

The Chronicles
Book One
Chapter Six

Liandron started to scream and Gabe let out a yelp of surprise, but both fell silent as Allen looked down at his chest, then brushed away the flakes of the arrow from where its head had shattered. Liandron brushed some of the arrow flakes away, as well, inspecting Allen's chest for a hole. "What the...?", she asked, mystified.

Kaine simply looked at what was left of the arrow in his hand, then at the shards of it left stuck to Allen's shirt. The arrow hadn't splintered like wood; rather, it had simply disintegrated, the remnants of it look like dried blood. Which, as Allen reminded himself, it was. "Why did it do that?", Allen asked the Symbions. Kaine didn't say anything; he just walked back over to his usual corner. Raine hung back, staring not so much at the shards of the arrow, but at Allen's face. Then she too went over to the corner.

"I thought you were done for," Gabe said, looking somewhat pale and still staring wide-eyed at Allen.

"Funny, me too," Allen replied shakily as he took a long drink from his mug. When Kaine had stabbed him with the arrow, he had been a bit surprised by the sudden movement, but even as he saw the barbed arrow head coming at him, he wasn't the least bit concerned. Somehow he knew that the arrow wouldn't hurt him. He couldn't have explained how he knew, but to him it was just a certainty that the arrowhead would shatter. He glanced over at the Symbions who weren't hiding the fact that they were talking about him. He knew they had answers to his questions, but the chance of getting those answers was pretty slim.

Liandron put one hand over her heart and exhaled deeply. "I'm pretty sure that took a few years off my life."

"Took more than that off mine," Allen said, leaning back in his chair and trying to brush the remaining flakes of dark blood off of himself. "This really hasn't been a good day so far."

"Make that the past few days," Gabe added.

Allen thought that between the mysterious appearance of the girl, battling the Reborn, almost being executed by Charista soldiers, and being stabbed by a blood arrow; that within the past few days he'd had more adventure than he'd hoped for in his entire life. The only problem was that they still had to travel into Charista and locate that girl so they could find out what happened in New Load.

"Think we'll be headed to Charista today?", Gabe asked staring out of the window. To Allen, it looked like his friend had seen his fill of adventure, as well.

Allen stared out of the same window. The sun was high in the clear sky; if they started out now, they'd make it to Charista past nightfall. That was assuming they could start out now. He still hadn't decided if he wanted to lash skins to the merchant's coach and use his team to make the journey, or if he just wanted to ride in on a horse.

"Well, I don't care when we leave," Liandron announced. Both Gabe and Allen's stares shot around to her.

"We?", they said together. It wasn't that the journey into Charista was fraught with danger, nor was the city itself an especially unsafe place; it just hadn't occurred to either of them that she'd want to go along.

“It’s not like this place is packed,” she said, motioning with her hand to the mostly empty common room. They had to give her that; there were only a few of the merchants left, most of them had started the return trip to Charista soon after learning of the fate of New Load. Allen couldn’t really blame them for that; the silver merchants didn’t have much to do since all of the miners were dead and a Quarter was on their way to seal off the town. Allen hadn’t considered it at the time, but part of Kaine’s reason for sending the Quarter must have been to ensure that none of the merchants went and helped themselves to whatever silver was left laying around. Despite the town being a veritable field of corpses, he had learned long ago that the only emotions greater than fear were love...and greed.

Allen pulled himself out of his musings and realized he had never answered Gabe’s question about when they would leave. “I don’t know...I imagine it’s probably up to those two,” he said, nodding his head in the direction of the Symbions. “I don’t really care to travel at night, but that Quarter should have beaten a path through the snow that no one could miss.” Between the merchants and the Quarter, there had been enough traffic between Gilder’s Hollow and Charista to trample down the snow and make their journey much easier than going up to New Load had been. “So I guess it’s a draw between having time to get everything ready properly and leaving tomorrow, but risk that the girl might have found another horse by then and run again.” Allen doubted that the Symbions had any trouble just picking up and leaving at a moment’s notice, but he’d need to arrange for someone to look after the stable...not that there’d be much business; but the horses there would still need to be fed, and Gabe’s furnaces needed to be fed as well. And if Liandron was going, she’d have to make sure the other serving girls could handle things. He looked around the mostly deserted common room and decided that wouldn’t be a problem. Plus, he still had to decide how he wanted to get there. The work cart they’d used as a sled before would be needed as a work cart again, so they couldn’t use that. The merchant’s coach and team he had essentially confiscated would be a good choice since neither Gabe nor Liandron could ride especially well; but since Allen was still wanted in Charista for supposedly stealing that particular coach and attempting to murder its owner, he didn’t think that riding into town in it would be such a good idea.

“Dad,” Liandron called out as Master Enmor passed by with a tray of food. He stopped and looked down at his daughter. “I’m going to Charista with Allen.” Master Enmor’s face brightened and Gabe’s darkened. “Oh, and with Gabe,” she added, which caused Gabe’s face to brighten and Master Enmor’s to darken.

“When are you leaving, lass?”, Master Enmor asked.

