside her. The woman had to manacles attached to her wrists, with short chains leading from each that were coated red from and eon of rust.

"We need to get these off first." He said, looking at one closely.

Shaanstar came forward seeing that the manacles were very old, and looked simple enough to pick with her thin dagger. She pulled it from its hiding place in one of her braids as she came forward.

Dillon saw the woman draw back when Shaanstar came forward with sharp blade drawn, and tried to hold her still. "It's alright, she won't harm you." He tried to explain, as she watched Shaanstar with wide eyes.

Shaanstar held one of her manacled wrists up, and moved slowly to show that she was only putting the blade into the manacle. She had to jam the blade into a gap in the side, and wriggle it about before she felt it shift something. With both hands, she yanked either end of the manacle open.

She moved over to the other wrist that Dillon held, and repeated the process to free both wrists. With a heave, she threw both chains into the corner of the room, out of the way.

Dillon looked upon the grimy wet sack that covered her. It had to come off too, as he leaned over her to grab it. It felt slimy in his hands as he pulled the sopping mass up over her head to find she had nothing else on.

He shifted his mind to ignore it as he threw the sack in the corner with the manacles and grabbed both towels, throwing one across her legs and wrapping the other over her shoulders.

"You need to dry off," Dillon told her as he rubbed at her shoulders and back with the towel. He saw marks across her back which he thought were stray pieces from the sack until he touched them with his fingers finding instead, dozens of freshly made wounds. "Shaanstar, come look at this," he called over his shoulder as many wounds to start weeping even as he dried her back.

She came closer to look at the marks on the first Mage's back, and knew they'd need treatment for that many, including the deep wounds on her wrists.

"I'll go see if I can get the healer," she said, and headed for the doorway.

She paused at the door to look back, seeing Dillon in a new light for the first time.

He'd been very ignorant of everything when she met him, he'd even been beaten up and hadn't resisted at all. During all this time he'd acted almost with a mind that he didn't care for anyone, except for himself. And now, he showed an unusual amount of interest in the care for this young woman, the first Mage.

Shaanstar couldn't fathom it or Dillon. She turned to the door, and opened it to find the Sentinels still pushing and moving to get close to the door.

"I need a healer," she asked the group. "Where is the healer?" Shaanstar plunged in, pulling the door shut behind her to find the healer of the Mage Watch.

## Chapter 9

Lilith felt Dillon's hands rub the soft material across her back, and then his fingers touch her injuries. They smarted a little, but she didn't mind his hands, as they seemed to tingle wherever he touched.

She sat passively still, letting the glow from the fire and the man's hands warm her chilled skin. She was tired and exhausted to the point that her eyelids felt too heavy to keep open.

"Don't fall asleep yet," Dillon warned her, shaking her shoulders to make sure.

"I'm awake," she mumbled, but his soft touches produced pleasant sensations across her skin that she had a hard time thinking of anything else.

Without assistance, Dillon found himself forced to dry her off by his self. He found a little pleasure in it, but focused himself to doing it quickly and efficiently.

She felt his touch across her body, pressing everywhere, exciting her in such a ways that she wanted to continue forever, but it finished quietly as he draped the robe over her back, wrapping it around her.

She looked at his nearby face, which seemed to probe her. "Why did you finish?" She asked him quietly, her voice still rough.

"You're dry enough now. At least where I could reach," he said. "But you have to get warm." He added, touching the skin of her cheek to check her temperature.

She rolled her head to the side at the touch, and pressed her own hand against his, finding bliss in the personal contact.

Dillon found that she wouldn't let go, and he didn't want to hurt her, so he sat behind her, resting against her. He thought that it might prove a double purpose as well by providing a little extra warmth for her.

It was several uncomfortable minutes as she continued to snuggle his arm, drawing it closer in to her body when the door rattled.

He couldn't turn to see who came through as it opened and closed upon the murmuring Sentinels, but the voices were evidence enough.

"Is it really the first Mage?" A male voice asked.

"It is Garsivaz." He heard Shaanstar's voice reply. "She was deathly cold when we brought her up here. Dillon has been warming her."

He heard a light note of scepticism in her otherwise normal voice.

"That's the healer?" Dillon asked.

"It is." Shaanstar said, almost dragging the man closer by his robes.

"It's really the first Mage. I'm so honoured to meet you." Garsivaz said, to the young woman on the floor.

Dillon saw that she didn't seem to notice the Healer, as she was preoccupied with his arm.

"Have a look at her wrists first," he suggested, trying to draw her hands back out of the robe.

Shaanstar helped, and held one wrist out for the Healer.

"Oh my, this is deep." He said, touching the wound with a finger. "The first Mage suffered much from us." He said in quiet reverence.

He quickly laid out a cloth that held a few jars. He opened one that held a thick claggy substance and took a sniff, wrinkling his nose.

"This is the one." He said to himself, as he poked a finger in it. Steadying the wrist with his other hand, he wiped it all around the wrist, making sure it went into all the wounds. Switching hands, he dug a roll of white cloth from his robe, and wrapped it around the wounds, dressing it tightly and cleanly.

"This wrist is finished," said Garsivaz.

Dillon could feel her pressing his hand against a breast, as he tried pulling on his arm. She resisted but her arm came out, but continued to hold his tightly against her face.

"This one is just as bad," Garsivaz said, treating the other wrist where it was with the offensive smelling substance and wrapping it also.

"Is that all?" Garsivaz asked Dillon and Shaanstar.

Dillon looked at Shaanstar for help.

She didn't know what to make of what was happening, but she leaned down to try break the hold the young Mage had on Dillon.

Shaanstar used both hands to pull on her fingers, when she saw sparks of light jump across to her own hand, and give her a shock. It was a sharp jolt that made her jump when she felt it, making her let go automatically.

"What happened?" Dillon asked, seeing Shaanstar's expression change.

"She zapped me!"

"Oh, the magery of the first Mage!" Garsivaz said in awe.

Shaanstar wasn't to be put off so easily so she tried again, but the sparks of light grew brighter and she drew her hands away before she could get shocked again.

"She did it again?" Dillon asked.

"I didn't let her." Shaanstar replied, concerned and confused. "But I don't think she'll let go."

Dillon wasn't just going to stay here, but her back needed looking at.

"I'll just move. You can slip the robe right off."

He got himself up, and worked around towards her front, so he was out of the way of the healer as the girl continued holding his arm.

Shaanstar lifted the robe off the first Mage, letting the Healer see the extent of the wounds on her back.

"Ah the pain." Garsivaz said, closing his eyes upon the sight. "All the Sentinels are truly sorry for the torture and the torment we have caused you."

Shaanstar saw a tear form in the corner of one of his eyes. She had wondered for a long time why the robed Sentinels had paid such attention to the entrapped first Mage, but the reasons still escaped her. It was curious also that they now broke their previous code about talking.

"Please heal her Garsivaz," said Shaanstar in a quiet voice.

"I will." He said, opening his eyes. He used the same jar as before, almost emptying it as he slavered it all across the woman's back, spreading it neatly.

"I don't have a bandage big enough to cover this," he said. "It needs something to stop her from wiping it off."

"The robe will have to do." Shaanstar said, straightening it across the woman's shoulders.

She looked at Dillon, who still had his hand joined with the woman. It was down lower now, pressed above her breasts.

"Her skin looks almost normal now, but she isn't acting normal." Shaanstar commented.

"I think I know what it is," said Garsivaz unexpectedly. "An old drug that only those of the Watch are supposed to know about," he explained to them. "It flows into the skin, causing it to react with the touch of someone else's skin. The affect is supposed to fill one with utmost pleasure."

Garsivaz collected one of the other jars, and swished its green contents around.

"She will have to drink this to counteract it, returning her to normal."

Shaanstar reached for the jar, so she could pour it down the woman's throat.

"Not you," Garsivaz said stopping her. "Him only." He pointed at Dillon.

"She's attached herself to him. She'd only drive you away with her magery."

Dillon took the jar in his free hand, and looked to the woman. He had to get in close to get her to drink it.

He moved around behind her again on his knees, so he had the angle. As he leaned forward she moved too, dragging his hand down her chest, across her abdomen, touching the edge of her pubic hairs.

His face was next to hers when she did this, while he felt something; he also saw the change of expression in her face, almost as if she were in rapture.

He hadn't force fed a person before and had to wonder if it would work.

Her lips were already parted with short breaths, so it was a little easier than he expected, putting the jar to her lips, and forcing her head back to swallow with a few spare fingers from the jar.

She did swallow, and convulsed. His other hand slipped down, feeling something it shouldn't have, causing her to involuntarily moan after she swallowed. She almost immediately sagged, losing her grip on his arm, and sliding unceremoniously against him.

Dillon moved his hand to pull the robe over her, seeing how quick and simple it had been as he handed the jar back.

"She will be fine now," said Garsivaz. "She looks like she might need some sleep too. It will also help to heal those wounds."

With an effort, Dillon picked her up again, finding her a little more difficult without her help, but Shaanstar pulled open the bed so he was able to slide her right in.

They let the sleeping first Mage rest, moving out the door into the crowded hallway outside.

Dillon's ears were assaulted anew by the murmuring from the gather Sentinels. He'd had just about enough. "The first Mage needs to rest!" He said, loud enough that she could probably hear him. He lowered his voice a little. "She won't get any rest if you're all at her door!"

They finally quietened down when they heard him

Garsivaz addressed them all. "The first Mage was weak with injuries from her imprisonment," he explained. "She needs time to rest. Meanwhile we must all get back to work. I am sure many of you left chores half undone. Go back to them now. The first Mage will still be here when she wakes up."

There were quiet ascents from all of them, before they dispersed. Before they could all disappear, Garsivaz caught the shoulder of one Sentinel.

"Make sure an ear is kept open for when she wakes. I wish to be notified immediately. That is before anyone else, in case she has other injuries that I have missed. These two should be notified next, then anyone else."

The Sentinel nodded understanding before departing just down the hallway.

"I must go too. I have chores to attend to myself," Garsivaz said apologetically as he left.

It left Shaanstar and Dillon standing there by alone. Dillon looked down, and remembered he had only his underwear on.

"I need some clothes," he half muttered, feeling a slight chill in the hallway air.

"A very good idea," Shaanstar agreed. "We need assistance." She called down the hallway.

In a moment, there were running feet, and a robed figure came quickly to a halt. The same woman who'd helped them the night before.

## Chapter 10

"What is it you wish?" She asked after catching her breath.

Shaanstar looked to Dillon, giving him the cue to ask what he wanted.

"Would my clothes be ready by some chance?" He asked.

"Yes." The Sentinel nodded, "This way."

Dillon followed her down the hallway with Shaanstar in tow this time, leading them to a small room with a small blazing fire.

"I have mended the holes in your clothes as best I could." She said, pointing out a pile of neatly folded clothes sitting on the end of a bench to the side.

Dillon lifted his shirt from the pile, holding it open in the torch light. The cuts and scratches had been mended with a fine thread and a skill he could appreciate.

"It looks good thankyou." He reminded himself to thank her as he slipped it on.

He felt better dressed once he pulled on his pants and socks, and slipped on his shoes. His watch and wallet looked similarly treated, cleaned and polished but still very much intact and working. The switchblade was there, its edge sharpened such that it looked as if it could cut anything.

The business jacket that had once been a good piece of clothing, had been hand washed, dried in front of a flame and neatly folded also. It didn't look anything like it used to, but it was very much intact.

"Your clothes are ready too." The Sentinel informed Shaanstar.

Whilst she didn't need to change right away, she thought it best to do so now rather than later.

She dropped the robe to the floor, and proceeded to dress.

Dillon waited, and watched her. The clothes weren't like any common clothes. She put them on in a specific order, tying this or strapping this, fixing in place hard leather and metal armour that protected parts of her body. Their money pouch she flattened and tucked behind her chest armour, just below her breasts. Her sword was last, which had been cleaned, and the edge sharpened slightly. She sheaved it in its proper place on her back behind her head.

"It is very good." Shaanstar said, her clothes feeling clean of mud and anything else.

"Your welcome," The Sentinel replied.

Light flickered on inside the room from a faceted crystal in the ceiling.

"The power-stone has been fixed," said the woman looking up at the ceiling.

"Power," Dillon commented to himself as he followed Shaanstar out.

She led him back along the hallway, headed back outside. They both noted the hallway was well lit now, with few dark shadows.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Shaanstar asked him.

"What?" He replied, not understanding what she was talking about.

"The map," she said.

"The map... Oh."

He'd forgotten in the confusion with the ice, and the first Mage. He'd dropped it out in the courtyard, but he remembered what he'd read on it. Circa 2210 AD.

It hadn't made sense at all, not then, not before. But now he had some idea, though he had no idea how, or why.

"Shaanstar," he said, opening himself for the question that seemed so stupid but he had to ask it anyhow. "Do you know what year it is?"

"Year?" She repeated, remembering it was an old term used for cycles. "You mean cycles. I do not know exactly. The Apocalypse was many cycles ago. Some of the Sentinels might know."

There was no answer there for him, but he hadn't figured this out yet.

He had more questions, and needed answers. It seemed also that the Sentinels were talking now, though he knew it was probably had something to do with the First Mage, so it was a matter of finding out who could answer them.

"Is there anyone we can go ask right now?" He suggested.

"Now? I think so."

They went outside, and headed towards the centre part of the main structure, that lay further back in the walls of the Mage Watch.

Shaanstar had been otherwise occupied when he'd been searching through maps to make his discovery, and he was curious what she'd been doing.

