

The Chronicles
Book One: The Lot in Life
Chapter Seven

Allen was up early the next morning sitting in the private dining room that the innkeeper had felt obliged to let them use when he saw that there were Symbions in their party. He didn't know if the innkeeper did it as a show of respect, or because the presence of Symbions in the common room might keep his liquor sales down as people looked elsewhere to drink. He went over to the window and leaned against the wide sill, watching the hustle and bustle of the city. He hadn't been able to see much of it when they arrived, as it had been evening, but now with the morning light breaking over the city he was able to study it more closely. The wide street that was essentially the East Road, or the Antioch Pass, ran in front of the window so that Allen could see much of the activity of the city. All of the streets in Charista, that he knew of anyway, were made of closefitting stones that were held in place by little more than a small amount of grout and good craftsmanship. Although how good the craftsmanship was seemed to depend on how widely used the road was. Some of the lesser side roads and alleyways were fairly treacherous due to the sloppy work done of laying the stones, which left them unevenly spaced and canted at odd angles. However, that only made sense given that Charista existed mainly for trade, so the trade routes were well maintained and engineered, while everything else was given second rate work. Allen had also thought that a city this size would be teeming with vendors and their carts trying to hock their wares along the main routes, but the city guard must have kept a fairly tight restraint on that, because all of the buying and selling that Allen could see was taking place in regular buildings. The building across the street seemed to be some sort of bakery where people were going to get their breakfast, and the common room of the inn was teeming with locals who were going there to get something to eat. It seemed a bit strange to Allen that none of these people would eat at home, but he did figure that doing it this way would be a lot faster, and for all he knew, most of the people may not have even had stoves. It was only a generation ago that a good portion of Charista had burned in a fire that people said started because someone had let their dinner catch fire. Much of the city was made up of wooden buildings instead of the sun dried bricks that almost every structure was made of now. That was also when wide streets became the norm; in the event there was another fire it was unlikely to spread from one section of the city to the next. He had heard that baking at home was outlawed because of the fire as well, but he didn't know if that rule was still in effect, or if everyone had gotten so used to not cooking for themselves that they simply kept eating meals away from home, regardless of the law being repealed. Allen thought that Gabe's sister might make an excellent citizen of Charista, and it would save anyone from ever having to eat her cooking again. Even this early in the morning, a group of masons was busy replacing the lower floor of a wooden building with bricks. There had also been a rumor that the masons had started the fire, but that was almost as impossible to prove as the burnt dinner theory.

Allen was watching the first few flakes of snow begin to fall from the grey skies when the door to the private room opened, admitting Raine and Liandron. They were

talking animatedly to each other and intermittently giggling, both of which they stopped doing abruptly when they saw that Allen was already in the room. "Good morning," each of the girls said brightly, in turn; Allen responded with a "good morning," but he found it difficult to keep the tiredness out of his voice. Rain and Liandron were part of the reason that he hadn't been able to get much sleep during the night. The girls shared the room next to the one he was in, and most of the night he'd had to listen to an inordinate amount of giggling and talking coming from their room; most disturbingly, he thought he'd heard his name mentioned often. His mother had always said that if you put two women in a room together for any length of time, they would either come out as the best of friends, or the worst of enemies. Allen decided this was a very wise saying as Raine and Liandron sat down at the table, trying to stifle a fresh outbreak of giggling. The other problem that he'd had in sleeping was that his dreams were filled with the cliff and its accompanying black door, but he didn't really want to dwell on those.

"Aww, not feeling good?", Raine asked, sticking out her lower lip and pouting at Allen.

"I'm fine," he lied; he was hoping that they could find the girl and the merchant quickly so that they could bring a swift close to this whole affair and his life could get back to normal. He somehow didn't think that things would be that easy, though.

Gabe, who was never much of a morning person, stumbled in through the door a few moments later; just in time to save Allen from Raine, who was trying to touch her forehead to Allen's to see if he was feverish.

"Hold still," Raine said as she basically chased Allen around the table.

