

The Chronicles
Book One: The Lot in Life
Chapter Nine

Mahirin felt that she should have been shocked by the site of the queen's dead body lying sprawled out on the floor of her bed chamber; but as the queen's secretary, Mahirin had witnessed the regent's behavior becoming more and more erratic lately, as the madness of the Symbion despairs began to set in more profoundly. The thing that seemed to finally push her over the edge was her run in with those two Symbions this morning; rather, it was that boy from Gilder's Hollow...at least, that was all she had been able to talk about all day.

Mahirin picked up the tiny crystal vial that was near the queen's outstretched hand and sniffed at the little remaining rose colored liquid inside. The vial did have a slightly floral smell to it, which was just as Mahirin had expected. Petal's Kiss, as it was called, was one of the favorite poisons of the wealthy because it was most effective if applied to the skin on the neck, and the uninitiated might believe it was simply a perfume, until it killed them a short while later. The queen, however, had apparently just drunk down the contents of the bottle. Mahirin supposed that was the fastest method for the poison to work, but using it that way to dispose of your enemies wasn't very easy, since they could always pick out the floral odor in their food, or wine, or however you tried to slip it to them.

She sat down on a plush chair at the queen's dressing table and stared into her former queen's dead eyes. She wondered what exactly it was about that boy from Gilder's Hollow that had unsettled the queen so much, when she noticed a piece of paper neatly placed on the center of the table top.

Mahirin's expression darkened as she read through the letter, which the queen had obviously written just before drinking the poison. Part of it was instructions to be carried out for her funeral, and part of it a letter to the king, begging his forgiveness for using him as she had. It was the last part that really caught Mahirin's attention; it was a brief note explaining that the reason that she had taken her life was because she had met the LastBorn that morning, and that she may as well kill herself instead of waiting for the LastBorn to do it. Mahirin trembled slightly as she reread those lines. So that was what had unhinged the queen so badly...the LastBorn had come...and his name was Allen Alderan...Mahirin remembered it from the pardon she had drafted (and neglected to send around to the guards.)

Mahirin folded up the note and set it on fire by the flame of a taper candle sitting on the dressing table. She took out a dagger that she knew the queen kept in a drawer of the table and she got up, walking over to the queen's body. Leaning down, she plunged the dagger into the queen's chest again and again, then stood up to admire her handiwork. She wiped her forehead with her sleeve and sighed; it was going to be a long night if she planned to kill the king and make it look like the queen had been murdered, then lay all of the blame on Allen Alderan and his Symbion friends. Yes, her masters would reward her well when she reported that she had the Charista guards kill the LastBorn for them.

“Ahh, I can’t believe it! A beautiful, sweet, innocent girl like me being chased after by the guards, and in the company of a dangerous murderer!” Raine put the back of her hand to her forehead and acted like she was about to swoon.

“In case you’ve forgotten,” Liandron said, pulling the hood of her cloak tighter to try keeping out the driving snow; “you’re one of those ‘dangerous murderers’.”

“Don’t bother her with reality when she gets like this,” Kaine said, leading the Symbion’s two horses along the narrow trail through the woods. The Symbion’s horses and saddlebags had been the only things they’d managed to take with them as they fled Charista. There again, Maren had already taken most of their things anyway, so they didn’t miss out on taking much. Raine quickly concluded her drama and took up pace with Kaine, Liandron following behind.

Allen and Gabe were at the back of the pack, trudging along behind Jaun and Kaun. The snow didn’t seem nearly as deep here, most of it being caught by the canopy of tree branches overhead, but there was the added excitement of dodging the occasional snapping branch that finally gave way under its load of snow. Allen looked behind him; he could just barely make out the outline of Charista’s walls in the distance, the city lying on a few folds of land away from where they were now. They’d spent the early morning sneaking through the alleyways of Charista, trying to avoid the guards’ patrols that were out in force. Allen thought that the choice to flee had been a good one, since he doubted that they’d be able to talk their way out of this one. They had managed to get the Symbion’s horses from the East Gate stable, and the suggestion had been made that since they were already outlaws, they might as well steal enough horses for all of them, but that was where Allen put his foot down. Being wanted for something they didn’t do was one thing, but actually being guilty of another crime was something he couldn’t abide. They had managed to escape the city without incident until they reached the closed South Gate, which was when Raine had to use her powers to persuade the guards to both open the gate, and forget that they’d ever seen anyone pass through.