"What exactly were you doing when I was looking at maps?" He asked.

"I've been sparing if you must know. Learning some new fighting techniques from the masters."

It surprised Dillon. Not that she'd been sparing, but they had experts here. "I thought they just collected information."

"The Sentinels collect information from all over," she explained. "They don't just store all of it away, but they become experts in some of the areas so they know which is good to keep and which isn't. A few of them study various fighting and combat skills."

She led him through various passageways as she explained some of the skills she was shown.

"There are many potent hand skills which one can use to incapacitate, disable or kill an enemy. I wanted to learn a few that I could use in case I lost my weapons as you suggested last night."

Dillon didn't actually suggest it, though it could have been inferred. He was impressed that she'd taken it like that, and used it for something positive. Well, positive for Shaanstar at least.

Inside, through the back of the building, Dillon was led into a vast greenhouse. He stopped at the entrance to look all around, seeing dozens, perhaps hundreds of plants growing under a glass like ceiling.

He looked back to see Shaanstar ahead of him, so he jogged to catch up.

At the far end, several of the robed Sentinels were busily at work seeding bare soil.

"Shaanstar, you do us pleasure with you presence and that of your companion," said the old Sentinel who'd greeted them last night when they'd arrived.

She knew him, having visited the Mage Watch on an earlier occasion. "Alsander, my companion has some questions, I think it'd be best that you answer."

"I'd be my pleasure," he replied, stepping onto the path.

"Is that glass?" Dillon asked right off, pointing at the ceiling.

"So it is. We've been working with it for a cycle now, finding out how to make it strong enough to stand heavy impacts. But we've found its best use is like this."

Dillon looked up at the roof again, admiring the simply architecture. The entire green house had been carefully built from timber, with many cross sections upon the roof. Each beam had been inset to hold the glass panels securely.

Dillon drew both his eyes down and thought back to what he was after.

"Can you tell me what year it is?" he asked.

"Year, ah the archaic term," said Alsander fondly as if it were his favourite topic. "We count it by the cycles of the seasons. What you want to know how many cycles since the Apocalypse. I think we talked about this last night."

"Only about the first Mage," Dillon said.

"Ah yes. Trapped in her prison for twenty six hundred and thirty four cycles, and now she is freed thanks to you. We shall remember this day for a long time."

"But the Apocalypse," said Dillon reminding him impatiently.

Shaanstar watched both of them argue out of the corner of her eye as she practised a few of the new moves further down the path.

"I know. I'm a little slow these days, so bear with me. There were three thousand before that, and..."

Dillon waited as the old man did the figures, calculating what he considered to be years.

"It was six thousand, one hundred and four... no, it was three. Six thousand, one hundred and three cycles ago that the Apocalypse struck our planet."

Struck. It was the first time anyone had mentioned anything about the event. But Dillon wasn't interested in that just now. The figure was still arbitrary to him. It held no meaning until he got a fix on when it happened.

"Do know when it happened?" He asked.

"I just told you when. Six Thousand..."

"No." Dillon interrupted him.

Alsander looked at Dillon as he'd just bitten him.

"I want to know the actual year it happened, like two thousand and ten A. D."

"The year, that's..."

Alsander was silent a moment trying to remember something. "That's the previous system used before the Apocalypse. You want to know what it was before?"

Dillon nodded eagerly.

"Well I don't know."

Dillon just blinked his eyes, stunned. He'd thought the old man knew everything, but obviously he was wrong.

"But I can tell you that it was recorded somewhere. It'll be in our records, but you'll have to get one of the younger ones to help you search. I'm afraid those basement areas don't do much for my bones."

"I'll try that thankyou." Dillon said. "I think you've answered enough for me."

"Your welcome. I'll have to see if I'm any help with this planting," said Alsander with a smile.

Dillon had already been with the records, and had left one of the Sentinels there with the maps. He hoped that the man would still be there.

Six one oh three. Dillon ran the numbers though his mind so he wouldn't forget them as he headed out of the greenhouse. Six thousand one hundred and three years since the Apocalypse. He let the sum hit him. Six millennia. It seemed impossible to him. It was longer than Christ had been around. Perhaps only the Egyptian Pyramids had been around longer.

Dillon was so preoccupied that he forgot about Shaanstar. She watched him leave without a word to her.

*Maybe he'd just assumed I would follow,* she thought for a moment of going back to do some more sparring just to spite him, but decided not to.

Last time she'd left him, he'd resurrected the First Mage. And before that... before that he'd killed a creature with an unknown force. She had no idea what else he was capable of, but she felt that maybe she should stick with him from now on. Though she wondered how she was going to turn a profit by doing so.

## Chapter 11

Dillon paused in the centre of the courtyard. The ice was gone and so was the stool. It almost seemed as if it hadn't happened, but it had.

He wasn't there to look at where the First Mage had sat, but for the map he'd dropped. It wasn't there of course. Someone must have picked it up.

It didn't matter now. He needed to speak to the Sentinel who'd showed him the maps.

It was back through the same building as before. He seemed to be getting good at remembering where he'd been, though he hadn't remembered where his room had been, but now the lights were on.

The place smelled musty, the odour of old paper and rank moisture. Shaanstar's footsteps echoed not far behind him, as he passed racks of scrolls and books.

Dillon rounded a corner to find the Sentinel still there, rearranging some of the scrolls. He approached the man as he worked, but he seemed too preoccupied to notice Dillon.

Dillon cleared his throat, and the Sentinel jumped as he turned about, holding a scroll out like a sword.

"Oh, you frightened me!" He said.

"You're talking!" said Dillon, surprised that he hadn't asked before this why there were all talking now.

"Yes. Our vows didn't permit us to talk freely until the release of the First Mage," said the Sentinel. "For that I thank you personally."

The man came forward and embraced Dillon, making him feel a little uncomfortable.

"It is a good day indeed," said the Sentinel as he stepped back with a broad smile. "Though I wished I had followed you immediately, so I could have seen it for my own eyes. But I did come in time to retrieve this."

He stepped over to pick up another long scroll, unravelling a portion to show the map that Dillon had dropped.

"I hope I didn't damage it." Dillon apologised.

"Oh, no the water damage is minor. I think it will need restoring soon anyhow, as the features have all but disappeared."

The young Sentinel returned the map to its place. "You've returned to look a more maps?" He inquired in a friendly tone.

"Actually no. I thought you might be able to find out when the Apocalypse was," Dillon said. "In the old dating system used before Apocalypse."

"I'm not sure," the man said thinking.

"The old Sentinel..."

"Alsander." Shaanstar said from behind him.

Dillon glanced over his shoulder, to see her standing close by.

"Alsander said it was in the records somewhere," he continued. "It should be something like two thousand and ten A. D."

The young man frowned in thought, and then grabbed the map he'd just had. He unravelled it a bit, looking at it then turned it towards Dillon. "Like this?"

"Exactly." Dillon said.

"But to do with the Apocalypse."

"Yes." Dillon said, thinking the young man was actually on the right track.

The young Sentinel scratched the side of his face, thinking. "I don't rightly remember any reports on the Apocalypse." He looked at Dillon's face as he explained. "It's not a time when there were enough people around to record stuff. But... I think I remember seeing it somewhere else."

He turned about, returning the scroll to a shelf.

"Follow me." He said, pushing past Dillon and Shaanstar.

Dillon turned to look at Shaanstar's expressionless face before following. Maybe it was all a wild goose chase, be he had a good feeling about this.

They trampled back up the stairs, through the courtyard across to the building on the other side where their room was located, and into the main hallway.

Dillon stopped behind the man as he stopped only a few feet along the wall to look at one of the artworks hanging along the walls.

"Not this one." He said quickly, moving along.

Dillon glanced at it as he passed, seeing a painting of what looked like an ocean, but it was boiling and frothing with a red glare.

The Sentinel moved on from the next one also, a rich fresco of a tidal wave washing over many small structures.

Dillon squinted his eyes to look at the buildings, thinking that they looked a little like skyscrapers, but the wave and the builds looked all out of proportion.

Quickly he moved to catch up to the Sentinel.

Shaanstar stopped also to look at the fresco, trying to understand what was so good about the picture when the young Sentinel called.

"Here! Right here." He called to both of them.

Dillon came in close to a large oil painting, to focus his eyes to where the man was pointing. In small figures a date was printed clearly enough to read.

Dillon stepped back, to look at the painting. It was the same one he'd noticed when they'd arrived, of a meteor streaking down through the atmosphere.

"Twenty four fifty seven A. D." He breathed, as if confronting something huge.

"What can you tell me about the Apocalypse?" Dillon asked.

"There isn't much to say about it, as not much is known about a few hundred cycles after it," said the young Sentinel. "A few accounts that have been passed down the cycles, report of an object like this lighting up the air as it struck down from the sky. It's arrival caused the Apocalypse. The earth trembled, and both water and fire rose from the land to kill many people."

Dillon turned towards the opposite wall, where an extinguished torch hung. He turned about, and leaned against the wall, letting himself slide down to the floor.

"Are you okay?" The Sentinel asked.

"I'm fine. I think you've answered all my questions now."

"Then I can return to my duties?"

"Yes." Dillon said, staring at the painting.

The Sentinel left, but Shaanstar still remained, standing silently to the side.

"Something troubles you." Shaanstar said coming close to squat down beside him.

"I'm thinking," said Dillon. "Some how, some way. It all seems impossible. A great philosopher once said that when everything else can be ruled out, then the only solution is the impossible."

"What is a philosopher?"

Dillon chuckled as he looked at Shaanstar. "A sage. Sort of like Alsander."

She nodded, but still didn't understand.

"I suppose I should have shown you that map, but it doesn't matter. I think I know the answer anyhow. I know where home is now."

This surprised her. Through all his questioning, she hadn't once heard any reference to any place.

"Home doesn't exist any more," said Dillon. "It hasn't existed for over six thousand five hundred years. Or cycles as you call it."

Dillon leaned his elbows on his knees.

"I'm from the past. From before the Apocalypse. Four hundred and fifty eight years before it ever happened."

Dillon went silent, as he contemplated the past. Patricia must have been long gone before it hit. He looked at the wedding band on his left hand. The one he hadn't taken off for three years, except to show it off. He twisted off his finger, looking at it closely as he wondered what had happened to Patricia. He she remarried? Maybe she spent her years looking for him, wondering where he'd disappeared.

He didn't know, but he wanted to know, to know that she'd been all right.

*But it was over six thousand years ago!* Came the thought.

He thumped his hand down on the stone, wanting to lose the ring in some dark crevasse of the hallway, but his fingers wouldn't let go. It held his memories for him, memories of happy times, of enjoyable moments, and passion at times.

He tried to recall her face, as he remembered it last but something else came up instead. It was the slight younger features of the First Mage that intruded, destroying his memories of his wife.

Tears came to his eyes, as he realised that he couldn't recall her face now. His memory of her voice too was as indistinct. It was like a ghost in his memory. It seemed substantial at first, then vaporised as he tried to catch it.

He broke down and cried as now, more than ever he felt very alone in a world that was before his time.

## Chapter 12

Shaanstar still didn't comprehend it all, but she understood it better after Dillon explained it.

That he was from before her time. From before she was born, and her parent's parents were born. Even back before the Apocalypse.

It was a long time. Long enough for many generations to have born and died, and many homes to have been built and destroyed.

It was a grieving experience to watch as Dillon cried. She felt her own eyes moisten, but held them back to watch over him.

She waited patiently as she'd learnt from a young age. Deep emotions weren't something to be rushed, unless there was danger near by. So she let Dillon exhaust himself until he was ready to recover.

"I suppose you don't require my services as a guide any more," she said.

Dillon looked up at her surprised, as he wiped his face with his hand. "What?" He asked, thinking he hadn't heard right.

"If your home doesn't exist any more, than I can't guide you to it," she explained.

"You're right," he replied, feeling as if was about to loose a friend. "I can't keep your services any longer. I don't know where else to go from here."

"You're telling me you don't know where to go?" She asked, mildly rebuking him.

He shook his head. "None," he said.

"Tell me then," she asked. "How did you get from before the Apocalypse to now?"

"I don't know," he answered truthfully.

Time machines were mere fiction to him, even in this far-flung future they didn't seem to exist. When he'd stepped off that busy sidewalk in New York, he hadn't exactly seen any strange looking devices or anything out of the ordinary before he found himself in the middle of a jungle in the future. There was no explanation on either end.

"Then tell me, how the First Mage came from the past?" Shaanstar asked, presumptuous.

"That's different," he said. "She was frozen in ice!"

"Does that make any difference? She was then, and is here now. You were then, and are here now."

She put a hand on his shoulder.

"Something made her come here. So something also must have made you come here. Maybe it's different, but it is still something that someone must know."

Dillon felt a sense of determination from her, as if she wanted there to be something that caused it.

"Who would know about something like this?" He asked. "It sounds ridiculous even to me!"

"How do you know unless you ask?" Shaanstar said. "We have the entire Mage Watch to ask for starters."

There was the possibility, Dillon considered. Even the remotest chance that he could find out something about how he got here.

Shaanstar straightened her legs, standing up. She offered a hand to Dillon.

He clasped her out stretched hand, and allowed her to pull him up.

But she didn't let go.

"Can I still be your guide?" She asked.

"As long as need be," he replied.

"Good," she said, shaking his and once and letting go.

He looked at her suspiciously. "We just made another contract didn't we?"

She smiled at him, before heading back towards the courtyard.