"No," he responded while trying to keep the table between himself and the Symbion. "I'm fine."

Gabe merely watched the two of them through his half-closed eyes, and then sat down at the table next to Liandron. "Morning," he mumbled then let his head fall to the table.

"Hold still," Raine insisted again as she and Allen made another circuit of the table.

Kaine was the next to come into the room; he took one look at the chase scene transpiring and simply said "Raine." This caused Raine's expression to droop and she went back and calmly sat on the other side of Liandron from Gabe. "I just wanted to make sure that he was okay," she said sulkily, then went back to quietly talking with Liandron.

Allen was just returning to his seat when Jaun and Kaun arrived, followed by a serving girl with a tray full of bowls of porridge. The girl sat bowls in front of everyone while the brothers seated themselves, then she left, pulling the door closed behind her.

"Well," Jaun said without preamble. "We asked around at the West Gate a little bit last night, and we talked to a few people who remembered someone who sounded like the girl showing up. She apparently caused quite a commotion by telling anyone who would listen that everyone in New Load had been murdered by red arrows. Most people naturally thought that she was a loon, and the gate guards eventually ran her off. We couldn't find much of a trace of her after that."

"But we didn't have time to check all four quarters of the city," Kaun added.

"Quarters?", Allen asked, looking from his untouched food to Kaun.

“Kaun drew on the table with his finger while narrating. “Well...Charista is basically laid out as a giant circle,” he said, drawing a circle on the table. “That circle is split up into four sections;” he drew a plus inside the circle. “In the middle of each of these slices of the city you have one of the major four roads, which means that you have one of the four gates in the middle of the outer edge, as well,” he said drawing another plus inside the circle. “So, basically, the city is sliced up into eight sections; it’s just that two sections are named after whichever road is running through them. So you have the East section, West section, and so on. Then in the center of the city is...”

“The palace?”, Gabe asked.

“No...the Ministry of Trade; that’s where the four major roads terminate and all of the trading of stuff actually goes on. The palace is pretty close to the Ministry of Trade, though. One of the eight pieces of the city is mostly taken up by the palace and its grounds,” Kaun finished, putting his finger on the imaginary slice.

At the mention of the palace, Allen felt a lump rise in his throat. He had almost managed to make himself forget that he was wanted for attempted murder and theft, and that soon they would have to go before the king and queen to see if they could get the charges dropped. Liandron, who must have been reading his thoughts, gave him a reassuring smile.

Raine and Liandron took their time eating and talking; then when they were finished the group decided that the time was right to journey to the palace. They had decided that they had better take along the coach and team, in the event that their safe return was a condition of having the charges dropped. Gabe suggested that they take all of their luggage with them in the event that they needed to quickly flee the city. Allen’s hopes weren’t raised when everyone agreed that that might be a good idea.

So while everyone else was packing, Allen went to the stables and got the coach and team together, then drove them over to the inn. The snow was beginning to come down a lot harder now and some of the city guard was patrolling the streets with shovels, trying to keep the main roads clear. To Allen, it looked like a losing battle, but he guessed they would keep shoveling so long as trade existed in Charista. He wanted to tell them the chances of a load of silver coming down the East Road were pretty slim, but he didn’t want to tip his hand that he knew more than he should. Plus he was busy keeping his cloak hood drawn tightly about his face so that none of the guards would recognize his description and arrest him while the Symbions weren’t around to rescue him.

The others emerged from the inn and stowed their belonging back in the luggage compartment; Gabe putting his bag in, along with Allen’s. Kaine was back in the inn, the innkeeper having made them pay for their stay since it looked to him like they were leaving. For all Allen knew, they might have been. Finally everyone, the Symbions included, climbed into the coach and headed for the palace. Kaun rode up on the driver’s seat along with Allen, so that he could point him out the way to the palace compound.

Most of the buildings that Allen could see on the way into the center of town looked to be pretty upscale. The coach rumbled along the East road; the only way for a coach of this size to get around town was to stick to the four major roads.