While the South Road was the main thoroughfare between Charista and Faren, at least it was the only one big enough to allow merchant traffic; there were several smaller routes between the two cities. These were often referred to as “thief trails”, and with good reason. Bandits often used them because they ran close to the main road at times, but still kept travelers on them hidden by dense forestry. And if a Quarter became ambitious enough to come down one of the thief trails looking for them, the thieves could easily wander off the trail and hide deeper in the woods. Allen didn’t like thinking about it, but the close quarters of the trail would be more to their advantage if it came down to a fight. The Charista Quarters were trained for battle on open fields, where their horses and lances would benefit them, but on a narrow, windy trail like this, they would be of no use. However, as far as any of them knew, the Quarters were still searching for them inside the city. Thanks to Raine’s bit of work with the Core’s power, none of the gate guards would be reporting that anyone had left the city. Allen had no illusions that their luck would hold out all the way to Faren, but any head start they had would be something.

“So who do you think set you up?”, Jaun asked as he and Kaun fell back a little so they could talk without having to do so loudly.

Allen had been thinking a lot about that all morning, ever since he had come to the conclusion that someone did intentionally accuse him of murdering the king and queen, knowing that he didn't do it. Though he had to admit that between the charge of attempting to murder the queen's nephew, the confrontation in the throne room between Raine and the queen, plus if anyone saw the scene out in the street that past night, he would look like a pretty good candidate for having killed her. The word that the guards were putting out, which was what the brothers had overheard, was that Allen and two Symbion accomplices were responsible for the murders. When Raine had heard that news, she was mad that she was being accused of it, but hadn't actually gotten to do it. Kaine had shown as much emotion as he normally did...none. Allen, for his part, wasn't too surprised given the way his life had been going lately. Getting charged with murdering a king and queen just seemed the natural progression of his luck.

"I really don't know," Allen finally answered. "The only people I know who don't care for me much are the queen and her nephew. I doubt she killed herself then framed me for it, and Maren is long gone, so far as we know...so I'm at a loss." That was all that he'd been able to come up with, despite how long he thought about it. Being that Gilder's Hollow was so isolated from Charista, he had no idea about how the ascension to the throne, or the political system worked. So he couldn't even begin to think of anyone who'd hope to profit from killing the king and queen. He'd pretty much ruled out anyone wanting to have him found guilty and executed for the regicide, so he didn't think that would be the motive for the killings. It seemed like he was just a convenient person to blame. But he guessed that whoever was the one person with the most to gain from the deaths was the one most likely to be behind them. And the real killer being that high up in the power structure was the reason they decided to flee instead of stay and fight the charges.

"Well, since the king and queen were childless," Kaun started, his eyes continually roved the snowy landscape looking for signs of trouble. "The kingdom would have gone to the queen's nephew...but without him around, there's no telling who will take charge."

Allen stared down at his boots as the group walked along the trail. The snow covering was so thin here that he could actually see the color of the ground beneath it in some places. He was especially glad now that he'd made arrangements for Momma Lamerra and her adopted children to live in his house, since it was looking more and more likely that he would never see it again. "You know," he said, after being silent for a long time. "You all could still go back." He stopped walking, causing the whole group to stop and gather around him. "The only one's they're really after are Raine, Kaine, and me. The rest of you could go back home," he said this looking directly at Liandron and Gabe. "I wouldn't blame you for not continuing. You'll probably be executed too if the Charista Quarters find you in our company," he said, nodding towards the Symbions. "I don't want you to have to risk your lives like this."