"Damn it, you did it again!" He yelled, after her.

Dillon and Shaanstar had spent the rest of the day after a brief lunch, going back around to all the Sentinels they could find, asking questions. Alsander had been very happy to assist further, answering questions and directing them to who might have more information, but in the long run it proved futile.

Most, if not all within the boundaries of the Mage Watch did not know anything about machines. Neither did they have knowledge of any people capable of transporting people through time. It was almost an alien concept to them, and Dillon was greeted with mixed responses from surprise to frank ignorance. For what Dillon wanted to know, Mage Watch was beginning to look like a lost cause.

The dinning hall was a livelier place than the night before. Even before the bell chimed and everyone sat down with the lights on instead of the candles, talk persisted up and down the long tables, mostly about the First Mage though word drifted around about Dillon as he sat with his jacket laid beside him on the bench.

He wasn't the least bit interested in the chatter, instead upon the platters of food that awaited their attention. Lunch had been a short thing, just a couple of pieces of fruit as he'd kept on trying to find anything about possible time travel.

He sat with everyone else, ready to help himself to a tasty looking hunk of meat in his reach, when someone rushed in half yelling their head off that she's awake.

Immediately there was a rasing of bodies off seats, when a loud voice boomed out "Sit!"

Many stopped in the movements but others kept getting up.

"I said SIT!"

It was almost a scream as it came from the table opposite Dillon and Shaanstar.

Garsivaz the healer slowly stood up, so everyone knew who was talking. The room almost became silent as he spoke up loudly. "The First Mage DOES NOT NEED to be irritated by all your gabbling apologies as soon as she wakes up."

There were some quiet comments further down.

"You will all sit here and eat your food," he said getting off the stool. "And then attend to your night duties whatever they may be. But you are not to come near the First Mage unless requested, either by the First Mage or me. Is that understood?"

There was a gabble of assent with very few grumbles, but nothing dissenting as they returned to their seats.

"Good. I'll be going to see how she is feeling. Now eat your food!"

The Sentinels obeyed the command, and started into the food on the table.

Dillon started helping himself to the food, piling a good selection of different foods.

When Garsivaz walked around behind them, Dillon felt as if he was going to regret something.

"I'd like you both to come along," said Garsivaz. "I think it would be better for her if you were there."

Shaanstar got up, leaving Dillon sitting in front of his plate full of food.

"What about this?" He asked.

"I'll have some later," she said. "Bring yours."

It made instant sense that he got up and brought his plate along, eating the ripe Lowgulas that threatened to roll off as he followed.

### Chapter 13

There were images and feelings still fresh in her mind, as if she'd just awoken from a dream. Yet upon waking, Lilith didn't feel the comfort she'd expected to go with a dream. There were aches and sore spots that accompanied them.

She felt something on her wrist, and drew it out of the bed to look at it. A white bandage covered it exactly where the manacle had dug into her wrist as she'd hung from the frame when she was tortured.

The simple piece of recollection flashed before her eyes, bringing out the memory of her pain.

The pin pricks on her back still hurt from the strikes of the whip and rod, which she'd endured non-stop until her tormentor was ready to rest.

She could see him in her mind, fresh and clear along with all the other robed men who stood around watching her, waiting for something to happen.

But something did happen. The memory washed over her unbidden, almost reviling in its clarity as the man had touched her, brought out feelings she'd never had, and bringing the spark of the lights also.

She's seen it jump and dance around her hand, like a living flame that didn't burn her.

But something happened then that she couldn't describe. No thoughts could understand, but the light that followed as a face descended upon her. She thought she was dead, until he spoke.

She remembered feeling cold, very cold, and the face that was a man made her warm, very warm all over.

It was that feeling again, she remembered from before, but indescribable. Not pain, no. It was something else entirely. All she could rightly remember was the feeling and his face.

And that was it until she woke up now, with no feelings except a dull ache across her back.

Slowly she began to wonder where she was. Lilith sat up in the large warm bed to look about at the huge room, remembering portions of it briefly but also that she had never seen one like it before.

Lilith could envisage her parents raising three or four children in a house as big as it. The fireplace at the other end of the room burned brightly, allowing her to see not wooden walls but stone.

Large tapestries covered some or cloths with intricate patterns that made the room look more comfortable than it was, complete with its own indoor fixtures.

The room, together with the memories made her feel a little dizzy. There was so much going on that she didn't know or understand, and she desperately wanted to know.

A little uneasily she climbed out of the bed, feeling the skin of her back rasp against the cloth of the clothing she wore.

Working her way around the room slowly, she touched the fabric hangings, feeling the deep weave with her fingers.

There was a rattle behind her, and she turned to see the door open into a lit hallway, as a figure stepped into the room.

She immediately backed away from the figure that strode in wearing the same robes as the Order of the Apocalypse.

The man who slinked along the wall in the darkness, as if chasing her, so she slid further back behind the fixtures.

The light in the room seemed blinding when it came on. Lilith looked up at the strange object in the ceiling that shone down upon the room with an unnatural light everywhere.

She was more frightened when two more people entered through the doorway, effectively trapping her.

"Why do you torment me?" She asked the people, as she cowered behind a large tub.

"We're not here to torment you," a male voice spoke back unexpectedly.

She didn't believe the voice that came from the robed man. Not after last time. "I don't trust you," she replied.

The figures stopped where they were, as the robed man stepped back to talk with the other two.

Lilith looked around, wanting to get away, to escape the torture and the cruelty.

"Please, we're not here to hurt you," the other man stepped forward. He wasn't wearing the robes like the Order, but she still didn't trust him. "Look, I brought some food. You're hungry right?" He stepped forward with a plate full of food.

"If you don't want it, I'll eat it myself. I'm kind of hungry myself." He picked a piece of cooked meat off, and stuck it in his mouth, chewing on it before licking his fingers.

"Umm, it's very good. I'm going to enjoy eating this."

Lilith watched him warily as he picked at the food slowly. The smell of the food tantalised her as her stomach reminded her how hungry she really was. She wanted the food, but she was too terrified to move from her hiding place behind the tub.

"How about I come over there," said the man.

He approached the tub slowly when she didn't object, baring the plate in front of him.

He settled to the floor on the other side of the tub, holding the plate out in one hand, "Have something. It's okay."

Lilith looked between him and the plate nervously, before reaching a hand out to snatch a cut piece of fruit. She put it in her mouth to taste its sweet juice as she chewed it. He was still sitting there watching her when she finished.

"Have another," he offered.

Lilith grabbed a few items this time, a piece of fruit, a roll and a piece of meat. She backed away from the tub as she ate the piece of meat.

As she was eating, she felt something familiar about the man. "Who are you?" She asked, between mouthfuls.

"Don't you remember? I'm Dillon." He replied.

His name and his face fell together in her mind, as she placed him as the man she thought she'd dreamed about. Instead she found him to be real.

She stopped eating as she recognised him. "I remember you," she said.

"That's good," he said with a smile.

Lilith tried to remember, "It was cold, and you... you made me warm."

She still couldn't place what happened to her between the torture and the cold, and now. It was like a she'd been in a heavy fog.

"What happened to me?" She asked.

Dillon saw a tear at the edge of her eye. He wanted to lean over the tub to wipe it off her face, when she smudged it across her cheek with the edge of her sleeve.

Where to begin he wondered as he put the plate down in the tub. He resisted the urge to turn about and ask to help from either Shaanstar or the healer. He was sure he'd know enough, but how does one break the news to someone that they'd been frozen in ice for 2600 years?

He suppressed a snort of laughter when he remembered he had just found out something similar, but he had had over a month before hand to realise something was wrong. The girl, no the young woman had probably only been aware of it for a matter of hours.

Dillon heard the Healer speak out behind him before he could open his mouth. "You've been trapped in an ice prison for twenty six hundred and thirty four cycles until you were released this very day."

"Cycles? Prison?"

Dillon saw a confused expression on her face, as she looked directly at him. He nodded his head in affirmation.

"Ma and Pa? Ma's new baby?"

She looked about ready to burst into tears. "They've been dead a long time now." He said, knowing it was true enough for his Patricia.

It was enough, as she broke into sobs, holding her hands against her face to stem the tide.

Dillon moved around the tub, feeling her pain himself as he held her. She gratefully accepted his arms, and wept across the shoulder of his clean shirt as he too shed some tears.

2600 years or 6500 years, it felt no different to either of them, feeling the sudden loss of friends and family that had been carried away by the events of time. Events that Dillon had no control or understanding of, but events that Lilith remembered and still feared.

When she calmed, they separated enough to look at each other. Dillon finally remembered that he didn't know her name. "Please tell me your name."

"Lilith," she said sniffing.

Dillon smiled, "Lilith. You'll be okay now."

She blinked her eyes, and then looked up at the figure that still stood in the dark robes and asked in a quiet voice.

"Then why is he here?"

Dillon looked across at Garsivaz, still missing something. Shaanstar too, standing to the side wanted to know.

"It is not our way to torture any more. We haven't done it since your time."

Garsivaz looked at Shaanstar then at Dillon. "Neither of you know, but she knows. She was there. It was the way of the Order. It was what everyone expected of us."

Dillon listened as Garsivaz explained.

"After the Apocalypse, people were afraid of things from the sky, they cowered whenever the ground shook. Even the burning mountains and the lightning from the air left people in terror. They were afraid that another Apocalypse would occur. That is why a select few men created the Order of the Apocalypse, that they could make sure it wouldn't happen again. It was then that magery started appearing. At first it was hardly noticed, before it started to become known. Everyone thought these people were given powers to help start a new Apocalypse, thus the Order was charged to find and commit these people to trial, who were summarily executed when their magery could be verified by more than two witnesses."

## Chapter 14

Lilith spoke up. "Why... wasn't I killed."

"The Order was given the Mage crystals. They'd been led to believe that it would be more efficient and more humane in finding and dealing with those who had magery."

Lilith didn't interrupt, but she closed her eyes a moment as she remembered the torture she was put through.

"They did work, though instead of killing you they froze you permanently inside a form of ice that couldn't be melted by any normal means. After your incarceration, the Order attempted to use the Mage crystals again several times without success."

"It was then that they..." Garsivaz paused and looked down momentarily, "returned to the brutal methods of torturing. It continued for many cycles as instances of people with magery grew. One thing however remained constant, and that was your pillar of ice. You stood in the centre of that courtyard, where the men of the Order had to see you day after day. The tortures weren't always done by the Order, but the one remembered well stood clearly seen by everyone who visited. Everyone saw you, everyone knew of you, and you remained there having never harmed anyone. It was soon after that the Order broke down when magery was discovered within the very members of the Order. Like a plague or a disease, it seemed to spread with every generation, sprouting even from young babies. People came to realise then that magery couldn't be evil, that they were simply something special."

Garsivaz came to his secret then. "What remained of the Order slowly changed its ways as magery became more known. They sought to redeem themselves for all the people they helped kill over the years, turning their attentions to gathering information, and to helping the Mage in the ice one day regain her freedom that we'd stolen from her."

"You were from the Order?" Shaanstar said, surprised at the revelation. She knew she wouldn't have guessed.

"We haven't used that name for a long time. We have been called Sentinels for a long time because all we did was watch, and this place became the Mage watch. A town grew up around it at one stage, as they sought to be near you the First Mage." Garsivaz pointed at Lilith.

"Many also attempted to break you out, lighting fires around you, even using magery you were imprisoned for, but none of them worked. After a while they grew disenchanted with us. And then there were also the recent battles. But it surprised us, when a single man with unusual clothes and strange questions who should have happened melt your ice prison as easily as if it were already water."

Lilith felt angry, tired and hungry. She wanted to be left alone by these people, yet what she wanted most she could not have because they were long dead.

"Leave me alone." She said, quietly that only Dillon heard it clearly.

"You sure?" He asked.

"Leave me alone!" She said louder and more clearly, drawing her arms about herself.

Dillon forced himself to his feet, and joined Shaanstar and Garsivaz at the door. He really wanted to help her, but didn't know how. He didn't know how to help himself.

Lilith watched as the door closed and the strange lights in the room darkened. She felt sudden guilt at forcing Dillon away like that, that she got up and rushed to the door. She stopped herself at the door, wishing he'd come back but she didn't want to see the robed man again. Instead she leaned against the door, wishing this were all just a nightmare that would go away. Leaning her head against the door, she heard their voices clearly through the wooden panels.

"She needs time to recover," said Garsivaz.

"It'll take more than time to recover," Dillon said, angrily. "She's been tortured. I saw the marks all across her back myself."

"They will heal," Garsivaz replied still calm.

"But she won't forget. I don't know what she's feeling but I know half of what she's been through. Losing her parents, her family, everyone she knew and cared about, and those that loved her. An entire town that she lived in and grew up in, completely gone! Not a single thing left that would seem familiar. It's gone, vaporised! Because your people thought a little magic could bring on an Armageddon."

"Apocalypse," said Shaanstar to correct him.

"Whatever." Dillon waved his hand dismissing her. "What makes you think she'll ever forgive you for what you've done?"

"She won't."

"Bloody right she won't!" Dillon started raising his voice then stopped, realised Garsivaz had agreed.

"I don't expect her forgiveness. Others might, but it's not their choice. We've done cruel things in the past, which we've been atoning for a long time. Alsander and I hope for her forgiveness, but we don't expect it. But we are happy that she is now free, as she should have been. That is one thing that has plagued us for all these cycles. And we thank you for that."

"I'm not sure I want to stay here another day." Dillon said.