“The East Side of town is one of the nicer areas,” Kaun said over the noise of the horses’ shoes ringing on the paving stones. “Since most of the trade here revolves around silver, a lot of the wealthier merchants, jewelers, gilders, and bankers all live around here. The West side of town is even fancier, but that has nothing to do with the trade from Steppin; it’s just because its so close to the palace compound.”

The coach finally neared the center of town; the buildings getting taller the closer in that they got. Finally they reached a cross road that Kaun said encircled the Ministry of Trade building. So Allen steered the coach onto the cross road, while staring at the Ministry of Trade building. Given that virtually all trade in the region took place there, it was a pretty unremarkable building. It was very large, but only one storey and not very elaborately decorated or designed. At spots around the building, there were places where merchant trains could be loaded and unloaded. Being from Gilder’s Hollow, Allen never saw much of merchant trains, they not being very practical for the silver trade, but he had heard a lot about them. Much of the trade from Steppin and Nordemain relied on the trains. Essentially it was one merchant leading a train of twenty or so wagons loaded with grain or coal, and the merchants would just hire out drivers for all of the wagons. Aside from the loading and unloading areas, the outside of the Ministry of Trade was pretty dull, and there didn’t seem to be much activity.

“They’re waiting around to see if the Ministry is going to close the roads,” Kaun said, pointing at a group of merchants who were knotted around a fire, talking to each other.

“Close the roads?”, Allen asked, feeling more and more naïve about the ways of Charista all the time.

“Yeah,” Kaun answered, still watching the merchants. “If the Trade Ministry feels that the roads may become too dangerous to travel for whatever reason... the weather,” he motioned with his hand to the heavily falling snow. “Or bandits, war, or whatever...they’ll close the four gates so that no one can get out. “Most of that lot,” he nodded towards the merchants, “have a good head for numbers, but they have just about no common sense whatsoever. So they’ll ride out into a blizzard and freeze to death, more often than not losing their load of goods in the bargain. One reason that Charista stays a trade hub is that they guarantee shipments will arrive safely at their destination. So if one of those idiots loses a train of wheat, Charista will have to send another one to replace it, and pay for it. So if the roads get too bad, the Ministry will just close them down.”

Allen started to wonder if going to the palace would actually do any good, or if they should just go to the Ministry of Trade, since it seemed like they were probably the ones who really ran the city.

The coach rumbled onto the West Road and Allen immediately saw what Kaun meant when he said that the Palace Compound took up much of one section of the city. On the left side of the wide road were a few marble buildings and some very large houses, but on the right side there was a tall, white wall that was topped with gilded, iron spikes. A few bushes and trees were planted in front of the wall to break up its uniformity, but none of the shrubbery was high or sturdy enough to afford someone aid who might try to scale the wall. The coach kept going past the wall, to what Allen seemed like a very long way, until they reached a portcullis in the wall that was large enough to drive the coach

through. However, it did take Raine leaning her head out of the window to convince the guard to open the gate and let them pass.

The coach pulled through the wall and onto what Allen thought must have been a gravel path, but it was hard to tell in the snow. They passed by a small building that looked like it was probably a guard house, then the path began winding through trees and lush gardens, until it finally opened up onto the broad lawns of the palace proper. The palace itself was an enormous rectangular, two storey building that was made entirely of white marble. There were chiseled figures carved into the walls in even intervals, so it looked like men and women were holding the palace walls up. There were also a few freestanding marble statues scattered about the palace grounds, but all of their faces were turned in adoration at the palace. Allen looked more closely at the figures carved into the palace walls and realized that their faces were all turned in adoration at one part of the palace, as well; he guessed that must be where the throne room was. He heard someone in the back of the coach say "bleeech" in a voice that sounded very much like Raine's.

A little ways away from the palace was a small square building with smoke coming from many different chimneys. Allen guessed that building must have housed the kitchens. On the opposite side of the palace from that, but set much further back, was a large rectangular two storey building that was white marble as well, but sparsely decorated so no one would have any question as to which building was the palace. Allen guessed that must have been the palace annex.