"Oh, and just you should?!", Liandron yelled angrily. "Just Allen against the world?! Haven't you done that enough already?", her tone softened. "Hasn't it been you against the world for enough years already?", she asked, tears streaming down her face. She was thinking of him and how he'd been after his parents died; how he didn't want help from anyone, how he continued fighting on alone. And that was show he had seemed to her ever since, regardless of how many people were around him, he always

seemed to be alone. Now, with the odds against him even more, he was still trying to push people away to protect them. But she was having none of it.

Allen merely stared silently at Liandron as she advanced on him. He saw Kaine over her shoulder give him a look that clearly said he was a goner. His point was emphasized by Raine storming along on Liandron's heels.

"Well just forget it," Liandron said, jabbing her finger repeatedly into his chest. "Everyone here already made a choice to go with you, and this ridiculous murder thing isn't changing any of our minds."

Raine, who had been nodding emphatically behind Liandron, spoke up as well. "And besides, they can't leave...Gabe is carrying my baby!" Everyone assembled gaped for a second, until what she had actually said registered. "Didn't you know? That's how Symbions are born...a Symbion female impregnates a normal male."

"Wha...really?", Gabe asked, going pale.

"No. Idiot!", Raine said, smacking him on his head. "The mood was just getting too serious." She started walking down the trail again, making their procession start once more.

Allen had to admit that Raine did have a way of keeping everyone's spirits up, even if her methods were a bit strange. Liandron, who was walking next to Raine once again, occasionally shot him a dirty look, but it did make Allen feel better that she was so passionate about continuing on...he hoped that she wouldn't end up regretting that decision.

The sun was getting low in the sky when they finally started looking for a place to make camp. They needed a spot well enough off the road so that they could make a fire without it being seen from the road. They finally found a good clearing that lay in a hollow, so they would be protected somewhat from the wind and from being spotted by anyone.

A supply of wood was gathered, which was tricky since most of it was covered in snow and wet. Raine's hand glowed briefly green as she stood over the wood pile they'd made in the center of the clearing, then fire sprang up on all of the branches and logs. "Nice trick, huh?", she asked no one in particular as everyone gathered around to warm their hands by the fire.

The Symbions apparently ended up sleeping outdoors a lot, because they had a good deal of camping supplies in their saddlebags. Yet, as it was normally just the two of them, they didn't have nearly enough for all seven people there. It was finally decided, much to the displeasure of Kaine, that the women should have the only two bed-rolls, and the men could make do as best they could. Gabe and Allen, having hunted a lot at home, managed to disappear into the woods for a while and bring down a deer, which was cooked over the fire.

"So now all we have to do is keep from freezing to death tonight," Gabe said as he put a fresh piece of meat on a sharpened stick that he was using as a skewer, then held it over the fire.

"If it makes you feel any better," Jaun said as she chewed on his dinner. "You'll be begging for snow by the time we get to Faren."

“Yep,” Kaun added; “the SouthLands are very hot and very dry.” He shoveled a handful of snow into a small pot that Kaine carried around, so that they could make some tea from a tasty root that Allen had literally stumbled across in the woods.

“It’s not that far away,” Allen said; “why the drastic change in weather?” He knew that the farther south you went, the hotter it got and the flatter the land became, but he thought it was supposed to be a gradual change.

“It’s just a trick of the wind,” Kaun answered. “It always blows in from the south-west, bringing the hot air of the SouthLands desert with it.”

“Why just from the south-west?”, Liandron asked.

“No one really knows,” Kaun said around a mouthful of food. “That’s just how it is. There’s any number of legends and myths surrounding it, from there being a fire breathing dragon colony out in the desert, to a great fiery horse that carries the wind on its back...but nobody knows for sure why it’s like that.”

“So we have a lot to look forward to then?”, Gabe sighed as he checked the meat on his skewer.

“Just hope that Faren is as far as our merchant friend gets,” Raine said as she accepted a mug of root tea from Kaun. There were only two metal mugs which Raine and Kaine provided, so those were passed around continually. “Any deeper into the SouthLands and you start running into some pretty strange and hostile territory.”