"We can leave in the morning." Shaanstar agreed. She'd found the Sentinel's useful to a degree in learning new things, but she had to figure Dillon in all things. And she also believed their inquiries couldn't go any further here. They had to seek a new source of information.

"But we'll need another room for the night." She added.

"I'll arrange something now," said Garsivaz.

He turned away, and then turned back again. "I've heard you ask most of the Sentinels here questions about people or objects that could propel a person though time similar to the First Mage."

Dillon frowned, wondering what the Healer was thinking. "So?"

"You haven't asked me about such information. Nor would I expect you to ask it of me now, but I will tell you of it freely as my own thanks for the First Mage's freedom. Though I know of no such powers, I have heard rumours of people with strange gifts who remain very much unknown amongst normal people. They sometimes make themselves known but the only people who have ever met them are left in a drugged state, and wake up never remembering what happened."

"You speak of the Adept's." Shaanstar said, recognising the traits. "Dillon has already had an encounter with one of them."

"Then you are very fortunate to have done so," said Garsivaz. "They may be whom you seek, or they may know of what you seek. This is all I can offer you."

"Thankyou." Dillon said, welcome for the information.

"I'll organise your room," said Garsivaz before he departed.

"We'll leave in the morning then." Shaanstar said.

"Yes."

Dillon looked to the door, thinking about Lilith staying here. "What about her?"

"She isn't our responsibility," Shaanstar said. "Neither is she the Sentinel's. She should be old enough to do what she wants. We'll leave after breakfast for Canduce. That's where you encountered that Adept. It's as good as place as any to start."

Dillon nodded, only half listening.

"Dillon," she said, getting his attention by placing a hand on his shoulder. "Why don't we see if there is any food left for us to eat? After that'll I'll see that our horse is ready for the journey tomorrow."

"Yes. I'm still hungry."

They went back down the hallway seeking any food left over from the evening meal.

## Chapter 15

Dillon slept a little fitfully, thinking about chasing phantoms and also worrying about Lilith. He tried to put her out of his mind, as he kept telling himself that he'd be leaving in the morning anyhow, and wouldn't have to worry about her again anyhow. It still didn't stop him from disturbing Shaanstar's sleep.

Breakfast was a solitary affair within their room, eating scrambled eggs cooked with leftovers.

Shaanstar was eager to be away as soon as possible, as the road back was dry now since the recent rain, but in these regions it could change at any moment, and they could be caught in a bad storm sweeping up from the south.

Dillon had thought to say goodbye to Lilith before leaving, but found out from the other Sentinels that she'd locked herself in the room during the night, and wouldn't answer to anyone. He stopped by her door anyhow.

"Lilith, this is Dillon!" He knocked on the door, but there wasn't any reply. He hoped she could at least hear him. "I'm leaving the Mage Watch, heading north to a city. I don't know if Shaanstar or I will be back this way again."

Dillon doubted it in his own mind, but if Lilith remained here, there might be a chance later, maybe...

"I just came to say goodbye." He said.

There wasn't the sound of any reply, just silence from behind the door. He stepped away from the door, joined Shaanstar as they left the building.

It was no fond farewell as they said goodbye to many of the other Sentinels with little emotion. Their horse Pecker was saddled with provisions for the journey, standing close to where the ice column had stood.

He mounted first before Shaanstar got up behind him, heading Pecker towards the gates that stood wide open now.

Dillon felt a little trepidation as they passed the gate, but he focused his thoughts upon what lay ahead of them. There was a two-week ride at least, and Shaanstar hadn't burdened them with any odd jobs to earn money along the way. He felt sure she would find something that would annoy him no end, whilst still effectively earning enough to feed them.

They were halfway through the ruins of the town around Mage watch when there were shouts from behind them. Dillon figured there were a few more of Sentinels that wanted to say goodbye, but he couldn't turn around to look.

"Shaanstar, stop the horse," he said, putting one hand on the reins.

She stopped, and round the horse about to look back at the tall grey walls of the Mage watch.

Emerging from the open gate was a single grey robed figure, who came running along the flattened ground bare legs and feet showing beneath.

Lilith hurtled along the ground disregarding the edges of ruin buildings and rotting wood as she hurried to catch the single horse. She had all but yelled at the Sentinels that she was going and that they couldn't stop her. None of them had even tried to stop her, though many had called out and pleaded for her not to leave.

If there was anything she wanted least, that was to stay there. She didn't want the reminders, the images of the robed figures lurking behind the dark doors as well as in her sleep every night or the strange lights in the ceiling. She didn't want to face them, or what they had done to her, she wanted to leave.

The conversation she'd overheard last night between Dillon and the other two, made her want more than anything to go with them. Dillon had mentioned knowing what it was like to lose everything he had, though she didn't know how or why. She had also felt something when Dillon had been with her yesterday and of what she could remember. She couldn't comprehend it, but she wanted to. Wanted to understand, and she believed only Dillon could provide those answers.

And Dillon was leaving the Mage Watch. It was all she knew she wanted at the moment. So she followed her head as she caught up with the horse with the two mounted figures.

"I'm coming with you!" She said, coming to a halt.

Dillon was a little surprised, but he had thought that maybe she should come with them. He knew he harboured feelings for her because she looked so much like Patricia, which he thought might have influenced him.

"We can't take you," Shaanstar said flatly.

"You can't stop me from coming, and you can't make me stay either," Lilith said, scowling at Shaanstar.

"It's her choice." Dillon tried to argue.

"It isn't the horse's choice to carry three people," Shaanstar said.

"I'll walk then," Lilith said, "It's not as if don't walk everywhere I go." She proceeded down the trail by herself to leave them behind.

"It'd better if she came with us," Dillon told Shaanstar.

"I know." Shaanstar said, edging the horse slowly forward after Lilith. "This is no place for a person to be wandering about by themselves without food."

"I want her to come with us." Dillon said.

"I know."

"And I think... You know?"

"I had extra provisions packed for a third person and a longer journey. Though I had thought that you might have asked her directly."

"I should have. But what about Pecker?"

"You and her will ride Pecker, I will walk. She'll hurt her feet at the rate she is going."

Shaanstar urged Pecker forward, rounding in front of Lilith.

"Don't stop me!" She said, glaring up at both of them.

"We're not," Dillon said. "You're coming with us."

Her face softened, before breaking into a smile. "Thankyou, oh thankyou for taking me." She pulled on Dillon's leg gently.

Shaanstar eased off the horse, dropping to the ground.

"Have you ever ridden before?" She asked.

"No. Never." Lilith replied, fascinated.

"You'd better get down to allow her up first," Shaanstar told Dillon as she held the reins.

Dillon climbed off, and then helped Lilith up.

"Left foot in the stirrup, that's right. Now push yourself up, and lift the other leg over."

"I can't get it over," she said as the robe got caught.

"She'll have to draw it up," Shaanstar said seeing the difficulty. "Draw the robe up with one hand."

Lilith almost lost balance letting go of the pommel with one hand to draw enough loose material up to lift her leg across. She settled eventually after shifting the loose material underneath her.

Dillon got up with a lot less difficulty having had some more recent experience, and settled behind Lilith. He reached around her as Shaanstar passed the reins up to his hands.

"Let's be off," Shaanstar said, leading the way on foot back along the road.

She struck up a fast walking pace, seeing no need for a slow stroll. She envisaged herself walking the whole distance back to Canduce unless Dillon walked for a while, but then they would move even slower.

If they were to make Canduce in anything less than three ten days, she would need to walk fast.

"This is fun." Lilith said, looking about now. Dillon's arm's kept her steady but she still held on to the pommel. "I've forgotten to ask your name." Lilith said.

Shaanstar glanced sideways, where Lilith looked down at her. "Shaanstar." She replied.

"That's a pretty name. Shaanstar."

"I'm named after a flower that is only found growing in dead bodies left in the desert."

"Disgusting," Lilith said.

"I think so too." Dillon agreed.

"Most flowers grow in dead things." Shaanstar told them. "You should tell her what word not to say around the horse."

"Word? Oh yes." Dillon remembered what it was.

He thought it best to explain first. "We got Pecker from its previous owner after trying to use it for breeding, except he had some performance problems. So apparently they trained it to mount the female horses." Dillon remembered to avoid the word in his explanation. "By using a spoken command. Whenever you speak this word, he'll buck off anything on his back, including us, so never, ever use this word."

Dillon leaned forward and whispered it into her ear.

She giggled when she heard it. "Poor horsy had trouble with the fillies," she said patting the neck of the horse.

Pecker neighed, almost as if he understood her.

Dillon remembered to look back over his shoulder to the Mage Watch. There were a few of the robed figures standing about, watching them leave, but only one was waving their arm. Dillon raised an arm and waved back, before returning his focus on the journey.

They travelled for hours, passing green vegetation that grew close to the road, but never infringing upon their path. It was quiet, almost dull as compared to the rainstorm Dillon and Shaanstar had to travel through last time.

Lilith didn't know what to expect as they travelled along, but she hoped to learn new things, at least learn of her companions. She studied Shaanstar for a long while, looking at her clothing, how her reddish hair was neatly tied back from her face with several small braids that hung behind her ears and her neck at her back.

She stared at the armour plates curiously, wondering how effective they were if they only covered portions of her body and left others unprotected and completely bare.

She could see Dillon's arms reaching around her, the fluffy white fabric unlike any she'd seen before upon his arms. A strange object was attached to his wrist.

"What is this?" She asked, touching his wrist.

"That's a watch. It tells me the time, not that I've seen anyone else with something similar. Its next to useless unless someone else has one."

*But then again, it of all things has kept working since I got here,* Dillon thought. *Water proof stainless steel case, Lithium battery, quartz movement, guaranteed for the life of the watch, not that the manufacturer is around any more to hold to that guarantee.*

"It's got little moving things!" Lilith exclaimed.

Dillon wondered how much of a child she was, be reminded himself that nobody else had seen his watch... except Shaanstar. But he hadn't seen her get surprised at anything. She was still walking steadily, pretty much ignoring them.

"Are we headed west? I'd like to see my old town." Lilith asked.

"We're headed east." Shaanstar replied. "It doesn't matter, as it was resettled a long time ago. There isn't anything left to see except a lot of trees."

"Oh." Lilith said, disappointed. "How do you know?"

"I went through this area about three cycles ago chasing something, and there was nothing out west to see, except trees, and the mosquitoes."

Lilith was silent, wondering how a town such as Sancoote could disappear. She suddenly wondered about Dillon.

"Dillon, tell me about your town," she asked.

The question caught him off guard. He hadn't expected a question like that from her. He had a sudden overwhelming feeling of grief thinking about home, or the city he had called home. The beautiful skyscrapers, the well lined city streets, the majestic lady who stood out from her buildings, holding aloft her golden flame. It was completely gone, almost as if it had been scoured to the bedrock by an atomic blast.

He had trouble breathing and didn't answer her for a short while.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said, wishing he were home.

It's not as if he had red sparkling slippers either to click the heels together.

No, this was no mere dream. It was acutely real. The horse, the people, the places, it was physically real.

"It's gone?" Lilith asked, intruding on his thoughts.

"A long time ago it was snuffed out like a candle. By the time you were born, it wasn't a memory any more."

"So long ago? Was it the Apocalypse?"

"Probably. Though I came from way before that."

Dillon didn't sound happy talking about it, so Lilith didn't ask any more questions on the subject.

It was getting dark by the time they stopped for the night. The sun had already disappeared behind them, turning the surrounding trees into a depthless black wall.

There wasn't much of a clearing, so they settled on the edge of the road, where a fire was built up for the night, so they could eat and sleep in some comfort.

"I've never slept away from home before." Lilith admitted, sitting on a small log drawn close to the fire.

She had her knees drawn inside the robe, holding her hands in opposite sleeves to stay warm.

"It's not too difficult." Dillon said.

"You'll have to get used to it," said Shaanstar.

The food had all been precooked or preserved by the Sentinels, so there was no cooking involved. Shaanstar had only to distribute it evenly.

Lilith stood up when finished. "I need to go potty."

"You'll have to dig yourself a hole." Shaanstar replied, trying to relax.

Dillon didn't know whether she was being obtuse to Lilith on purpose or not, but he got up and went to Pecker to retrieve the small shovel.

"You'll need this," He said turning to her.

"It's better than using my hands." She replied, coming forward to retrieve it.

"Let me. I need to go too."

He looked about for a moment, and then headed across the road farthest from the camp. Lilith followed him until he found a spot behind some trees then dug a deep hole, big enough to put his foot completely inside.

"Thank you," she said.

Dillon turned without a word, and headed back to the camp. He took his time at gathering some ash from the edges of the fire before heading back.

Lilith was finished when he returned, with the smell of human waste evident.

She didn't make a comment as she headed back across the road, leaving him alone to make use of the hole.

When he was finished, he spread the ash over the contents and covered the hole up again, firmly stamping it down.

Bedrolls were arranged before everyone settled down to sleep.

## Chapter 16

Dillon awoke during the night thinking he heard something. Turning his head he heard a voice and movement in the darkness.

Instantly awake now that he was sure he heard something, he sat up straight. The fire cast a small amount of light, just enough to see by as he looked at Shaanstar who lay perfectly still. He couldn't tell if she was awake as her face was facing away from the fire, in the shadow of the fire.

Dillon heard the movement again, and turned his head towards Lilith. She tossed and turned half off the bedroll, her legs and arms splayed at uncomfortable angles, murmuring something in her sleep.