“I’m not sure,” his daughter answered.

“When will you be back?”, he asked.

“I’m not sure,” she answered again.

Master Enmore looked from his daughter to Allen. “Alright, have a good time,” he simply said and took the tray of food over to the few remaining merchants.

Allen marveled once again at the rather unusual relationship between Liandron and her father. Liandron actually came from a rather large family, even though most of them had nothing to do with the inn. Liandron had four younger sisters and no brothers at all, so Master Enmor was pretty thoroughly outnumbered at home. Allen supposed that the innkeeper had simply stopped trying to argue with any of them long ago, because

he always went along with any of their suggestions. He also guessed this must be part of the reason that Master Enmor worked such long hours.

“Well, that’s settled,” Liandron said brightly. “Just let me go pack a few things.” With that, she bounded up from the table and headed off to her house, leaving Allen and Gabe to stare quizzically at each other.

“I suppose that’s our hint that we should be doing the same thing,” Gabe said as he got to his feet.

“Might as well,” Allen replied, rising as well. Gabe went ahead to his house to pack, leaving Allen to put a few coins on the table to pay for all the food and drink they’d had. He normally wouldn’t pack much for just a trip to Charista, but he didn’t have any idea how long they might be there searching for the girl. Charista was a reasonably large city, being at the crossroads of a few major trade routes, the silver trade being the least of them. Coal and iron came south into Charista from Nordemain, grains and produce came east from Steppin, and spices and other exotic good came north from Faren. Nordemain, Steppin, and Faren were all interdependent on each other for their survival, and Charista happened to sit in the midst of all of the trade between them. Charista’s vast army ensured that no one tried to create an alternate trade route; sure, there were smugglers, but Charista’s system seemed to be pretty beneficial to everyone involved. Trade caravans from Steppin were not allowed to carry on through Charista and onto Faren. All of their goods were bought by Charista, who would then resell them to Faren at an increased price. However, the returning caravan would be laden with goods from Nordemain or New Load, so it saved the merchant’s a lot of travel, plus they only had to negotiate prices with Charista, instead of with local merchants. Plus, Charista was able to control surpluses, so the price of wheat would be roughly the same year-round, and there were no shortages in winter.

Allen mused to himself about just how much you could learn about trade by eating your dinner at the inn and listening to the merchants discuss it incessantly. He figured that the price of silver would rise rapidly now that world of New Load’s fate would be spread by the returning merchants. However, he suspected there’d be fresh workers in the mines before all of the bodies were even buried. He reprimanded himself for thinking that might be a good thing, but Gilder’s Hollow’s existence depended on the silver trade.

He headed outside, where the Symbions were discussing something in the middle of the road with Jaun and Kaun. They were still garnering their fare share of wide-eyed wonderment from the people of Gilder’s Hollow. Kaine looked at him sidelong as he passed. “We leave shortly, LastBorn,” Kaine said to Allen. He stopped to ask the Symbion what that was supposed to mean, but Kaine was talking with the brothers. In fact, Allen realized, he had been talking to them even while Allen heard his voice. He saw the Symbion glance at him quickly, then go back to looking between Jaun and Kaun. Allen shook his head to clear it and continued down the road.

“Everyone I meet lately is crazy,” he said to himself as he walked past the front of the stable, then turned right and walked down the alleyway between his stable and Torsten Martey’s mill next to it. Coming out of the alley and walking well past the rear of the stable, he arrived at his house. He put his hand on the doorknob, took a deep breath, and opened the door. Even after six years, every time he opened the door he was reminded of the scene that met his eyes that one night so long ago.

He shuddered slightly as he normally did and closed the door behind him. He really didn't like being home too much. Six years ago, when they had found out he planned to keep living there, the people of Gilder's Hollow had scrubbed the house clean for him. All he'd really been able to do at the time was sit in a room at the inn, staring off at nothing and under the constant watch of Liandron. He caught himself sinking into dark thoughts, about how things might have been different had he been home instead of out in the woods, hunting with Gabe. However, those thoughts were pointless and he'd gone through them in every variation and scenario before. He shook himself out of it and got to the task of packing. He thought that enough things for five days should cover any eventuality, so he threw everything into his old leather sack and got out of the house as quickly as he could.

He went back around to the side door of the stable and was surprised to see Jaun and Kaun working on attaching skis to the merchant's coach. Kaun looked up at Allen entering. "Raine decided we should take this coach," he offered by way of explanation.

"Well, I'm not one to argue with a lady," Allen said as he watched the brothers' work. "Especially one who can use magic." The brothers laughed and continued lashing the skis onto the spokes of the coach wheels. Allen undid the buckles that held closed the luggage compartment on the back of the black coach, and went to stow his bag in there, but stopped with a gasp.

"What is it?," asked Jaun as he tightened the knots in the leather cords running through the wheel spokes. Allen didn't answer so Kaun went behind the coach and looked into the luggage bin.

"Ahh, cripes," Kaun said, which caused his brother to finally come over and look.

"Oh, this isn't good," Jaun said as he looked into the luggage bin. "I'm gonna go get the Symbions," he mumbled, then dashed out of the stable.