The coach way led in a circular sweep to the front steps of the palace, where six guards in blue and white stood stiffly at attention lining the broad steps that led up to the palace entrance.

A boy in blue and white came running from around the side of the kitchens as the coach drew near, then he took hold of the team as they came to a stop.

Everyone got out of the coach and began ascending the palace steps. If the six guards thought anything odd about the party as they approached, they didn't say anything. Allen was half expecting them to cross their tall lances and forbid them access, but they didn't.

They reached the top of the steps and came into a large, lavishly decorated room that must have been used for greeting important dignitaries. There were more of the strange reverently staring figures carved into the walls, plus thick blue carpets covering most of the floor space. At the opposite end of the room from the entrance was another doorway, where stood a pompous looking page wearing the regent's colors of blue and white, appraising the group. Allen supposed they must look a very strange lot to the page; three of them were dressed in plain clothes that clearly marked them as peasants, while the brothers wore the simple garb and leather wristbands that all guards wore, and the Symbions were quite plainly Symbions.

"How could I help you," the page asked in a tone that assured everyone he didn't want to help them in the least.

"Two Symbions to see your bitch of a queen," Raine said brightly, flashing a smile.

The page and Allen's jaws both almost dropped to the floor. Allen had originally thought that the Symbions might be able to sway the king and queen for him; now it looked more like they would end up getting him executed.

“Are you...umm...are you sure that’s the message you wish relayed?”, the page stammered, looking like he was having visions of his own execution.

“Yes,” Raine said, advancing on the page. “Relay that message word for word.” Allen thought that he was a glint of green light pass across her eyes.

The frightened expression on the page’s face vanished immediately, only to be replaced by a rather slack look. He turned on his heel and started for the door that he had been guarding. “Follow me,” he said tonelessly.

The group followed the page deeper into the palace while Allen was busy trying to figure out why Raine could have possibly thought telling the page to give the queen that message was a good idea. She looked over at him and stuck out her tongue. “Don’t worry,” she said brightly.

Allen sighed and trudged along behind the page. If he had thought he was nervous on the coach ride here, it was nothing compared to the anxiety he was feeling now. The walk down the long white hallway felt more like he was being led to his death, rather than to meet with the king and queen. Raine wasn’t helping assuage his fears, since she was constantly muttering under her breath about how she thought the wall friezes were tacky and how the artworks smattered through the long hallway were all ugly. Allen did have to agree with her that the wall friezes were a little strange. They were the same style as those on the outside of the palace walls, and they were all looking reverently in the same direction, but these were carved with a much lighter hand, so the relief on them was not so drastic. The various tapestries and vases that were displayed here and there along the hallways that Raine was still criticizing, he didn’t have much of an opinion about. The one thing there that he thought looked very out of place was himself and his friends from Gilder’s Hollow. The three of them, up until now, had just been living a simple life in their small village. Now, here they were, walking down a hallway in the royal palace of Charista, being escorted by two Symbions, and on their way to speak with the king and queen. Although Gilder’s Hollow was technically a part of the kingdom of Charista, they had never been visited by their regents, nor had they ever heard much about them. They simply knew that they existed, but nothing else. So Allen didn’t know if they were supposed to be gracious and lenient rulers, or if they were likely to want his head. They were nearing the end of the hallway and the figures in the friezes were starting to look more inward than forward, so he guessed he was probably about to find out firsthand what they were like.

When they reached the end of the hallway, the page stepped through a set of double doors on his left while Allen debated jumping through the window on his right. However, just as he was thinking of making a break for it, he found Raine holding onto the long sleeves of his shirt...she had apparently guessed his plan.

Allen heard a woman’s voice echo from within the chamber as she screamed “WHAT?!?!” He figured that Raine’s message must have just been delivered. The big double doors opened and the page stumbled out, looking quite scared as well as mortified by what he had just said to his queen. Allen guessed that Raine’s control over him must have ended. The page didn’t bother to escort them into the throne room; he simply took off running down the hall.