He eased himself off his roll and walked lightly around to Lilith as she tossed some more, her knees kicking up her robe revealing her feet and legs to the firelight.

Kneeling close he pulled the edge of her robe down, covering her again.

"Please don't, no, your hurting me."

Dillon could hear her talking like she was having a nightmare. He had no idea what she'd been through, but he wished he could ease her pain. He placed a hand gently on her cheek, shifting her hair away from her face.

"Why. Why are you doing this? What are you doing?" He heard her talk further.

She rolled again drawing her knees up as she moaned.

"My hands! What's on my hands?"

Dillon glanced at her hands half thinking she was awake, and was surprised by what he saw. Arcs of light were easily discernible in the darkness, leaping across her skin as he'd seen before at the Mage watch.

It slowly faded by itself as he watched, and Lilith relaxed once more. He sat there for a while until he was sure she was okay, before returning to his bedroll.

He lay awake for a few minutes, wondering why he hadn't had any nightmares since all this begun. Oh, he'd had dreams, lurid, weird, and some about the past, but no nightmares. He fell asleep thinking about this.

In the morning after getting on the road again, Dillon queried Lilith about her magery.

"How do you create those sparks on your hands?"

Lilith was apprehensive with the question, unsure about talking about the subject.

"I don't know," she answered timidly, afraid to find out his response.

His arms were around her, and it was as if he was holding her against her will. She pushed against his arm, and slipped off the horse, falling onto the ground.

Dillon reined the horse to a stop as Shaanstar bent over Lilith who lay on the ground holding her elbows and shaking.

"What happened?" She asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "She just pushed past my arm and fell off."

Dillon climbed off Pecker and walked over.

"Lilith, what's wrong?" He asked.

"Please don't hurt me. I don't know how to do it," she said in a quiet voice.

"We're not here to hurt you," he told her, as she started crying.

"Hey, hey." He tried to sooth her, kneeling down to help her to a sitting position against him. "Have we hurt you?"

He held her close as she sobbed, trying to calm and reassure her as best he could.

"We're not going to hurt you. I would never ever would I hurt you. Truly."

It was a few minutes until she calmed down again before she spoke. "Why did you ask about my magery?"

"I was just curious about it. I've seen it twice now, but I don't know how you do it. Shaanstar can make things colder, and all she seems to do is concentrate on whatever's in her hands. I feel like the short stick, because I don't seem to be able to do anything."

"That can't be so," Shaanstar interrupted. "How did you free Lilith from the ice?"

Dillon looked up at her, "I don't really know. In fact, I don't think I did it at all. I was only standing there when it started melting."

He forgot to mention when he approached the ice that it started melting faster, but that could well have been coincidence. He didn't really believe he had any magery or powers, as he wasn't even from this time period.

Lilith sat up, and looked at Shaanstar. "You... have magery?"

"Yes." She replied, suddenly feeling the centre of attention.

"Can I see them?"

"They aren't much," Shaanstar said trying to play down her insignificant abilities. "And it isn't really visible."

"Oh."

She could see disappointment in Lilith's face, and she wasn't one to disappoint usually.

She looked around for something useful, and couldn't find something so she snatched a small green leaf from the ground.

"See this?"

She held it up in front of Lilith, and bent it backwards and forwards to show that it was a leaf.

She placed the leaf on one palm, and held her hands together as she concentrated. She hadn't tried a leaf before, but it didn't have much mass, so she knew it shouldn't take as long to freeze.

She could feel the leaf getting colder, but it was several minutes before she opened her hands up.

She held the frosted leaf up to Lilith, and this time as she bent it, it bent and stayed that way. She held it forward for Lilith, as she took it from her hands.

Lilith bent the leaf until it snapped, feeling the half frozen leaf between her fingers.

"It's frozen," she exclaimed, never having seen anything frozen before.

"Not quite." Shaanstar said. "I'd have to concentrate hard for twice as long before it was fully frozen. I'm not too sure if I could do it with anything much bigger than that either."

Lilith was quiet, as she looked at the leaf.

"We should be on our way," Shaanstar said, grabbing one of Lilith's arms and helping her up.

Lilith grimaced at the hold and it wasn't until Shaanstar folded back her sleeves that they saw the grazes along her forearms where she'd landed.

"We're not going to the Mage Watch to heal those. They'll have to heal naturally."

Dillon had an idea, and unwrapped one of the bandages still on her wrists. "Let's try this." He suggested, smelling a little of the healing potion still on the bandages. Dillon wrapped it around Lilith's arm; careful to make sure it wouldn't slide off as Shaanstar did the same with the other arm.

"My wrists!" Lilith said, noticing now that her wrists were fully healed.

She touched each one carefully, noticing no marks or any scars to show that she'd ever been tortured.

"Up onto Pecker." Shaanstar directed, helping her up onto the saddle.

"I'm going to walk for a while," said Dillon when Shaanstar offered to help him up.

Shaanstar looped the reins around a hand, and proceeded down the road. Dillon walked fast, keeping pace with her.

Lilith was amazed at how her wrists had healed. Never had she seen anything like it. She touched and prodded them, but they felt normal. She looked at the leaf she still held, much greener now with the warmth from her hands, but it remained broken.

She began to wonder about her own magery, and stared at her hands thinking about how to create the light she'd seen sparking across her fingers. It was hard to imagine it, but she concentrated on just seeing the light appear over her fingers.

Shaanstar saw how Lilith was preoccupied with her hands, and turned to Dillon who walked along beside her, barely keeping up. She shortened her pace just a touch so she could talk to him without him running out of breath.

"You know I talked with Nedruss and Savitch on the caravan about your encounter with the harpy, and they swear that no one else could have stopped it, except you."

Dillon just looked at her, remembering the frightful incident.

"Neither of them have skills like that, and they talked with the guards when we went to see the minister and they sure didn't have skills like that, or even ranged that far."

"What do you mean?" Dillon asked.

"Savitch, Nedruss, and the guards were all some distance away. Only you were closest to the harpy, and it did come straight for you."

"There were the horses..." he tried to dispute.

"Horses don't have magery!" Said she, feeling exasperated that he wouldn't accept fact. "It was you and no one else who did that. Just as I'm sure you freed Lilith. Twenty six hundred cycles of mage ice doesn't just melt by itself."

Dillon looked to the road, "I suppose it doesn't."

"Of course not. You've got magery and you have to accept it, just like she is." Shaanstar indicated towards Lilith who was still staring intently at her hands.

Dillon accepted it though he didn't think on it as Lilith was. He'd been amazed when he'd first seen magery, but he didn't want to contemplate any powers that he might have.

## Chapter 17

During the following days, they proceeded eastward at a constant pace as Shaanstar walked briskly beside Dillon and Lilith as they rode double on the back of Pecker.

Lilith continued to concentrate on her magery, thrilled when she saw some progress one night after she lay down to sleep in the form of a very small spark on the tip of a finger. But it remained difficult to produce anything larger, until she tried to remember how she felt before when her magery had worked.

She had to provide a physical sensation before she could get any further, either touching her stomach or the back of her legs lightly but it remained difficult.

She spent most hours as they travelled, trying to focus mentally to provide the stimulation, but instead of blocking out everything else she magnified what she could feel, Dillon's chest pressing against her back, his arms around her, and the feeling of her thighs pressed against the smooth leather of the saddle.

She thought she was doing it all wrong until she looked at her hands, and saw the sparks licking across her fingers. She was about to turn and show Dillon when it disappeared before she could utter a word.

Lilith stopped trying only for a short while, feeling tired from the effort.

Days later, they turned onto a larger well-worn road, headed north now.

"What's that way?" Lilith asked, curious.

"Ballydin. It's a fishing town near the big waterspouts."

"Water spouts?" Dillon asked.

"Huge pillars of water," Shaanstar explained. "Ships don't go near them, because it's too dangerous, but closer to land the fishing is good."

"How big are they?" Lilith asked.

"Many times bigger than a ship. That you can't see the top in the clouds."

Dillon thought the weather conditions had to be strange to support such a formation, but it wasn't unheard of. He put it to the back of his mind, as he watched the scenery slowly change as they headed north.

The countryside changed subtly as they travelled, as the jungle like forests slowly thinned out.

They were a day out from the Ballydin junction, when Shaanstar heard something. She stopped and turned, hearing something rapidly approaching from behind.

Dillon stopped the horse, and turned to look too, seeing a small dust cloud visible on the road behind them. A horse and rider appeared in front of the approached dust, slowing when it spotted them, to come to a halt nearby.

"You're travelling to Canduce?" He called, trying to keep his horse still.

"We are," Shaanstar replied.

"Be warned that Royan has declared war on Argandonia after a group of their soldiers attacked Royan farmers."

"How serious is it?"

"Any Argandonian's caught by Royan soldiers by will be dealt with."

The rider turned his horse, ready to race on down the road. "A caravan was attacked on this road further north. You might wish to join the armed caravan returning from Ballydin a few hours behind me, in case some of the raiding Argandonian's try to attack."

Without another word, he kicked his horse and pounded down the road kicking up dust and gravel as he went.

"Sound's serious," said Dillon.

"It might be, but it's hard to tell." Shaanstar replied.

*Soldiers don't usually attack farmers, unless there was something else going on. But they've declared war now,* she thought.

"Who are the Argandonian's?" Lilith asked.

Shaanstar explained it to her, "They are an old family who lives much further north of here. There's a feud between them and the Royan's, who inherited some of the old Telseca lands where your town used to be."

"Why are they at war?" Lilith asked.

"Because they can," Dillon murmured, thinking about the small battles fought between two religiously opposed groups in southeast Europe during his time.

"I don't know." Shaanstar replied. "I don't think anyone knows except the lords themselves."

Dillon was ready to continue north, but Shaanstar appeared to linger.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"The caravan following us must be Remar and Savitch. Back in Canduce, she told us there was another caravan headed down towards Mage Watch in a ten day, and we haven't seen anything."

"Your right." Dillon said, having seen nothing. "Jeeze," he said under his breath, putting the rider's message together with her fact. *It must have been the caravan headed for the Mage watch that was attacked.*

"We should wait here for Remar to catch up with us."

Dillon dismounted, and helped Lilith off too, so they could wait for the approaching caravan.

It was visible for some time way down the road, dust, horses, and the large wagons.

Shaanstar stood her ground in the road as Dillon and Lilith stood slightly behind with Pecker as two riders on horses advanced forward to meet them, with weapons drawn.

"Ho there! What are your intentions?"

Shaanstar recognised neither of the riders, "We seek protection on the trip to Canduce. If either Remar or Savitch are in your caravan, they can vouch for us."

One of the riders held the ground, as the other rode back to the caravan, which had stopped on a rise ready to either turn about or defend itself depending on what they did.

Two riders came back, one with a dark moustache, and a grin that broke open when he came close enough.

"Shaanstar, so its you who's slowing us down now!" Remar called approaching close. He turned to the other two men. "They're friends. The caravan won't be harmed by them, if anything they'll frighten off anyone who'd want to attack us."

The two riders turned back, waving the wagons forward.

"I recognise your friend here, who killed that nasty beast, but I don't remember the young woman." Remar said, still on his horse.

"Lilith, was a guest at the Mage watch," Shaanstar explained. "But she decided to travel with us when we left. It's a complicated story."

"I like complicated stories," Remar said, stepping his horse sideways as the caravan approached. "You should know that Shaanstar."

Remar looked back at the wagons as the first one passed. "The fourth wagon's a little light. We can fit one of you on there, otherwise you'll have to double on a horse."

"Dillon, you take the wagon," Shaanstar directed. She mounted up on Pecker, almost as if she'd been riding for years. "Up on the back." She told Lilith, giving her a hand to swing her up. "First sign of trouble, you get off and stay close to the wagons, okay?"

"Yes," said Lilith.

Remar had the fourth wagon slow so Dillon could climb up, seating himself on the front next to the driver.

The trip back to Canduce was a ten-day journey for the caravan, stopping only at night after securing the area against possible attacks, keeping riders scouting ahead and eyes open to all sides.

They found the remains of what had been the caravan headed towards the Mage watch both on and off to the side of the road. Dillon and Lilith saw the bodies of men and women lying wherever they'd fallen during the battle as no one had come back this way yet except for the rider. Birds and other scavengers were around the bodies, picking at whatever they could get.

The caravan stopped only long enough to clear the bodies and burnt remains of the wagons from the road before continuing.

Dillon was left wondering why they hadn't stopped to at least bury the dead, but the driver who he rode next to snapped at him. "We stop here to bury them, and we're more than like to end up joining them."

Lilith rode behind Shaanstar all the way, having no chance to try her magery except at night because she had to hang onto Shaanstar whilst they rode as the caravan kept up a good pace.

Dillon was in range when Remar talked with Shaanstar during the nights.

"I bet you're glad you didn't take that later caravan," he said.

"Somewhat, but I didn't know they were going to war right after we left," she replied.

"Word came down from the messenger, that Royan has troops all through Canduce. You might want to avoid been seen as anything but Royan loyalists, otherwise someone might want to make an example."

"I'll remember that, thanks."

"Make sure your charges know that too."

Shaanstar understood enough to tell Dillon and Lilith what to say and not to say when asked about who they were.

When they finally approached Canduce in the afternoon. Lilith was amazed at the scale of the walls and buildings. She could see stonewalls reaching vast heights, with large buildings sprawled beyond, bright and more beautiful than her old home could ever have been.