Allen just shook his head as he stared into the luggage bin. In the dark compartment he could see the dim light glinting off scores of dark red arrows.

"Blood arrows," Kaun seethed; "there's gotta be..."

"One for everyone in Gilder's Hollow," Allen finished for him. The most disturbing thing was that the luggage bin was half empty.

Raine and Kaine rushed in moments later, followed closely by Jaun. Gabe and Liandron, both carrying their bags, filed in behind them.

"What's going on?," Gabe asked, trying to see past everyone who was already gathered around, looking into the luggage compartment. Allen moved away from the coach, his eyes blazing with hatred.

The two Symbions looked in; Raine looked angry while Kaine showed no emotion at all. Gabe finally was able to nudge his way up to the coach to have a look. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped open. He looked like he was trying to form words, but nothing came out.

"Oh, just let me see," Liandron said, shoving Gabe aside. As soon as she saw the blood arrows, she yelped out the beginning of a scream before she could stifle it with her hands. "That's...that's...those are...", she stammered, looking wildly around.

“Yes, these were intended for you,” Rain said. “You’re lucky that you had your little run in with him...if Allen hadn’t beaten him half to death, you’d all be Reborn by now.”

Allen wasn’t really paying attention anymore, he was lost in his own thoughts; wondering if there was anything the merchant said or did that would have betrayed that he was a Dark Heart, as the servants of the Dark One were called. He had to admit that the merchant acted just like any of the other merchants; a bit more obnoxious than some of them, but nothing that indicated he was a Dark Heart. Although, Allen admitted to himself, you’d have to be pretty stupid to walk around announcing to everyone that you were a Dark Heart. “I should have just killed him,” Allen said in response to Raine as he leaned against one of the big front doors of the stable.

“Most of his damage had already been done before you ever had your run in with him,” Raine said consolingly, putting her hand on his forearm. “He can’t do anything more without all of these,” she said, pointing back to the luggage compartment full of blood arrows. “Blood arrows aren’t exactly common, nor are they easy to render...that guy’s boss is going to be mighty unhappy that so many of them were destroyed.” She paused and made eye contact with Kaine. “Speaking of...” The same blue glow enveloped Kaine’s hand, growing brighter and brighter, until a ball of light formed around it, which rapidly expanded and consumed the blood arrows, completely destroying them. “Don’t need to leave those just lying around,” Raine said afterwards.

Allen was dimly aware that Raine’s hand was still on his arm and that Liandron’s glare should have been burning a hole into the back of the Symbion’s head.

“I still don’t get it, though,” Gabe said. “He had a bunch of blood arrows, but so what? He was here the whole time and he’s only one man, how could he kill everyone in New Load?”

“Have you checked his room?”, Kaine asked Liandron.

Liandron looked startled, and then her face colored a little. “Well...actually, with all of the excitement and no new customers coming to need it, I haven’t cleaned it yet.” Liandron took her housekeeping very seriously.

Both of the Symbions headed out of the stable’s side door and made for the inn, everyone else following on their heels. Inside the Inlaid Rose, Liandron pointed out which room had been the merchant’s and the Symbions went in first.

“That’s how he did it,” Kaine said to Gabe, letting him get a full view of the room.

Almost every bit of the walls, ceiling, and floor was covered in arcane writing and symbols that were drawn out in some white substance. A few of the symbols had red lines drawn across the white in what was unmistakably blood.

Everyone kept looking around the room while Raine narrated. “These are spells of binding and animation. As you can see, he was just barely able to bind enough blood arrows to him to attack New Load. The spells allowed the arrows to move under his control. So he was able to kill everyone in New Load from this room.”

“That explains why there weren’t many tracks in the snow in New Load,” Gabe said mostly to himself. “There was no army...just a flock of arrows flying through the air.” He scratched his chin and stared at the floor. “So then, that was him controlling the Reborn?”

“He had been run out of town by then,” Liandron said. “So he couldn’t have done it from here.”

“Those Reborn weren’t under direct control of anyone; they were just acting on the baser instincts of the dark blood that fuelled them...to kill anything living,” Raine added.

“So...”, Allen began. “How did that girl escape if the arrows were supposed to hunt down every living thing in New Load?”

“We don’t know,” Kaine said. “That’s why we want to find her.”

“Okay,” Gabe took up. “So why attack New Load and plan on doing the same thing to Gilder’s Hollow? What’s the point?”

“We don’t know,” Kaine said again. “That’s why we want to find him.”

The Empria Suite was the name given to a set of buildings that lay on the Charista palace grounds, but that weren’t actually connected to the palace proper. They normally existed to house lower level visiting dignitaries, whose rank didn’t earn them a room in the palace itself. It was also used as the housing for the more senior advisors, who were considered as indispensable as to not ever be out of near proximity to the king and queen. It also housed various other hangers on to the royal family; such as the queen’s nephew.