Allen didn’t know if she meant the land, or the people, but she didn’t offer any clarification, so he didn’t ask.

They had already eaten a good deal and everyone was starting to look pretty drowsy when they heard the cry of an animal that sounded like a wolf, but it had a screaming quality to it, as well as a howl. It definitely didn’t sound like just a regular wolf to Allen, and from the look that Raine and Kaine gave each other he knew it meant trouble. When several more cries joined in a chorus of the first one, he decided that it meant big trouble.

“What is that?”, Gabe asked, looking off in the direction that the howling seemed to be coming from.

“That,” answered Kaine as he casually roasted a chunk of meat over the fire; “is the sound of death.”

Maren was glad that they’d stopped at such a nice, quiet village, especially after being in the coach for so long with that girl’s incessant yammering. They had arrived at the village late the night before and had spent most of the day just idling around while the local carpenter tried to fix a broken spoke on one of his coach’s wheels. He didn’t like waiting around, since every moment lost was bringing his pursuers closer to him, but he didn’t have much choice. The wheel might be able to carry them to the next town on the broken spoke, or it might leave them stranded in the middle of nowhere. The forced break also afforded him the time to send the peasant girl to the local dressmaker so that she looked more worthy to be in his company. She had blubbered and blustered her thanks to him over and over when she finally accepted his offer of the new clothes, but the truth was that he didn’t care if she wore a stitch of clothing or not. The only thing he cared about was how others looked at him, and when they saw him with a peasant girl,

and saw his fine black wool pants and cloak, then saw her dingy dress, they must have thought he'd run off with some peasant girl he'd gotten in trouble. Since no self-respecting female servant would travel alone with a man, he would have to pass her off as his sister, or his cousin perhaps. Either way, she would have to look much better to be able to pull it off.

Right now, Maren was sitting in the common room of a dinky inn in a dinky village, drinking heavily and waiting for the girl to come down from her room to join him for dinner. He rued once again how long it took women to dress as he went ahead and signaled the nearest homely looking serving girl to go ahead and bring him his dinner; he figured he'd probably have it finished by the time she got ready.

"How does it look?", the girl asked nervously as she came around the table, blushing. She was wearing a light blue wool dress that had full, floor length skirts and came up to a somewhat snug fitting bodice with long sleeves. She had obviously never worn anything that wasn't in the style of that sack-like dress he had first seen her in, since she seemed a little uncomfortable with the way her new dress showed off her form. Her dress looked like it would be good for while they traveled in the NorthLands, but it would probably kill her by the time they got to Faren. He supposed he would have to buy her something else before then. Or perhaps she also had something made more appropriate for warm weather, since she knew their destination.

"Looks like a peasant in a nice dress," Maren thought to himself, but he rearranged his face into a warm smile...it was sickening to him. "You look marvelous," he gushed as he pretended to admire her.

The girl smiled a little bit, her face coloring even more; then she took extraordinary care in arranging her skirts as she sat down. Maren decided that buying her new clothes had been a bad idea. Here they were in a hurry to get away from those two Symbions and that Gilder's Hollow rabble, and now everything that she did took five times longer. The girl smiled a little again as she finally got situated and sat up in her chair straight and proper, but Maren could tell that she was still trying to covertly rearrange the skirts beneath the table. He took another long drink and really hoped that his plan to hand the girl over to his masters would work, otherwise he could always argue that he'd been tortured enough already by having to put up with her.

"Thank you once again, Lord Maren," the girl said meekly after she seemed to have finally gotten herself arranged satisfactorily. It was about the hundredth time today that she'd said that. Ever since he "rescued" her from Charista, she'd been apoplectic over what to call him, since she found out that he was a duke. She'd gone between addressing him as Duke Erolstrom, Lord Duke Erolstrom, Master Erolstrom, and just Master, but Maren had made her settle on simply Lord Maren. He thought it had a nice sound to it, and he decided that if his plans worked out nicely and he was richly rewarded by his masters, he would have all of his subjects (slaves) address him as Lord Maren.