They faced an armed escort or soldiers who rode out from Canduce to intercept them before leading them into the city. It was all orderly and very totalitarian as more guards stopped the caravan inside of the city walls, to direct them around the busy movements of soldiers inside.

It wasn't like the happy atmosphere of a city with people moving about that Dillon remembered it from before, but organised groups marched or walked to and fro.

The wagons of the caravan had to give way to these groups, making headway towards the caravan's home more difficult.

There wasn't any need for them to accompany the caravan all the way, so Shaanstar bid farewell as Dillon hopped off the wagon onto the cobble-stoned road.

"It's so large!" Lilith said, feeling the buildings looming over her.

Dillon looked up at the two and three story structures, and felt it was a little open. Maybe around Central Park you could get this much sky, but not in down town New York. Dillon didn't tell Lilith otherwise, but looked to Shaanstar.

"Where do we go now?"

"We see if we can get some lodgings," she replied.

They moved down the street, looking for an establishment that could house them, at least for the coming night. Halfway down, a group of well-dressed soldiers approached in the other direction.

"You there, who are you and what are you doing down here?" One of the soldiers demanded as they came closer.

Shaanstar wondered for a moment if they should have stayed with the caravan, but it was too late for that now.

"We're Royan travellers, a little lost."

"Travellers, eh? You bear the marks of a warrior or a mercenary." One said accusingly, but there were five of the soldiers, all of them armed though none had drawn weapons.

"I sometimes work for pay, yes."

"Good! Cause you've all just been drafted!" The first soldier said. "You can all bear arms in the Royan military. We're a little short in a few of the reserve units."

Dillon wondered if they were pulling a joke on them, until the soldiers put their hands on the hilts of their swords. "Come with us this way," they said, directing them.

"That your horse too?"

"It is," Shaanstar said, feeling more uncomfortable.

"Good, cause we can use all the horses we can. You'll be reimbursed suitably for it."

Shaanstar rode Pecker behind two of the soldiers as the other three followed, with Dillon just in front of her. She didn't want to join this army, but she had little chance of making an escape with Dillon in a city full of soldiers. She had no choice but to go along.

They were led around into the general barracks, where their horse was taken away.

"Twenty two hundred crowns," a man said, lumping her with a hand full of coins.

"Hey, we paid more than that..." Dillon called to him as he walked away with Pecker in hand without any protest.

"It's probably more than you'll ever get something that old," the soldier that'd drafted them said.

"It's a pity you..." Dillon started before Shaanstar thumped him in the chest with a closed hand.

"It's a pity what?" The soldier asked.

"It doesn't matter," said Shaanstar.

"Good. I'm Izart. I'm commanding the Fourth Reserve unit, which you have all just joined. Enar here will see that you are billeted for the evening and appropriately fitted with what a reserve soldier requires."

Izart left abruptly with the others who'd accompanied him, leaving them with no horse and a short swarthy looking man who wore a similar uniform but with less decoration.

Enar glared at them from under brown eyebrows. "I don't want to be here just as much as you do," he said.

"Then we'll just leave," Dillon offered.

"I wouldn't do that. You're now all members of the Royan military. If you leave you'll be declared a deserter. Deserters get hunted down and executed without trial during a war."

Shaanstar had had a bad feeling when the soldiers had approached them, now she could only hope that the war ended before they called in the reserves.

"The Forth Reserve is billeted over there on the second floor." Enar pointed to a long two level wooden building, with open shutters spaced along it. "Take whatever beds are empty. They're all out getting some weapons practice in with the Third. But I suppose two of you require weapons?"

Whilst Lilith was still confused about what was happening, Dillon went along knowing he was going to regret whether he did or didn't.

"This way, and we'll get you something," Enar said.

## Chapter 18

"A sword for you," Enar handed Dillon a sword in its scabbard. He pulled it out, to look how big the blade was. The metal looked dull but the edge had been sharpened recently.

"I'm not sure a sword would be appropriate for you. You don't happen to know how to use a bow or crossbow would you?" Enar asked of Lilith.

"No," she replied.

"Well, let's see. How about a nice short axe." Enar pulled the axe from its rack, expertly spinning it around as if to show off, before passing it to Lilith.

She found it heavier than she expected but not too heavy that she couldn't swing it.

"That blade is nice and sharp, but the handle makes it a little difficult against someone with a sword," Enar explained.

"A little?" Shaanstar interrupted.

"Well, more than a little." Enar said, finding himself at odds against Shaanstar.

She gave him a contemptuous look before turning to Lilith. "The idea is swing that thing sideways with both hands, otherwise you might take your own leg off," she said, showing Lilith how to hold the axe for maximum effectiveness. "If you get behind someone with that thing, aim for the middle of the back, cause you might get their spine, otherwise if you are face with someone with a sword, then run away. Unless they're trying to cave your head in then duck and swing for their legs. Because if they don't have any legs, they can't come after you."

"That's about right," Enar said, scowling that the woman knew enough about axes. "But do you know what to do about shields?"

"Don't bother attacking someone with a shield, your axe will only get stuck in it or bounce off it," Shaanstar told Lilith.

Lilith tried to memorize everything, on how to hold and use the axe against a living person.

"Back to the billets." Enar ordered them back outside and across the yard.

He marched them upstairs into the reserve quarters. "Choose any of the untouched beds, then you can stow your gear at the end of the beds. The rest of the reserves will be back from their training soon, so you might as well get comfortable until then."

Shaanstar watched Enar depart, leaving them alone in the large room.

"What the hell is going on?" Dillon asked, tossing the sword onto an apparently empty bed.

"It looks like the Royan lord is getting everyone into this war. It's possibly a make or break situation," Shaanstar speculated. "It's very serious."

"Seriously stupid."

"Don't think that. We may be reserves, but it is very possible that we will be called to fight Argandonian forces."

Lilith felt lost, understanding little of what was going on around her. She desperately wanted to understand, but everyone was talking about places or people she didn't know about. Even the room disturbed her, with its lights that didn't come from flames. Back at the Mage watch, she'd seen the glowing lights in the ceiling briefly, but now they were all over the place.

The room frightened her. The whole place frightened her. She dropped the axe, and slipped under one of the beds to hide from the light.

Dillon turned with Shaanstar at the sound of heavy metal embedding itself into the wooden floor. The axe stood with its handle pointed upwards.

"Where is she?" Shaanstar asked.

"Lilith?" Dillon called, wondering how she'd disappeared so fast. For a heartbeat he considered her been taken by whatever had taken him from his time, but dismissed it as quickly.

Shaanstar bent over, and looked under the beds. "There she is."

Dillon squatted down to have a look, finding Lilith cowering under the bed with the hood of the robe pulled over her head.

"Lilith?" He asked, getting no response.

Both he and Shaanstar approached the bed on either side. Shaanstar squatted down on that side as Dillon lay down along the floor so he could see Lilith face to face.

"Lilith?" He queried again.

A muffled voice came back, "Why does the light not burn?"

"What light?" Dillon asked confused.

"The lights in the roof," Lilith replied still covering her face.

Dillon looked up at the ceiling, at the crystals that glowed too brightly to look at directly. He had thought that they were light globes, but that required electricity. He hadn't seen much of anything around that said anybody had electricity, but the lights he'd seen turned on like electricity. They'd said at the mage watch that they had a power stone. It sounded like electricity, but it didn't usually come from stones.

He wanted to know, and Lilith needed to know how the lights worked. Dillon levered himself up to look over the bed at Shaanstar. "How do those lights work?"

She looked at Dillon incredulously. "You press the wall stud," she said stupidly, before remembering that he knew that much.

"I know that, but how do they..." he pointed at the ceiling. "Make light?"

"They are glow stones." She answered, trying to remember what she knew. The stones were just stones as far as she knew, but they needed to be connected to power stones. "They are connected to a power stone, which may be on the roof of this building by a power line. The wall stud simply connects or breaks the power line."

*Power line?* Dillon thought. It seemed curiously the same as modern... as technology from his era. But still it didn't make sense. "Then where does a power stone get its power from?" He asked, trying to get the bigger picture.

"From the sun." She replied.

To Dillon it sounded as if she was explaining a solar panel, but it was called a stone. And he hadn't seen anything even remotely similar to the technology to create something as sophisticated as a solar panel anywhere.

He was still in the dark on how it actually worked, and Lilith was still hiding in the darkness of the bed. He needed simple answers. "Where do the power stones and glow stones come from?" He asked, not really prepared for the simple answer.

"Someone makes them."

*Someone makes them. Our course someone makes them! But...* "But how do they make them?"

"I don't know," Shaanstar replied at the extent of her knowledge. "The same was as a healer makes healing potions I guess. They just make them."

Dillon didn't know a thing about how the healers made their potions, but knew they worked extremely effectively. "And how, do healers make their potions?"

Shaanstar explained what she knew, "They have special magery, that they imbue on a mixture of certain items. What sort of potion they get depends on what they mix together. They heal wounds, clear nausea, remove pain, and heal any number of ailments."

Dillon thought about it for a moment. Considering the effectiveness of magery which he'd seen little of personally, it made sense to him that something could alter the molecular makeup of something, turning it into something else by rearranging the structure. If he extended that idea to rocks, or stones, then it seemed likely that something could in fact do what these stones were doing, collecting energy from the sun, and transporting it across some sort of line to another stone which then produced light.

*Simple*, he thought to himself. He had trouble believing it himself, and now he had to explain it to Lilith. He bent under the bed again. "They won't harm you Lilith, they only produce light."

Lilith didn't stir. "A stone outside absorbs sunlight, and gives the light to the stones inside which release the light. That's all they do."

"No fire?" Lilith asked.

"No fire. They don't make heat." He guessed, but he was sure it was only light. The stones were mounted in the wood of the ceiling. If they made heat, the roof was sure to catch on fire.

"It wasn't fire," Lilith said. It sounded like she was crying under the cloak.

Dillon put a hand on her, hoping it was her back. "What wasn't fire?" He asked, trying to soothe her.

"What they did to me," she sobbed.

*The Mage watch*, he remembered. *They froze her... with crystals!* The leap in logic from glow stones to crystals didn't take much, but it made sense that Lilith was afraid. *She's still like a child, but then I'd probably be afraid of fire if I didn't know what it was.*

"It's all right, they won't hurt you. I can promise, and I'm sure Shaanstar can promise too that the stones won't do anything to you."

Lilith remembered other promises made to her, promises to be kind. "Don't promise. Swear it." she said.

"On what should I swear it?" Dillon asked.

To be true with her self, Lilith knew she had to trust in something. Her family, whom she'd trusted were gone, and her heart which she thought had been true had let her down in believing Segen was the one for her.

She found there was little left for her to believe in. When Lilith realised this, she started to cry again.

Dillon wondered what was wrong when she started to cry again, shaking under his hand. He needed to swear upon something to get her faith back in herself. So he swore on what he knew.

"I swear that the lights won't hurt you. I swear it on my life and my heart to you Lilith."

She heard him over her own crying swear his heart to her, and took a moment to calm herself before lifting the hood to face him. "You swore on your heart?"

"Yes, and my life."

Lilith hadn't expected him to swear his heart to her, that she had trouble breathing for a moment. Segen had pledged himself to her, and then brought about her torture and separation from everything she had known and loved. She'd thought he'd been the one, and her heart had deceived her.

She could still remember the images and the feelings associated with him, but they brought up different sensations now. She didn't think she could trust her heart in this, but there was something she felt about Dillon, something that felt right in her body, if not in her heart.

Her breath was still coming quickly, as she made up her mind. "Then I pledge my heart to you," she said, sliding towards him.

Dillon was relieved that she started to come out, and moved back, to helping her up onto her feet. Shaanstar stood up on the other side of the bed happy at least that Lilith was coming out, but she didn't understand why Lilith spoke about her heart.

Lilith's eyes were wet with her tears, so he wiped them off gently, hoping she would feel better. He was leaning close, when her lips unexpectedly met his. He didn't draw back, as he looked into her face drawing the kiss on until they finally broke. When he thought they'd finished, she wrapped her arms about him.

"Thankyou," she said.

Dillon stood there awkwardly, wondering if something had transpired without him noticing. He glanced at Shaanstar, but she stood tall and straight, not expressing anything unusual.

He dismissed it, as sounds erupted from outside.

Several men and women staggered inside the doorway, huffing and puffing heavily as they tried to clear the way as more followed them inside, some older men looking like they had barely crawled up the stairs.

"It's a wonder... that we made... it back," one of the men puffed. He was bent over breathing hard, only his dark hair visible over his sweat stained clothes.

"Speak for yourself," a woman said, straightening up as she controlled her breathing.

She had a dark complexion, and black hair shaven short, that ill matched her faded leather shorts and stained vest. "It looks like we've got a few additions."

"They should have been... out with us then. We might have beaten the Third," the man said, bending up enough to take a glance.

"Maybe. And maybe not," the woman replied.

She walked forward between the beds, looking over the three of them standing there. She stopped where the axe still stood embedded in the floor, and pulled it out.

"Shouldn't leave an axe lying there. Someone might cut them self on it," she said, weighting it in one hand. "Whose is it?"

"It's mine," said Shaanstar, before Lilith could respond.

"Yours eh? Catch then." The woman spun it about in her hand then tossed it into the air with a slow whirl towards Shaanstar, who caught it by the handle.

Instead of just catching it, she spun it about her hand, then threw it from her shoulder past the other woman, where it landed chest high in the opposite wall.

"You shouldn't play with other people's things either. The owners tend to get angry," she told the unknown woman.