The merchant, whose real name was Maren Erolstrom, studied his reflection in the mirror as he gingerly touched the back of his scalp. There was a sharp intake of breath to accompany the searing pain that touching the back of his head had caused him. He looked at his fingers and saw the faintest trace of blood on them. “Stupid, back woods peasant,” he seethed into his empty room, thinking of Allen. He was surprised he had been able to make it back to Charista alive after that mob of hicks ran him out of town, all for trying to show that stupid serving girl a good time. Luckily he had been able to liberate a broken down nag from one of the peasant’s huts. He didn’t think the mangy animal would be able to carry him all the way back to Charista, but it had. On arriving back, it wasn’t difficult to convince his aunt, the queen, that he’d been attacked and robbed; especially since he told his side of the tale while having the back of his head sewn back together by the palace’s healer. He washed the blood from his fingers with a little wine from his goblet, and then downed the rest. With any luck, that hick had already been arrested and the Quarter would be returning with him any second now. He had also instructed the Quarter Master to bring back his coach and team. Every time he thought about what treasure he’d left in the coach’s luggage compartment, he broke out into a cold sweat. If his masters found out he’d lost that many blood arrows, he’d beg to let that backwater lout finish him off. So long as the Quarter came back tonight with his coach, he should be alright. He just had to find a dive in the city to stay at so he could finish the rest of his work. Covering his room in the Empria Suite with a lot of runes of binding would probably attract just a little too much attention from the servants that swooped in and out all of the time.

He touched the back of his head again; it made him flinch, yet helped him to concentrate on how great it would be to sit in some sordid room of a local inn, with a blood arrow bound to him, directing it into that stable boy’s head. “No...no, that would be too quick,” he said to himself, pouring more wine from a silver pitcher into his goblet. He stared into the red wine, its color so close to that of blood. “No, he needs to suffer.” He took a long drink, wine dribbling down his chin. He set his cup down and a twisted

half smile played across his lips. “And she does too,” he said, thinking of the serving girl. He giggle maniacally as he touched the stitches on the back of his head again and again...oh yes, they’d pay.

A short while after vacating the room in the inn, the two Symbions, the two brothers, and the three friends were traveling down the Antioch pass, headed for Charista. Allen, Gabe, and Liandron were sitting inside the merchant’s black coach and the two brothers were up in front on the driver’s bench. Slightly ahead of them rode Raine and Kaine on their horses.

Gabe, who was munching on a roll from some of the food Master Enmore had insisted they take, wiped his mouth with his sleeve and addressed Allen. “There’s a lot of this that doesn’t make much sense.”

Allen stared out of the coach’s window, watching the dense forests that lined the road flash by. Gabe’s observation was a pretty big understatement. Almost nothing that had happened in the past few days had happened for any kind of sane reason that he could make out. He didn’t know why New Load had been attacked, and it made no sense for one of the silver merchants to have done it. It was like salting your own field. Although, as Allen thought about it, someone with a few hundred blood arrows was likely to have other things on their mind than profit margins. Then there was also the girl to think about, and how she had managed to survive the melee. Plus he had to wonder what would happen once he got to Charista and the guards there tried to arrest him; or would the Symbions authority last there, even so close to the palace? His head was starting to hurt from thinking about it all.

“What’s wrong?”, Liandron asked, her preternatural ability to sniff out anything wrong with Allen or Gabe came into play once again.

“Just too much to think about,” he answered honestly. That, and with all of this happening he hadn’t been able to get much sleep.

She smoothed out her dress on her lap and looked at him very seriously. “You could always be like Gabe and not think at all,” she said in an earnest tone.

“Hey!”, Gabe yelled past a mouthful of roll, spraying crumbs everywhere. He went to wipe his mouth with his sleeve again, but Liandron smacked his arm. “Oww,” he yelped as he withdrew his arm from her reach. Allen thought that Gabe was fortunate in that the merchant’s coach was large enough for him to stay out of Liandron’s striking range.

The coach door suddenly opened and Kaun swung in from the roof. He shut the door and looked around. “Always wondered what it’d be like riding in one of these things.” He glanced around the spacious interior. “Pretty dull really...us guards never get to sit on the inside.”

“Say, Kaun,” Allen started. “How long did you and Jaun work for that merchant?”

Kaun sat back and rubbed his forehead. “Well, that would have been our second run with him. He’s got a pretty unsavory reputation among the guards. Seems not many could take more than three or four runs with him.”

“Imagine that,” Liandron said dryly.

“Why so few,” Allen asked. Most of the time he’d see the same merchants come in with the same guards time after time. They needed each other in order to survive, so they typically got on pretty well. The whole reason for the guards was the area they coach had just entered. The dense, dark forests were home to bands of thieves that liked preying on the lucrative silver merchant’s coaches. Even with the guards, some coaches never made it back to Charista with their cargo intact. Naturally, it was only the coaches making the return trip that were attacked. Allen chagrined at the thought that they were making the return trip in what was obviously a merchant’s coach.

“Well,” Kaun took up again. “You saw what he was like. Just really arrogant...spoiled. He was like that to everyone. Treated his guards like dirt; plus, he just creeped most people out. Some of the guards would tell about how they’d get a room next to him at an inn, and he’d be up all night laughing and muttering to himself...when he wasn’t forcing himself on women, that is.