Raine smiled brightly and started to walk through the large doors. Allen thought about making a run for it again, but Raine was already pulling him along behind her by his shirt sleeve.

The throne room was a large, square room that Allen was not surprised to see was made entirely of white marble. More of the friezes were carved into the walls and a rich blue carpet ran from the double doors up to the base of the raised dais that the thrones were on. The thrones themselves were naturally marble, inlaid with intricate silver designs, and were covered in blue cushions, upon which sat the king and queen. Actually, only the king was sitting there calmly; the queen was on her feet and glaring at the newcomers. Allen was little pleased to see that the queen was also holding a scepter like she was ready to use it to bludgeon somebody. More alarming than that, though, was that she was a Symbion.

Despite how little news of the king and queen of Charista reached Gilder's Hollow, Allen would have thought that the queen being a Symbion would have been pretty well known. It wasn't like you could look at her and not tell that she was one. However, he also had no idea how often she might make public appearances, or if she ever left the palace at all. He also saw that the king, who was still just staring forward uninterested, was not a Symbion. He shot Raine a questioning look.

"Yes," she said quietly out of the corner of her mouth. "She's a Symbion... a dis-paired Symbion."

Out of all of the tales he'd heard during his lifetime, he'd heard only one or two vague mentions of dis-paired Symbions. That was the term used to describe a Symbion who had lost the other half of their pairing. Unfortunately, the only things he'd really ever heard about them was that losing their other half made them very unstable. Yet, the only real difference he could see between the queen and Raine was that the regent's hair was a much darker shade of blue. It was almost the same color as the blue carpets that ran all over the palace. However, she was wearing a long, full gown that was a light blue the same shade as Raine's hair. The king himself was decked out in a white military style uniform that had a blue sash full of medals running across his chest.

Raine finally released Allen's sleeve, then grasped the sides of her long cloak below her waist and flared it out as she dipped into a very exaggerated curtsy. "Oh your majesty, thank you so much for being so gracious as to see us," she said, still dipped down. Then she lifted up her head and gave the queen a nasty look. "You whore," she said with a smile.

Allen was shocked and heard a sharp intake of breath from Liandron, who was standing a little ways behind him with the others. The queen, however, didn't look anywhere nearly as shocked or outraged as Allen expected that she would. She just stood on the dais with an odd smile on her face. It was the king who reacted; he shot to his feet and pointed at Raine. "Who dares speak to my lovely wife in this fashion?", he bellowed, his voice echoing through the chamber.

"Oh, and you can drop your little act," Raine said flatly, getting up and continuing to address the queen.

"Very well," the queen sighed and Allen noticed for the first time the green light flipping across her eyes. The light stopped and the king slumped to the floor, like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Allen could only stare wide eyed at the fallen form of the king. The queen was using her power as a Symbion to control the king of Charista; he wondered if she'd used the same powers to become queen in the first place.

“I never thought much of you,” Raine said, her eyes narrowed dangerously. “But I never thought that you’d stoop so low as to use your powers to control a kingdom. Why don’t you just go earn your money on your back in a brothel? At least that would be more respectable.” Allen looked over at Raine and saw that she looked very angry, yet her eyes seemed a little sad. He glanced back at the others; the brothers were looking pretty uncomfortable, Gabe looked pale and worried, Kaine was showing his usual complete lack of emotion, and Liandron looked as outraged as Raine did. Allen didn’t know if Liandron was outraged by what the queen was doing, or she was just offering support to her new friend, Raine. Allen would have been a bit happier if she was looking concerned on his behalf, but at least Gabe was looking nervous enough for two people.

“Well, thank you so much for traveling all this way to offer me career advice, Raine,” the queen said, smiling sweetly. “However, I’m pretty happy being the ruler of a kingdom. True, they have some rather odd ideas about how only a man can be the ruler of it,” she said, stepping over to the crumpled form of the king. “But Tylius here has his uses.” She lifted the hem of her long skirt a little, and then kicked the king, knocking him off the dais. “I actually run the kingdom and he doesn’t even have to bother doing any thinking for himself. Men are so bad at that anyway,” she said, smiling down at Kaine. Kaine, for his part, merely stared blankly at the queen, who was now descending the five steps of the dais and walking towards Raine and Allen.