The two of them stared at each other before they both broke into smiles. "Welcome to the Fourth reserves you rogue!"

"It's nice to see you too Ivanka," Shaanstar replied, as they embraced briefly.

The other reserves who'd been filling in behind to watch the potential clash, now filed past towards their beds to put their weapons away.

"Though not under the circumstances I expect," Ivanka replied.

"Certainly not. You'll have to tell me what's going on."

"I will, I will. But first let us go eat. I'm starved after all the training they've been running us through."

Dillon obliquely followed them with Lilith in tow, as they went outside to where food was being served to hundreds of dirty and worn soldiers and reservists from long tables.

There was some pushing and shoving as Dillon tried to stay behind Shaanstar. Lilith was caught between several people and almost got separated until he grabbed her hand, and pulled her through, getting behind Shaanstar where one of several lines had formed.

It was a lot calmer but still too noisy to talk until they'd gotten themselves some food, and found a quiet spot further away.

"You're the last person I expected to see in an army," Shaanstar told Ivanka as they ate.

"Me? What about you?" her old friend exclaimed.

"We were forcibly drafted," Shaanstar explained.

"That's about what they did with me. They seemed to have drafted just about anyone who can hold a sword or pull a bow, except those who are too young and anyone having to look after them."

"What for?"

"I don't know, but there are a lot of rumours flying about that She's pretty damn angry about something to be conscripting everyone she can."

"You mean Royan?"

"Yeah, her high and mighty Lordship herself. There's talk about these so called attacks, been nothing more than just rumours, and this is just some way for her to mount a full assault upon Argandonia."

Shaanstar disagreed. "It can't be. We passed a caravan on the way here from down south, which had been attacked."

"Bodies?"

"Still lying about. They'd been there a while when we saw them."

"As I said. All I've heard are rumours. You haven't introduced your comrades yet."

Shaanstar looked at them both standing there, eating whatever they'd been served with their fingers. "This is Dillon and Lilith," she introduced them.

Ivanka nodded in greeting, as her hands were greasy from the roast fowl. "So what brought you back here to Canduce, and don't tell me it was the springs," she said with a smile.

"Well, that was going to be our second stop..."

"As always," Ivanka said.

"But to follow up on our last visit. We had, or rather Dillon had a run in with an Adept."

"Really?" Ivanka listened with curiosity.

"It seems like a long shot, but we were hoping to try to find them, or at least have another encounter."

Dillon coughed loudly, appearing to choke on something until it cleared.

"I think the chances of that happening, are about the same as been struck by lightning. I can only wish you luck."

"Maybe you've heard something then? About where the Adept's have been seen recently."

"Maybe... I think so. There was talk recently about something in Corinth. Although it's hard to say if there were Adept's involved or just someone fooling with their magery."

"What happened?"

"Some sort of light show in the sky. A few people didn't remember what happened except that they woke up where they didn't expect."

"What sort of light show?"

"I think someone said that it looked like a streaking ball of fire high up in the sky."

"Angel of doom," Liliith said out loud.

"The what?" Dillon asked.

"No, that's just superstition," Ivanka said. "Anyway it disappeared before it travelled very far."

"Corinth. That's directly to the north and close to the border isn't it?" Shaanstar asked.

"It's some distance on foot, but not while you're in this women's army."

**Chapter 19**

"Up! Up you stinking worms."

The voice was loud and insistent, as was the light suddenly bright and glaring.

Dillon woke with the suddenness of Enar yelling at everyone. The shutters were still closed and very dark beyond them as it was still very early morning.

"Get your lazy bodies up and ready to leave quickly. Sleeping rolls and weapons, before the sun rises."

Enar strolled back out the doorway, seeing everyone had woken.

Dillon rolled out of the bed he slept in. It felt as if half of him was still sleeping, but the other half remembered feeling the hard wooden slats digging into his shoulder every time he rolled over.

He looked at Lilith who looked wide-awake, and not nearly as bedraggled as he felt. Shaanstar also was awake, and looked ready to take on anyone.

"Everybody out, and assembled outside now!" Enar yelled through the doorway.

Dillon had barely enough time to pull his socks and shoes on before being forced to move or be left behind.

It seemed as if all the reserves were being assembled outside, close to 200 people all up were arrayed in the artificially lit yard, waiting for instructions.

"You're travelling north past Delphin," a tall man wearing clothes similar to the Minister that Dillon and Shaanstar had met before. "Word has come of Argandonian forces sweeping through from Corinth. There isn't time for our regulars to get there from further east, so we're sending you instead."

There was a sudden clamouring of voices, asking how they were going to get there. The Minister's voice overrode them with trained ease. "You'll be taking the newly built rail between here and Delphin. May you travel swiftly and safely," he said before departing.

The commanders quickly went to each of their units, as the Reserves started talking amongst themselves.

"You have trains?" Dillon asked, astonished.

"Aye, a steam train," said Ivanka, holding her halberd upright. "There is only one capable of pulling this lot, the other was the first one they got running a cycle ago."

"What's a train?" Lilith asked, curious.

"Don't you know?" Ivanka said. "Where did you say you were from?" She asked suddenly curious.

"I didn't," Shaanstar interrupted. "She's from south. She used to..." she was stuck for an idea.

"Work on a farm," Lilith finished. "With my parents."

"Well, maybe you should have stayed there," suggested Ivanka.

Lilith didn't reply. It was a thought she had considered. Maybe she should have stayed on the farm with her parents, instead of going to town to her Grandma. Maybe...

"Follow the third unit out towards the North entrance," Izart yelled at all of them, waving a hand forward.

They entered the subdued streets in the half darkness just before dawn, to follow the hundreds of feet in front of them.

Dillon was amused that they had developed steam locomotives. It had seemed so primitive to him to walk or ride everywhere on horseback, but a steam locomotive created potential to bring people together.

"At least we're headed towards Corinth," Shaanstar mused at their luck.

"The train should get us to Delphin in less than 3 days where the line ends," Ivanka said, "Barring breakdowns."

"Then it's straight across into Corinth," Shaanstar said.

"What are you planning to do what then? Desert?" Ivanka asked under a quieter voice.

"No!" Shaanstar hissed, then changed her attitude. "Maybe. I don't want a death sentence over my head, so if there is another way I'll try it."

"If you get any ideas, just include me in. I want out of here as much as you. I'd rather be lost amongst the western fire mountains than fighting with this lot."

The sound of hissing air could be heard before they reached the Northern gate. Outside the large archway, under the light of many freestanding lights stood a small relatively simple steam engine coupled to less than a dozen long flat carriages.

Dillon wished he could go and get a closer look at the engine itself, but Enar hustled all of them onto the flat carriages near the rear.

The flat carriages resembled old wagons that had been cut down and stretched.

It sat upon the rail with small metal-rimmed wheels and metal guides that held it upon the rails. The top was sparsely covered with wooden panels, as almost 20 of them tried to find a place to sit.

With a wheeze, the small engine puffed forward, taking up the slack between all the flat cars, slowly edging forward.

Dillon sat between Lilith and Shaanstar on the side, with their legs hanging over edge.

He couldn't see the ground move by in the increasing darkness but knew they must be picking up some speed.

"You might as well rest now," Enar called to those of the Fourth Reserves. "It's a long journey, and we aren't stopping for any reason."

"What if I need to take a piss?" Darius called.

"We don't stop for anyone," Enar yelled back. "If you need to do it, then do it over the edge or hold it in until we take on water for the engine. Otherwise too bad!"

Enar glared around at everybody, from the centre of the carriage, but most people were faced away from him, sitting on the edges. "Now get some rest, otherwise shut your mouths so other people can sleep."

There was a general murmur of assent.

Dillon felt something on his right shoulder, so he looked to see Lilith resting her head on him. He couldn't see her eyes, but guessed she was trying to rest to.

He glanced at Shaanstar who sat still, but her eyes were closed.

He felt Lilith put her arms about him, as if snuggling up to him, making him a little uncomfortable but he knew that she was only trying to feel secure enough to sleep. Gently he put an arm about her, to reassure her as much as himself.

As the train entered the darkness, Dillon felt as if he was the last one still awake. He began wondering how exactly to fall asleep on the carriage without falling off.

They stopped often along the way, to take on more water at specially set places along the track. Occasionally when the train reached steep grades that it couldn't climb, everyone was ordered off the carriages to push the train up the hills, making it possible to continue the journey.

But mostly they just sat and watched the terrain roll past, which was almost excruciatingly boring in it self.

Five times along the way though, carriages derailed, sending everyone falling over and even off the side onto the ground beside the tracks.

To be jerked awake during the following night was a surprise to Lilith and to find she was falling through darkness was even more of a shock. She added her own voice to that of several screams that echoed around her as she landed, feeling limbs entangle with other limbs. She stopped screaming when all movement ceased, as she just lay there with something under her back and wrapped around her.

She was ready to scream again when it groaned as it moved, lifting part of her bruised body.

"Lilith? Shaanstar?"

She recognised Dillon's voice in the darkness.

"Where are we?" She asked, unable to see anything around her.

Something shifted, and the weight from her legs disappeared.

"Something's on my arm," said Dillon.

Lilith realised it was her self so she sat up, freeing his arm.

"Thanks." He said.

"Where is everyone?" She said, afraid suddenly that everyone had disappeared.

"Lilith, it's okay!"

She felt an arm around her.

"Dillon?" she asked, making sure he was actually there.

"Yes, it's me. We must have derailed again."

"I was falling through the dark."

"I know. It's very dark out. Give your eyes a moment to adjust."

There wasn't any need as several lights sparked into existence, one after another right down the length of the train.

Some people were sprawled further up the line, were able to gather themselves up.

Dillon helped her up, as she looked upon the strange lights.

"That's Magery?" She asked him.

He looked at the various lights and glows, seeing several types of light sources that weren't natural. "Looks that way."

Some of the lights looked beautiful, casting spectral glows across the ground around the person it belonged to, others produced glowing or burning orbs which were too bright to look at.

Someone with very powerful Magery had created a small glowing blue light that hovered over the derailed carriages.

"Looks like we need to lift this one back into place." Dillon said.

The strongest Reserves were called together to lift the carriages back onto the rail. Once that was done, the empty train was inched forward until it was past the damaged rail.

From there, all the Reserves were able to climb back on, to continue the journey through the night, well into the next day.

They didn't get to see much of Delphin as the Commanders pushed all of them on through the last town before the Argandonian border. The presence of the townsfolk was quiet and subdued as they watched them walk past, in almost apathy.

## Chapter 20

Camp was set up several hours north of Delphin, where the mountains were easily visible across their path and down to the southwest.

They'd travelled long and hard, covering terrain more varied than near the coast. Shaanstar knew they were close to the border. Corinth however was more than a day's march northeast of where they were, and they had no roads to guide them, as travellers less frequented this area. The best they would hope to find would be narrow trails or open forests.

The Reserves had kicked up dust or dirt during the march, making most of them somewhat dirty. Rotating the units each and every hour helped little in reducing the dust that covered the rear most unit.

They went to work putting the camp together for the night, there was some friction was evident between the Units and sometimes inside a unit between men and women, but it helped in the form of friendly competition between them, competing to finish their assigned tasks as quickly as possible.

Whilst the other Units went to work clearing a campsite, collecting water and firewood or hunting for extra food for supper, the Forth was put to work digging the temporary latrines, making them dirtier than previously thought possible.

Dillon sloughed out of the piles of soil that he had helped shift from the rapidly dug trench, shaking it from his hair and shoulders.

He hadn't exactly seen how an effective army operated before, and he wondered how he'd cope in a real army, working every day, following the directions of the commanders all the time, training and everything. It was hard work, and he knew it. He just wished that it wasn't so dirty.

The sky was bright pink on the clouds overhead with the sinking sun, as Izart the commander of the Forth checked over their efforts. "You've all done well. The other Units are almost finished, so you might as well take a break now. You can freshen up down at the river before supper. If you don't... well that's up to you. Enar, you can relieve them."

Enar turned about, "You heard him. Go take a wash you filthy vermin."

"That's it?" Lilith asked of the others.

"There's no more work for us to do here," Shaanstar said. "And I for one, want a wash."

"Mind if I join you?" Ivanka asked.

"Not at all," she replied.

The three of them collected their gear and turned towards where Izart had indicated the river, where others of the Unit was also headed. Shaanstar stopped, realising someone was missing and turned about. "Are you coming Dillon?"

He looked at the three of them, unsure if it was wise. Everybody else seemed to be headed towards the river, and it looked as if he was going to be left out, so he decided to go with the crowd lest he look like the odd one out. "I'm coming," he said, grabbing the sword he'd placed out of the way during the digging.

"You should ease up some more," Ivanka told Dillon as she slapped him on the back with her free hand, sending dust into the air. "You look like a Banther snake bit you. The farm girl here, she looks ready to dig another trench by herself."

Lilith appreciated the comment, but internally she felt tired. The hard labour was fine with her, but the long march with the pack and axe before hand had taken its toll. Her legs felt ready to give up for the day.

At the river the Reservists they took to the water, as many hadn't been near any washing water for days. They seemed to separate somewhat, women going upriver a little and the men going down a little, but it wasn't totally isolated as some mixed or stayed in the centre as they unclothed themselves so the clothes wouldn't get wet, stripping down to minimal clothes or a few baring themselves completely, though it was hardly noticed.

Soil covered clothes was beaten against river rocks or hard trees to remove soil and dirt.