“Hmm? He did more than the silver run?”, Liandron asked.

“He did all of ‘em,” Kaun answered.

“Isn’t that a bit unusual?”, asked Allen.

“Yeah; most of em just stick to one run. This guy was always all over the place,” Kaun replied. “He didn’t even go for the most profitable runs...he seemed to have an agenda all of his own.”

“Sounds like a busy fellow,” Allen said, suddenly having a very bad feeling about all of this. Something about a Dark Heart making rounds to all of the local major cities was very unnerving. “We should probably...”, he began, but quit talking as he was thrown from his seat while the coach lurched to a stop.

“That’s just lovely,” Kaun said, sticking his head out of the window and looking at what had caused them to stop.

“What?”, Allen asked while picking himself up from the coach floor.

“Torm,” Kaun answered.

“What’s a Torm?”, asked Liandron.

“Not a what...a who. Torm considers himself to be the bandit king. He and his men do most of the raiding of coaches on this run. Not too bad of a fellow actually. He takes most of his profits and gives it out to some of the poorer families in Charista.” Kaun undid the latch on the coach door and stepped down to the road. “Just his job and mine don’t go well together,” he said as he drew his sword and started walking towards the front of the coach.

Allen and the other’s curiosity got the better of them, so they all piled out of the coach and started walking up to where Jaun and Kaun were standing by the coach’s team. Allen noticed that the Symbions had drawn in close to the coach and they had their hoods up.

“We’ve got nothing to interest you today, Torm. Let us pass,” Jaun called out to the leader of a group of men all dressed in white that had blocked the road up ahead.

“Sure you don’t,” the one called Torm said back to them. He seemed to be about average build and height, with black hair and a matching beard. “Seems every time there’s a silver-swapper’s coach with guards,” he eyed the Symbions. “Extra guards,” he added. “That there’s nothing in them. You probably needed all these extra guards to make sure nothing happened to all that nothing that you’re carrying.”

Allen heard Kaun exhale deeply. “We’re telling you the truth, Torm,” the brother said, his voice sounding strained. “We have no treasure.”

“No treasure?”, Torm said disbelievingly. “No treasure?!” He walked quickly towards them, his white cloak billowing out behind him to reveal that he was wearing tight black pants, and a purple shirt that looked to be made of Faren silk. There was also a silver studded, black leather sword belt that supported the matching scabbard on his right hip. Allen noticed that even as he rushed towards them that the brothers didn’t actually raise their drawn swords. “looks like you’re trying to hide the prettiest piece of treasure of them all,” he said, striking a pose while staring at Liandron, who was half hiding behind Allen.

Everyone stood stock-still, staring at the king of bandits, who was trying to flash a winning smile at Liandron, who attached herself to Allen’s back quite securely. Allen thought he heard Gabe mutter something that sounded like “you’ve got to be kidding me.”

“We have no time for this. Clear the road,” Kaine said as he and Raine edged in closer.

“Ohh...clear the road is it? Just who are you to order Torm the Bandit King around?”

As Allen expected they would, both of the Symbions lowered their hoods. What their white and blue hair meant registered immediately with Torm, who started backing away towards his men. “Well, had a great time, must be going. Bye,” he said as he and his men cleared the road and quickly vanished into the woods.

“Yep, everyone is weird,” Allen muttered as they got back in the coach and got moving again.

Maren Erolstrom was having quite a good time of drinking and imagining how much fun it would be to kill Allen, if the Quarter Master didn’t beat him to it. He decided that he’d show his aunt how lenient he could be by forgiving that hick and letting him go back to his hovel, then running a blood arrow through his stomach. A man might be able to survive a wound like that if he could find a good enough healer, or a light Symbion happened to be in town. The chances of that stable boy running into either of those in his backwater town were less than slim, so he’d just crawl around in terrible pain, watching all of his stupid friends die, then come back to life as Reborn, before he finally died. He debated having that snooty serving girl be the one to finish him off once she came back to life as Reborn; but he had other plans for her. She may not have wanted him in life, as least she pretended not to, but when he was the one controlling her, she certainly would. This time he would be sure to cast full binding over the arrows and the Reborn that they became. He giggled into his wine goblet as he touched the back of his head again. He was starting to like the way the pain felt.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself,” a soft voice said from his bed.

Maren dropped his goblet to the floor and started choking on his last swallow of wine.

“There, there,” the person on his bed said. “You’ve got so slow down or you’ll hurt yourself.” The person smiled oddly. “We wouldn’t want that, now would we?”

Maren finally finished his fit of coughing and looked over at the person lying on his bed. To him it had always seemed that Galleon had no bones in his body. Anytime he was at rest, he was always draped across whatever he was resting on; as if the chair or bed or whatever was the only thing giving his body support. And whenever he was in motion, he had an eerily fluid way of carrying himself. His walk was just almost a little too smooth. His frame, which looked very emaciated, was deceptive, so were his languid movements. Maren knew firsthand just how quickly and powerfully Galleon could strike. He was also one of the Dark One's inner circle. A Dark Heart such as Maren should feel honored that one so high had visited him, but Galleon invariably brought bad tidings. "Hello, my master," he stammered. "It's great to see you, my master."