The queen glided towards them, her walk seemed to Allen more like a slink than a stride. She moved, emphasizing the roll of her hips, and moved her arms so they constantly brushed against her breasts, which caused what of them was exposed by her low cut dress to dance around. Allen glanced over to see both Raine and Liandron giving the queen the exact same dire look. He didn’t know if that was part of their friendship, or if that was just one of the stock looks that every woman was born with. Whatever the case, he felt that his chances of being pardoned now were getting very slim indeed.

“What really brings you here?”, the queen asked, standing just a few inches from Raine.

Raine, who was the same height as the queen, stared at her so long that Allen thought about nudging her. Finally, she grabbed Allen’s sleeve with one of her hands and pulled him closer to her, so he’d be in the queen’s line of sight. “You issued an order for the arrest of this man; I want you to drop it.”

The queen looked from Raine to Allen; she seemed to be measuring him with her eyes. “Hmm, could this be the one who attacked my nephew, Maren?”

“Your *nephew* tried to rape me,” Liandron spoke up, making the word nephew sound a curse...the queen looked at her coldly. “Allen was only protecting me,” she added determinedly. As Allen thought about it, with Liandron’s over protectiveness, she might end up being as much of a liability as Raine was if she started getting haughty with the queen.

“Hmm,” the queen said, letting her stare linger on Liandron. “I would have thought that Maren would have better taste.”

A sharp sound echoed through the marble chamber as Raine slapped the queen hard enough to send her flying backwards.

Allen had to admit that he was glad that Raine had done that, but he was also wondering if he’d be able to escape the palace grounds if he ran for it, or if the guards at the front gate would cut him down.

The queen slowly picked herself up from the floor, making an exaggerated show of licking blood from the corner of her mouth and smiling. "So, tell me, Rainey," she simpered as she advanced on them again. "Why should I drop the charges?" She stepped directly in front of Allen so that their bodies were nearly touching. She put her hand on his chest and looked up at him. Allen glanced down at her, but quickly averted his eyes when he saw that the queen's head being tilted back afforded him a view directly down her dress. "Is he your play mate? Do you loooove him?" She giggled quietly as she rubbed his chest. Seeing the way the queen's personality suddenly seemed to have shifted, he understood what the tales said about dis-paired Symbions being unstable. She got an evil smile on her face and Allen felt her press her hand into his chest suddenly, but then she stopped and just stared up at him wonderingly. Her mouth began opening and closing, but she wasn't actually forming words.

"If you don't dismiss the charges," Raine finally answered with a slight smirk on her face. "Kaine and I may get a little...dangerous."

The air in the room suddenly felt very heavy and Allen thought that he could hear the marble all around him begin to groan and pop.

The queen's eyes darted quickly between Raine and Kaine, but it was on Allen that her gaze settled again as she started backing towards the dais. "Amaror!", she shouted as she was nearly back to the steps. A door off to the side of the thrones that Allen hadn't noticed before opened, and a woman came out with a quill, ink, and parchment. "Announce to all the Quarters and guards that all charges against Duke Erolstrom's supposed attacker are hereby voided." Allen could hear a sigh of relief from Gabe and Liandron, but he was unnerved by the way that the queen continued to stare at him. If Amaror thought anything strange of the king lying on the floor, she showed nothing of it as she heated wax into a pool on the parchment, then walked over to the fallen king and pressed his signet ring into the hot wax. Then she retreated back into the door behind the thrones, closing it behind her.

Raine simply turned on her heel and started dragging Allen out of the room by his sleeve. The other five in their group were already leading the retreat.

"Oh, and Raine," the queen called out just as Raine and Liandron had made it to the big double doors. "Since we're such old friends, if I ever decide to follow your career suggestion, I'll make sure to give your new man a discount," she said, her eyes glittering malevolently as she looked at Allen.