"Please, don't mention it," he said, trying hard not to make it sound like a command. He thought that if she did mention it again, that he might just end up bludgeoning her. Thankfully, any further talking from her was cut short by the arrival of their meal. The serving girl had been competent enough to notice that his dinner companion had arrived and had brought out two plates full of food, saving him the trouble of explaining why he'd only ordered for himself. The serving girl still took the time to give him a dirty look as she set his plate down. "Do something to one girl in a

room, and all of the rest of the girls in the room know about it instantly,” Maren thought glumly as he smiled up at the serving girl, picking out where in her neck he’d like to stick his fork.

After they finished a quiet dinner, before the girl had time to start talking again, he downed the rest of his drink and stood up from the table. “I’m going to go check on the progress of the coach,” he lied. “Why don’t you stay here and enjoy the entertainment,” he nodded towards the bored looking minstrel who was singing in a corner by the bar.

“I’ll come with you,” the girl offered and started to rise from the table.

“No, no,” Maren countered as he motioned her to sit down again. “You shouldn’t have to go into the stables in your pretty new dress,” he almost made himself sick. “And by the time you could get changed, I’d be done already.” He added to himself that by the time she could get changed that he could have walked to and from Faren five times.

Erynne finally agreed and Maren stepped out of the brightly lit common room and into cold evening air. At least it had stopped snowing here. He started walking down the muddy street towards the stables where the carpenter should have been finished with his wheel long ago, when he suddenly took a right turn into a deserted alley. He stayed in the blackness of the alley and looked around for what he needed. As his luck would have it, what he needed was sauntering down the street towards him now. Most every town along the South Road had them; they were regarded as a dirty little secret by the locals, but also as a necessity, as they kept the merchants and their guards from harassing the normal women so much...a prostitute. And Maren desperately needed a prostitute right now.

“Hey,” he whispered from the gloom of the alleyway as the woman passed by.

“She stopped, recognizing the tone he put into his voice, and peered into the alley. “Hmm...what could I do for you, Master?”, she cooed, knowing that she’d already landed her first customer of the night. And since this one was being so secretive, he’d probably pay more for her to remain discrete about their business. Some of the merchants were pretty strange about their privacy...she guessed they didn’t want anyone to know they used the same women their guards did.

“I have something for you,” he whispered feverishly as he gently reached for her arm and pulled her deep into the alley.

“Oh really?”, she giggled as she leaned with her back against the brick wall of the inn, then smiled as Maren pressed himself against her. “Is it something good?”, she purred into his ear as she wrapped her arms around his neck, while mentally calculating how much of a bottle of brandy this would buy her.

“Well, its something you won’t forget,” Maren answered honestly as he stabbed the blade of his dagger into her stomach. She gasped, going wide eyed, then started to scream, but Maren buried her face in his shoulder to muffle the noise as he stabbed her again and again. For his needs, he could have finished her off quickly, but he’d been having a bad time of things lately and really needed to let off some pent up energy. Feeling the girl’s last few fits of life struggle out of her as she vainly tried to fight him off was relaxing, and with his body pressed against hers, he could feel it through his chest as her heart stopped beating. “Well, that was quite satisfying,” he murmured to her as he dragged her to the back of the alley and got to work.