"Yes, it must be," Galleon replied, resting his head on one of his hands while languidly swinging the off the edge of the bed.

The other thing about Galleon that always bothered Maren was that the man was simply beautiful. Not handsome in a manly fashion, but if you put a dress and wig on him, he'd make a gorgeous woman. Maren heard tell during a visit to a Dark Heart in Steppin that Galleon's beauty had something to do with how they were bound to the dark master. He wasn't very clear on it and wasn't so stupid as to ask one of the Dark Lord's inner circle why he looked like a girl.

"I just wanted to drop in and see how those blood arrows I sent you were working out. The Great Master was very interested in your plan, you know," Galleon said in his musical voice.

Maren turned around on the pretense of pouring more wine, so Galleon couldn't see the worry etched into his face, but then he remembered that he had dropped the goblet. He took a long drink from the pitcher, not caring how it must look. He wished he'd had the time in Gilder's Hollow to do a full binding on the arrows he sent to New Load so he could see how the Reborn he'd created there were doing, but he had been in a rush. "They're working splendidly, my master...everything is going according to plan," he lied. He also thought the term "dropping in" that Galleon used for his arrival was a bit of a stretch since he had just appeared out of thin air.

"That's good," Galleon said, fluidly rising off the bed and sauntering over to where Maren stood. "I'm glad," he added, resting his hand on Maren's shoulder and leaning in to whisper into his ear. "I would be very upset if something went wrong," he whispered. "*HE* would be very upset."

Those words nearly caused the merchant's knees to give way. He was glad that his idea had been noticed by the higher ups, but having the Dark Lord himself following its progress was more notice than he'd wanted. At least, he thought, he would end up being very close to the inner circle, if not part of it, if this worked out well. If not, he would beg for a quick death.

The idea was simple...replace all of the merchants and suppliers with Dark Hearts, so all of the money and power flowing through Charista would be theirs. They had already accomplished that, to a degree, and he had started replacing some of the Quarter Masters with those of his choosing. Having Dark Hearts serving as advisors to the regents also helped out immensely. He'd also had the idea to cleanse New Load and Gilder's Hollow because there were too many...well, good people living there. He needed to replace the silver miners with cheaper labor; like people who would want to work for free instead of being killed. And he didn't need the people of Gilder's Hollow

nosing around his business, or asking why carts full of people in cages were passing through town. Plus, from having dealt with the peasants in the two remote villages, he'd simply grown to hate them all. So he was more than happy to kill them all. Some more towns may need to be cleansed in the future, but he wanted to start things off close to home. All he had to do was get his blood arrows back and he could start making Gilder's Hollow into a Reborn habitat. The afternoon was quickly turning into evening and the Quarter still hadn't returned. He was starting to become concerned, but the Quarter Master was one of his, and he might be having fun bullying the peasants of Gilder's Hollow around.

"Don't disappoint us," he heard Galleon say, but the man had already vanished.

The two lanterns on the front of the coach were lit and casting feeble light down on the road. The Symbions were still riding in the lead, and as usual, appeared to be having no trouble navigating in the dark. Kaun and Jaun had joined the others inside the coach, complaining that the team didn't obey any of their commands anyway, so there was no point in being out in the cold night air. Allen had to agree with them, but he couldn't help but wonder what a driverless carriage must look like to anyone who saw it. The brothers had promised that they'd take back their positions on the driver's seat once they got near Charista.

The steady drumming of the horse's hooves and the swaying of the carriage was having a lulling effect on its five occupants. The brothers were quietly watching the night pass by through one of the windows; Gabe and Liandron were both sound asleep, and Allen was awake, but resting with his eyes closed.

The next thing he knew, he was flying over a sparsely vegetated plain, which was dotted by large rocks. Then he flew towards the base of the same cliff and saw the partially open door and heard the incomprehensible chanting. The figure in the cloak from this morning was standing there, looking up at him. He couldn't make out any details of the face because it still had its hood covering its head. "Welcome, LastBorn," the figure said. "Want to know how you will die?!?" The words were whispered, yet seemed to rise to a scream that reverberated through Allen's head.

He woke up screaming and panting to find Gabe and Liandron staring warily at him, and the brothers were gone. His friend's began asking him if he was alright, but he waved away their concerns with one hand and wiped sweat from his forehead and away from his eyes with the other. Glancing out of the windows, he could see moonlight shining on against the tall outer wall of Charista, and see the fires dotting the top of it where the numerous guard towers were. He seldom went down to Charista, so the sheer size of it always managed to boggle his mind. The city itself not only was large, but the outer wall had been built a few thousand paces back from the outskirts of the city. Allen never knew if that was for defense, or to allow the city to expand without rupturing through the safety of the wall. It might have been a bit of both. The giant wall had four gates built into it, one on the north, south, east, and west roads. There was no outer road connected these four roads, emphasizing the point that Charista wanted all of the trade and travel to go through it, not around it. Allen suspected that the moment the coach reached the East Gate and the guards recognized the description of him and the coach,

that then the fun would really begin. Although he didn't really know how things would work in a big city with a big army. In Gilder's Hollow, everyone knew everything about you; from when you went to sleep to what you had for breakfast. Here, the orders may have only been given out to the Quarter that was sent to arrest him. His question was answered as they pulled into the portcullis in the wall and the guards there immediately swarmed around the coach, surrounding it.