Raine appeared to be forcibly swallowing her reply, and then she yanked on Allen's sleeve and began her march out of the palace.

Allen was immensely relieved to not have to worry about being arrested anymore, but the entire meeting with the queen left him with an uneasy feeling. The look she had given him when she had her hand on his chest was eerily reminiscent of the one Raine had given him when she tried charging him in New Load.

Raine suddenly stopped walking and threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, you were so brave!", she enthused, returning back to her normal demeanor. "The way you stood up to that terrible, horrible, awful, disgusting, dirty woman," she simpered. Allen didn't really remember doing much of anything, much less having stood up to the queen. Then Raine released him and grabbed Liandron's hands in both of hers and jumped up and down, saying "and you were SO amazing Li-Li!" Allen could only stare at the two as he wondered at Liandron's new nickname.

“Oh no...” Liandron said, clasping Raine’s hands back. “YOU were so amazing, the way you slapped that horrible woman for me!”

The two hugged each other while the men in the company all gave each other quizzical looks.

“Oh, Kaun,” Jaun enthused, grabbing his brother by the shoulders. “You were so amazing in there...the way you...stood there.”

Jaun took up the act instantly and clasped his hands together over his chest and danced in place. “Oh wasn’t I, Kaun? Wasn’t I marvelous?!”

Allen couldn’t help but laugh, especially when the brothers’ efforts were rewarded by kicks in the shins by Raine and Liandron.

One part of their reason for coming to Charista had been taken care of, now they were free to track down the merchant and the girl from New Load. Tracking down the merchant should be easy, Allen mused as they walked back down the long hallway. Raine and Liandron were whispering together about how poorly the palace was decorated. The merchant should, if he was in, be at the building that Allen could see from the windows in the hallway...the palace annex.

As they walked, they debated about just going after the merchant now. Raine and Kaine insisted they ought to do it alone since the duke was a Dark Heart, while the others argued they should do it now before the queen could warn him of their presence.

However, everyone’s good mood was shattered when they reached the reception room and saw that their coach was gone.

“Hey, where’d our coach go?” Gabe asked one of the six guards lining the steps. Allen noticed that they were different guards than the ones that had been there when they arrived.

“Your coach?”, the guard asked incredulously. “The Duke Erolstrom left with HIS coach not too long ago.”

Maren’s hopes were buoyed as he looked out of the window of his bedroom when he awoke and saw that his coach was sitting in front of the palace. He dressed quickly and walked from the palace annex over to the palace proper. He assumed that the Quarter Master would be making his report to the queen, so he decided to drop into the throne room and make sure to suggest that the Quarter Master be rewarded with a promotion to overseer of all of Charista’s Quarters. After all, the Quarter Master had come through for him in a very big way. True, it had taken him a long time, but Maren could finally stop worrying about having to explain to his masters how he had lost that many blood arrows...if they even let him explain before simply killing him. Now he would finally be able to get down to the task of getting those arrows back to the good people of Gilder’s Hollow. He laughed to himself at the way those arrows would be returned. As he walked down the long hallway, he wondered if the Quarter Master had actually just taken the stable boy prisoner, or if he had killed him. He would be very sad if all of the fun of killing the stable boy slowly had been taken away from him, but right now he was so happy that he didn’t really care either way.

He stopped just outside of the throne room as he heard raised voices. He craned his head around the door just enough to see that those stupid peasants who’d caused him

so much trouble in the first place where there, along with those traitorous guards, and worst of all...two Symbions. This was very bad.

He hung around outside of the door to hear his aunt order that the charges he'd managed to get trumped up against the stable boy were dropped, and then he took off quietly running down the hallway. He didn't really care right now if the stable boy was arrested or not, he needed to get back to his coach and check on his blood arrows.