Dillon sat on a rock near the centre, seeing near naked or naked people down the river beating clothes or washing in the shallow waters. He rested his eyes on the palms of his hands, trying to repress his guilt at watching the other people.

"Dillon, what's wrong?"

He heard Lilith's voice and drew his face up, regretting it even more.

She stood with the grey robe draped over an arm, hanging just in front of one leg, hiding nothing else from his view.

He groaned at the sight, dropping his face to his hands again, hoping to ground his eyes out with his fingertips.

"Dillon?"

He felt her grip his hands, and pull them away from his face. He kept it down, looking at his feet. Hers were just beside his in view.

"Please, what is wrong?"

She was concerned but she didn't know what was wrong. Lilith knelt down in front of him, trying to look him in the face. She could see his eyes but they were avoiding her, staring fixatedly at a point on the ground.

"I know we haven't properly wed as yet, we are pledged to each other and I wish to know what is wrong."

*Wed as in wedding?* Dillon heard her, and thought he'd missed something somewhere. He shifted his focus slowly until he had her face in focus.

"We're to be married?" He said.

"We've pledged our hearts to one another. To finish the ritual, we only have to mate under the roof of our own home."

She folded his hands within her own, feeling happy that she was pledged to this man, reasonably good looking, who seemed to care for her. "I only wish we had a home now. Then we could start a family."

Dillon sat there stunned as she patted his leg and stood up, taking her robe over to another rock close by to knock the dirt and dust out of it.

Somehow he'd gone from caring for her welfare to becoming her husband and the father to her potential children. He knew there must be a step missing somewhere, but he didn't know what it was. He'd shown affection, yes. Even gotten sexually involved, though she had been under the influence of some sort of drug, but he was lost on how he went from companion to couple.

He knew he had to ask Shaanstar what she knew, but she was probably in the river half naked or something. It wouldn't do to interrupt her, but he wanted to ask her now while it was still uppermost on his mind.

Getting up he took one more glance at Lilith, wondering if marriage to her was such a bad thing, but he had to sort it out first.

Shaanstar wasn't even undressed, as he'd thought. He found her a little down river sitting on a rock near the water talking to Ivanka who sat there twisting the halberd between her hands.

"It was big enough to take a man out, and was the ugliest thing I've ever seen. If only it had lived long enough." Shaanstar was saying.

"They're horrible creatures. I've heard say that they breed in the fire mountains."

"No doubt, this one was lost then."

Dillon approached from behind Shaanstar, close enough to hear them but didn't want to interrupt them unnecessarily, but Ivanka saw him and smiled in a friendly sort of way.

"With magery like that, and cute too. Where did you say you met him?" Ivanka asked.

Shaanstar wasn't aware Dillon was there as she laughed momentarily, remembering the brief encounter on the island. "Up north on this Island near Carvargna. He looked like... well, I don't know how to describe it."

"Wearing those strange clothes?"

"Yeah, and carrying this square black bag he called a brief case. I didn't know what to make of him, except that he was lost. I took him back Carvargna, where a tavern owner knocked him out. He's a little strange, but he's got a nice body, not like those oafs."

Shaanstar indicated the few Reservist men nearby who were partially unclad.

"You've been with him?" Ivanka asked, trying to drill her old friend for information. She could still see Dillon listening to their conversation.

"No." Shaanstar sighed. "He doesn't seem interested in it, or in me. He's taken some interest in Lilith, but... I don't know. I'm still trying to figure him out."

"Lilith's cute too." Ivanka suggested, "I wouldn't mind spending some time alone with her."

Shaanstar heaved a sigh, cautious about Lilith with her background. She hadn't mentioned to anyone who she was. It was liable to cause some trouble, none of it been beneficial.

Dillon turned away for a moment at Ivanka's comment a little put off, and stepped away until he turned about. "Shaanstar," he called, resolving himself to get some answers as he approached again.

Shaanstar turned, unaware that their conversation had been heard by Dillon.

To Dillon, she was as mask of unknown emotions. He couldn't tell what she was thinking right now with the stoic look on her face.

"I thought you were going to have a wash?" Dillon asked her.

"The water's too cold. I don't see you taking a swim." Shaanstar replied.

Dillon shook his head. He knew he was diverting himself from the issue he came to ask them about.

"How do you get married to someone?" Dillon asked. "I mean, what's the usual way two people get married?"

If anything, Shaanstar was surprised by the question, and it showed on her face.

Ivanka responded, none too surprised by the question, having watched Dillon. "There are a few methods, but they usually involve the trading of vows and the ritual consummation."

"That's the problem," said Dillon, "Somehow, Lilith and I have become betrothed. She said we are promised to each other, and I don't remember that happening."

"You and Lilith?" Shaanstar asked, only slightly relieved it wasn't her, but still she didn't understand. She wasn't familiar with marriage rites. She turned to Ivanka, hoping for some help. "How does one get promised?"

"As I said, there are a few methods. It depends on where you're both from."

Shaanstar glanced at Dillon for a moment then turned back to Ivanka. "Lilith is from far south. They use old practices."

"A farm girl from the south. Well, it's usually a promise of their hearts to one another, followed by a kiss to seal the commitment. From there, they usually build a house together. They get a blessing from their families when they join in to help built it. The first night in their new home usually consummates the marriage. That's for the farming people, as I should know since I helped put my brother's house up. In the town however it's a different matter. You can't have a new house been built every time someone gets wed."

Shaanstar turned to Dillon. "You swore your heart to her, at Canduce in the barracks," she remembered.

"We did?" Dillon said, trying to remember.

"She returned it, and you did kiss."

"We... oh God!" He remembered it. He thought he was just trying to reassure her, make her feel safe in this strange world.

"You haven't consummated yet," Shaanstar reassured him. "You could still break it off."

"You've got an interest in him?" Ivanka asked Shaanstar.

Shaanstar looked at her as if she'd been struck.

"I'm only kidding," she said, holding her hands up to show she meant no harm. "But you can't break it off, not unless you want to hurt her. If she's promised her heart to you, then she's really in love with you. You'll only break it if you do, and it's not a pretty sight."

Dillon went from feeling appalled and relieved to been worried and thinking he was insensitive. He hadn't considered Lilith in his needs, and wanted her to be happy. How and why it seemed that Lilith had turned out to love him didn't matter, but how he treated that affection.

*I don't want to hurt her. I care for her, don't I? I do! I want her to be happy. Does that mean I love her too? But Patricia...*

He felt as if his emotions were been torn apart and squashed back together inside a tornado. He knew internally that Patricia was long dead even though he hadn't been there to see it, but he still felt something. But Lilith looked so like Patricia, that she could well have been a sister. He felt confused.

*Am I confusing this love for Patricia with Lilith? What was it that I felt for Patricia then?*

Dillon turned away from Shaanstar and Ivanka, and headed down the river to find somewhere to think.

"Dillon?" Shaanstar called, seeing that look on his face again, of something deep and intense. She was about to get up when Ivanka put a hand on her shoulder.

"He needs some time by himself. He looks like he's got a lot on his mind."

"What if he wanders too far?"

"Give him a few minutes. He'll come back when either when works something out, or when he realises he's alone out here."

"I worry about him."

"I think you care for him more than you realise," said Ivanka. "But he has to find himself before he can open up to anyone."

"That's the problem. I don't think he'll ever find himself," said Shaanstar watching Dillon disappear behind some trees.

## Chapter 21

Lilith watched Dillon during the night with concern. He seemed preoccupied with something. Shaanstar also was preoccupied, but with Dillon, watching him more intently than she'd notice before.

She wasn't sure to be worried about Shaanstar's attention or doubly worried about Dillon because Shaanstar knew something that she didn't. The fact that he avoided them all night lessened one concern at least, but she remained worried all night.

In the morning Dillon remained a little distant but he was less reserved, offering smiles to both her and Shaanstar. He didn't offer conversation, not even after they resumed marching northeast. The sky remained overcast from when they woke, blowing a strong constant wind with it.

*He's still worried about something,* she thought, thinking that what had been bothering him last night was still on his mind. *Maybe two minds could solve his problem. I should ask him, then.*

She would have been happy to help him in any way, but before she could ask the columns of Reservists halted as word was passed back to be quiet.

There was silence for a moment more until word was yelled back from the forward most units.

"Okay form up!" Enar yelled, as he passed them by. "Two units of Argandonian regulars are just north of us. They've seen us, and they're coming our way. We're holding back with unit three until we're sure they aren't hiding something."

As Enar spoke, the first two units almost a hundred strong, roared as they charged through the sparse trees at the advancing enemy.

"This way, quickly." Enar directed them to the side, getting them to run after him up a slope to a hill.

Unit three split off in the other direction, initiating a manoeuvre to flank the enemy when the time was appropriate.

There was a good vantage point from the hill to see the initial engagement as the Argandonian regulars in their dark maroon uniforms clashed with the Royan reserves in their assorted clothes.

Dillon had thought to see a bloody battle, but when sword strike was accompanied with blasts of fire or streaks ice, he was suddenly mesmerised. It was like watching a re-enactment of an ancient battle on TV, except that he had a full view, and could smell the atmosphere.

The wind seemed to pick up, whether it was the battle or the clouds overhead, the air seemed to become charged.

"Everybody, forward!" Enar yelled, running forward as sudden yells came from behinds.

Turning about, they found maroon uniforms coming up from the other side of the hill.

Someone screamed "Attack!" and there was a bloody exchange.

Dillon suddenly quavered as someone went down as a blade sliced off an arm. He hadn't expected to get so close to the bloody violence.

He hardly noticed Shaanstar who had run forward into the enemy, except that she swung her sword at exposed body parts, maiming and killing any that got within her reach.

But he wasn't the only one affected, as Lilith stood not far from him. She wanted to help, but she was afraid to attack. She held the axe in both hands, knowing she hadn't the skill to swing it but wishing all the same that she could.

There were more Argandonian soldiers than they could cope with as one advanced around the others towards Dillon, swinging a sword at him.

Lilith heard the ring of metal as she saw a Dillon fending off a soldier with unskilled use of the sword. She saw him barely stop the swings that were aimed at slicing him bodily.

The fear that she felt galvanised her to what she should do. Gripping the metal axe tightly in both hands, she forced her emotions down, feeding them, directing them as she summoned forward her magery. She could feel prickling flow across her skin and down her arms as the charge built up.

The energy Lilith could feel was tremendous, nothing like she had felt before. She turned to face the moving soldier attacking Dillon, and pointed her axe at the man, using it to direct the energy she felt ready to burst forward.

Dillon moved sideways to avoid a thrust, before feeling his hand go numb again as his sword was struck again. He didn't think he could hold the man off forever. He'd only had a glance to see that no one else was near enough to help him, as they fended off their attackers some distance away. Moving to the side, he suddenly saw Lilith standing there with her axe raised.

There was no time for him to contemplate her as he fought off another attack. He had the brief thought that she was going to attack the man with her axe as he fell to the ground, feeling his tenuous position slowly becoming a death sentence.

Dillon looked up for the expected sword thrust, and saw for a moment a flicker of light. It was brief enough to register, before then there was an explosion of intense blinding light with an explosion that seemed to echo through his skull, turning everything into a blanketing white around him.

Shaanstar knocked down one soldier with her hand as she parried another that came at her.

She was well aware of the smouldering burn on her arm but ignored the pain as she tried to deal with the attackers that were beginning to flow up from the battle below that the Royan reserves were steadily losing.

She'd lost sight of Dillon as she was drawn deeper into the battle, thinking he'd be safe if he stayed away from the fighting.

She had her back to them when it happened. An arc of lightning from the sky struck close enough behind her to explode. It was close enough to knock her forward, surprising one soldier as she landed on top of him. She knocked him solidly with the hilt of her sword across the face, knocking him out or killing him outright. There wasn't time to find out, as she climbed to her feet to face the rush of enemy reinforcements approaching from below.

She hardly noticed several enemy soldiers who flailed about holding their faces, except that they were cut down quickly.

"Retreat!" Someone called in the sudden lull.

Shaanstar looked about, as reservists who still stood on two feet, turned about to run away.

Whether it was a lawful order or not, it seemed that the reservists weren't going to stay around for the approaching enemy. She looked about quickly for Dillon or Lilith, but couldn't see them standing amongst the bodies. She had no time to search the bodies, so she hoped beyond hope that they were with those that were already running in retreat in front of her.

Taking a last glance at the advancing soldiers, she ran after the departing reservists.

She moved quickly to catch up, looking around at the faces for Dillon, but he wasn't there. The only person she was glad to see was Ivanka.

"Ivanka," she called to her, "Did you see either Dillon or Lilith?"

"Aren't they with us?"

"No they're not!" Shaanstar said, worried now.

"They were there, but I didn't see them go down. Not before the retreat."

Ivanka halted when Shaanstar did, as she looked back towards the battle site.

"What about the lightning?" Ivanka suggested.

"I didn't see it."

"If we didn't see them go down, then they may not be dead."

"Then where are they?" Shaanstar demanded of her.

"If they're still back there, then they may have been captured."

"Then we have to go get them."

Shaanstar started back to the battle site, before Ivanka grabbed her shoulder. She twisted violently out of the grip.

"You know it's foolish to go back there."

"I have no choice."

"You know I said I wanted to go with you to Corinth, but it's not wise to arrive there as prisoners. We'll go there another way, just not through their soldiers."

Shaanstar knew she was right. She had to find Dillon, but it wouldn't help if she got caught herself. They had to go to Corinth, to find and rescue Dillon and Lilith.