Maren was restless and tired of waiting for that incompetent Quarter Master to return with his blood arrows, so he had decided to kill some time and nervous energy by searching out a dive for his spell binding later. He was interested to see that screw ball woman who had caused such a stir back in Gilder's Hollow flit from a dark alley into a decrepit looking inn.

Charista, like any large city, had its more nefarious sections. The city planners and the guards did a good job of keeping it all localized in an area known as The Pleasant Den; or sometimes called The Peasant Den, but normally just The Den. Any variety of low cost and usually illegal entertainment could be had there. As The Den served to keep the seedier elements of society from causing trouble in the nicer parts of town, the guard usually turned a blind eye to what went on in The Den, so long as it stayed there.

Like many of the other shadowy forms stalking the streets of The Den, Maren wore a long cloak with the hood up, covering his face. He wouldn't wager much against many of the other half hidden people lurking around being other merchants or dignitaries from the palace, out for a bit of illicit fun. Everything from whore houses, to cock fights, to human fights would draw wealthy patrons who could ill afford to be seen coming to The Den, so anonymity was the order of the day. He passed through the assorted pungent smells and grime of The Den's streets until he arrived at the inn he had seen the girl duck into. He glanced up at the sign above the door; there was simply a picture of a rather well endowed serving girl happily residing on the lap of a patron painted onto the rough hewn wood. Both figures in the painting had large tankards of ale in their hands. Maren wondered if it was ale or well endowed serving women that could be bought at the inn; but he guessed that with The Den, it could be either.

He stepped into the dimly lit common room. There was a minstrel at one end of the bar, trying to make himself heard over the din, and several serving girls that failed to match up to their painted counterpart flitting around the room. He glanced around for the girl, the one who had somehow managed to survive his little present for New Load, but didn't see her among the serving girls or the patrons. He figured that someone arriving in Gilder's Hollow the way she did couldn't have been bursting with money, so she must have been working at the inn in exchange for her lodging. He was also curious about how she had managed to escape the care of those Gilder's Hollow women. With the kind of care he'd received there, he wouldn't be surprised if they ran her out of town as well. He finally saw her come out of a back room and speak with the burly man working behind the bar. She was wearing a greasy apron over the same rough wool dress she'd worn the last time he'd seen her. The barman curtly waved her away and she wandered back into what must have been the kitchen. Maren found an empty table that afforded him a view into the kitchens, and waited to see the girl again as a serving girl arrived,

blocking his view. She didn't smile or greet him; she seemed more preoccupied with keeping herself from spilling out of her rather low cut dress. "The house ale and whatever's fresh from the oven," he told the serving girl; he had no intention of actually touching either, but they made for useful props if you wanted to pose as a patron while stalking your prey.

The girl he'd seen in Gilder's Hollow would come into view for a few seconds on occasion. The narrow doorway leading into the kitchen only afforded a view of one wall of the kitchen. The girl would restock the shelves lining that wall with plates and tankards, and occasionally hang a pot on the wall. "So, she's earning her keep by washing dishes," the merchant mumbled to himself, actually surprised that this dive washed any of the dishes instead of just reusing the dirty ones. So now he knew that she hadn't any money, and during her little rant on the floor of the inn in Gilder's Hollow, she made it pretty clear that she wanted to get as far away from New Load as possible. He guessed she wouldn't be getting any further than Charista for quite a while if she had to work all day just for her boarding; unless she wanted to catch a ride on one of the merchant wagons, but he knew firsthand what they normally charged a young girl for passage, and it wasn't payable in gold. The merchant smiled as the serving girl threw his food and ale on the table, spilling most of it. He was happy because the girl would probably be where he could readily find her for some time, and because the binding spells required human blood to work properly. He'd had to use his own in Gilder's Hollow out of necessity, but this serving girl was quickly offering up hers. In an inn such as this, no one would think twice about one of the serving girls disappearing for a few hours with a patron.

Yes, he thought as he took a long drink of the ale without thinking, things were coming along nicely.

The guards at the West Gate became very cooperative once the Symbions revealed themselves as what they were. Everyone was anxious to start looking for the girl and the merchant, but after talking it over, they decided it would be best to pay a visit to the king and queen first, to have the Symbions convince them to drop the charges against Allen. Trying to make a thorough search of the city would be too time consuming if they had to be stopped by the town guard all the time.