Running out to the front of the palace, he brushed the snow that covered the luggage compartment away and fumbled around with the leather straps that held it closed. Before he opened the lid, he hoped against hope that he would find his blood arrows still inside, but his hopes were dashed as he raised the lid. There was nothing more in the trunk than some of the peasant's belongings. He rifled through them anyway, in case the arrows were hidden under their garbage, but no such luck.

He was sunk; not only were his blood arrows gone, but now the peasants and their pet Symbions had found them, and they had undoubtedly looked at his room in Gilder's Hollow and pieced together what happened to New Load. He glanced over at his room in the palace annex; there were things in there that he needed, but he didn't think he could afford to run into the Symbions and that other rabble. He hopped up into the driver's seat of the coach and spurred the team on, not caring that he nearly ran down the boy who was minding the team.

His mind raced at a feverous pitch as he navigated the large coach through the main streets of Charista, which were becoming pretty treacherous because of the snow. Not only would that rabble likely kill him if they caught him, but he would probably be killed by his masters once they caught up with them. He finally had the idea that if he was able to deliver that girl from New Load, the one that blood arrows had no effect on, to his masters that it might be enough to save his life. It was a pretty slim chance, but it was the only chance that he had.

He navigated the coach onto the South Road and then drove it over to the dive that the girl was staying in. He gave someone a coin to watch the team, then went inside and found the girl in the kitchen, kneeling on the floor and scrubbing out a large pot. "Aria! We have to get you out of here!", he told the girl, trying hard to make it sound like he was concerned about her.

"What...why?", she said as she looked back at him while continuing to scrub the pot.

"I just saw...", he began, trying to make himself seem shocked as he kneeled down so that his face was level with hers. "Those people from Gilder's Hollow are here," he whispered to her confidentially. "They're telling everyone that you're the one responsible for killing everyone in New Load!" He was having a hard time acting like he didn't know more about it than he really did.

"What?!" the girl asked incredulously. That's absurd! Why would they do that? Why would I do that?"

Maren waited patiently for her stupid babbling to subside. "Look, I know that you wouldn't do what they're saying...you're so nice." She did seem nice; it was sickening. "But listen to me...those people...are DarkHearts!" The girl gasped, and then he continued. "And they apparently decided that they would blame everything on you to cover up their vile deeds."

"No!", the girl screamed. "No no no!"

“I saw them talking with the king and queen,” Maren said, thinking that at least that part was true. “The guards will be coming soon to arrest you, once they find you.”

“I don’t care,” she said defiantly. “I’ll just tell them the truth! They’ll have to believe me,” she pleaded.

Maren was having trouble believing how naïve she was. “Listen, Aria...I saw them...there’s seven of them, and two of them are Symbions...and they’re all saying that you did it. They’d never believe you over them.” Tears started welling up in the girl’s eyes and Maren wanted to slap her. “Look, the queen is my aunt...we can take you to another city and then I can write her from there, explaining everything to her. She trusts me.” He almost laughed at that one, too; his aunt had become very suspicious of him lately. “I’ll take you down to Faren; I have some business down there anyway. You’ll be safe there,” he said reassuringly. He did indeed have some business down there; his business would be trying to hand the girl over to the inner circle on his own terms, and she most definitely would not be safe there.

Aria looked up at him, tears sliding down her face. She wondered again why all of this was happening to her. She wanted to stay and try proving her innocence, but she knew that Maren was right; they’d never believe her word over that of seven other people. She felt that she really had no choice but to accept Maren’s plan. Hopefully they could get to Faren and he could write the queen and tell her the truth. It looked like it might be her only hope of getting out of this, despite how slim that hope was. She was sick of running; nonetheless she nodded her assent to Maren. She didn’t really have any belongings, so she just left with him and got into his coach. With no further delay, they were on the South Road and on their way out of town.

By the time that Allen and the others finally managed to find out what had become of the coach and its owner, it was already dark and the Ministry of Trade had ordered all of the gates closed. Raine and Kaine probably could have managed to get the South Gate open again, but according to the guards there, Maren’s coach had left quite a while ago and now the roads really were too treacherous to try following. Plus, he had taken their means of transportation, as well as all of their belongings.