Allen had wanted to see about getting the charges dropped immediately, but Liandron pointed out that it was pretty late, and pulling the regents out of bed was probably a bad way of going about things. So he relented and went about finding a stable for the coach and team, plus the Symbion's horses, while the others found an inn. Allen, having done some business with the stable master of the largest stable by the West Gate before, had no trouble getting the animals and coach put up, and some extra gold ensured that the city guard wouldn't be coming around nosing for the coach. He also inquired about his horse, and the stable master said that it was indeed there, but he had apparently found it abandoned outside the stable one night.

He went back to the nearby inn that they'd decided to stay at, and found Liandron sitting in the common room, clearly scrutinizing everything. The inn was a bit smaller than her father's, but it seemed to be clean and quiet. Jaun and Kaun, being from

Charista, said that they needed to go home for the night, but would return in the morning to help them take up the search; which was handy since this was familiar territory to them.

They booked two rooms; one for the women and one for the men, and then they all sat around a table in the common room, waiting for their dinner to arrive.

“My horse was there,” Allen announced to the table as drinks were served. “The girl was not,” he added.

“The merchant should be easy to find if he’s the queen’s nephew,” Gabe said. “He’s probably living it up in the palace right now.”

Maren was plying the girl with food and drinks at the moment. She had been hesitant to join him earlier in the evening when he invited her to sit down with him, but she was sated when she realized he knew her from Gilder’s Hollow.

“You know, I thought you looked sort of familiar,” she said around a mouthful of meat. Maren himself wouldn’t have eaten anything here since there was no telling what animal the “beef” was actually from, but it was certainly good enough for the peasant girl. “But that whole time is kind of fuzzy,” she admitted, blushing. Maren knew she didn’t remember him at all, because all of her conscious time in Gilder’s Hollow had been spent flailing around on the floor of the inn. Yet, she was saying it to be polite...he thought her to be utterly disgusting. However, he smiled kindly at her as she continued eating the food. He kept pushing spiced brandy towards her; a wink and a discreetly slipped gold piece to the serving girl insured that the brandy got to be stronger and stronger as the night wore on. He let the girl prattle on about how the people in Gilder’s Hollow had drugged her and how she had to steal a horse to escape.

“So tell me,” he interrupted. “How did you manage to escape from New Load, if, as you say, everyone there was killed by these *red arrows*.” He was having a tough time keeping the balance between dragging information from her and not revealing that he knew more about it than he should.

“I don’t know,” she said, her eyes getting dewy. He probably would have found her pretty cute, had she not looked so roughshod. She was an average height for a girl and had shoulder length sandy blonde hair. Her dress was course grey wool, which betrayed her peasant status. He thought that he could make out a cute body hidden beneath that horrid dress, but it was hard to tell due to the shapelessness of the garment. He thought that he might have to see for himself after this business with the missing arrows was finally settled.

“There were just all of these red arrows, flying everywhere,” she took back up again. “Everyone was running here and there...my father caught me up and put me on our horse, then he slapped its hindquarters and it was so frightened anyway...it was all I could do to hang on.” She paused in her story to brush away a tear. Maren took the opportunity to encourage her to have another drink. “We were just about out of town when my horse was hit in the neck by one of those arrows...but he managed to carry me most of the way to Gilder’s Hollow,” she said, choking up.

The merchant couldn’t believe that anyone could sound so sad over losing a stupid horse. “And none of the arrows managed to hit you?”, he asked, trying to make it

sound like it was a wonder that she hadn't been hit...but really he was wondering why she hadn't been hit.

"I was hit by one...", she muttered, staring down into her mug. Maren wondered if his plan of playing her with alcohol was about to backfire and she was going to pass out. "...but for some reason...the arrow," she took a big gulp from her mug. "For some reason the arrow didn't go in...it just hit my chest and shattered."

Maren was glad he'd just swallowed a mouthful of ale; otherwise he would have spit it all over the table. "How in the world could that happen?", he blurted out before he could think to stop himself. Luckily, the girl misinterpreted it as concern.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe the wood was faulty or something. It just hit me then disintegrated."

Maren wasn't even really listening anymore; he was too busy trying to figure out what could do that to a blood arrow. And the idiot peasant girl was babbling some nonsense about it being wood.

"Say, what's your name?", the girl asked, trying hard to focus her eyes on him.

"I am the Duke Maren Erolstrom," he told her his true name since he didn't plan on killing her anytime soon. He needed to study this one; find out why the arrow didn't do anything to her. "And what's your name?", he asked her; tears were pouring down her face as she obviously thought about all that had happened to her.

"Aria, Aria Naruma," she announced proudly, and then her head fell to the table with a thud as she passed out.

Maren had wanted to spit on her by then; he couldn't stand having to speak with low born people for so long at one time. However, he had gotten some very interesting information out of her, and she had given him a lot to think about. He gave the barkeep some gold coins to pay for the meal and to make sure that the girl was put into a proper room. He added some extra gold to make sure she didn't become the unwitting partner of one of the drunkards who were still swilling away their cheap booze in the room. It wouldn't do to have his little curio damaged before he could play with her. As for now he had to get back to the palace grounds to see if that idiot Quarter Master had returned yet.