The best part about prostitutes, he thought to himself as he worked his dagger down her cleavage and started cutting away her dress, was that they didn't bother wearing much clothing. When she was naked, he started carving spells of binding into her flesh with the tip of his dagger as he chanted in a low monotone. He would have preferred to do this while she was still alive, but this was a rush job and he didn't really want to get blood sprayed on him as he moved to the next step. The symbols on her flesh began to glow with a faint red light, so he stood over her, with one leg on each side of her body. With his dagger held firmly in both of his hands, he put the blade between her legs and started cutting as deep as he could, all the way up to her neck. Then he cut again, once along the line of her hips and once more at her shoulders. Using his knife blade, he peeled away the flaps of skin and started carving symbols onto her exposed bones. Once these symbols began to glow the eerie red color, he moved onto her arms and legs, cutting away flesh and muscle, then carving even more symbols onto the bones. Finally done with the bone carvings, the symbols began to pulse and glow in unison until they glowed brightly, at which time the dead woman gave birth to what looked like twelve grotesquely ugly puppies. The slimy, hairless creatures immediately began climbing over the dead woman's body, devouring it. The creatures, when they finished feasting on the corpse, were quite a bit larger. They intently stared at Maren with red, glowing eyes.

"You know my enemies; seek them out and destroy them," he announced to the twelve creatures, which immediately tore out of the alley and began running north on the South Road.

Maren quickly washed off his dagger and the small amount of blood he'd gotten on his hands in the snow, then inspected the ground where the dead woman's body had been. He had to admit that the Lempaka were extremely efficient; there wasn't even any blood left on the snow. He wadded up the prostitute's cut clothing and hastily buried it under a pile of snow, then he went to the mouth of the alley and glanced around. There was hardly anyone out, plus it was pretty dark now, so he smoothly left the alley and started whistling happily as he wandered back into the common room of the inn.

"Everything going alright?", the girl asked as she clapped along to the minstrel's singing.

"Yes," Maren answered as he genuinely smiled. "Everything is just fine."

"I still say I can hear a woman screaming," Liandron said as she listened to the howls of the beasts.

"That's the anguish of their mother," Kaine said quietly as he chewed on a piece of meat.

"Their mother?", Liandron asked.

"You don't want to know," Raine said sadly as she went to her saddlebags and took out the strange weapons she'd used during the battle with the Reborns on the first night they'd met. She didn't put them on, however, she simply laid them on her lap and went back to stewing some root tea.

“What are those things?”, Gabe asked edgily, as he looked around. The howls now sounded like they were coming from the south, east, and west...like they were being surrounded.

“Lempakas,” Kaine simply said.

“No way!”, Gabe exclaimed, looking over at Kaine. “Those things really exist?!”

Allen, Liandron, and Gabe had always heard about Lempakas in stories and legends told around a fire, but they never thought that they actually existed. Allen glumly remembered that in almost all of the stories involving the creatures, the Lempakas normally came out on top of any confrontation. In Gilder’s Hollow, the creatures were always used as a warning to young women, since legend had it that Lempakas were born from an “unsavory woman’s womb”; so it was always said that any girl not behaving properly would end up with “a Lempaka feasting on your bones.” Allen thought that he caught Liandron giving Raine a dirty look as if she was the cause of all of this.

“Lempakas are summoned creatures,” Kaine explained almost in a whisper, addressing all of their unasked questions. “Summoned by a DarkHeart...and these came from the South; you can figure out the rest.”

“Maren,” Allen seethed, wishing once again that he’d killed the merchant when he’d had the chance.

The mangled howling began anew and everyone around the fire alternated between looking at each other for assurance, and looking around to the different directions the howls were coming from. It sounded like they were coming from all around now, prompting Gabe to simply say “surrounded.”

Allen found himself wishing that he had a weapon as the strange screaming, howls died down once more, but it seemed like they did that as the Lempakas did their greatest amount of movement. Since they were already all around then, the only way left for the creatures to move was inwards, towards their campsite. The others seemed to have realized this too, judging by the tight, drawn looks on their faces. Raine finally affixed her long gauntlet type weapons to her forearms and gave them a few trial slashes through the night air. Kaine stood up as well, throwing his cloak off his right shoulder to free his access to the two sword hilts on his shoulder. The brothers had broadswords of their own that they unsheathed, leaving Allen and Gabe to stare blankly at each other. “Maybe we can talk our way out of this...aroo...arooo,” Gabe said in a slightly panicky voice that made the others chuckle.

The eerie howls started again; this time so close that the sound of them reverberated in Allen’s chest...he could hear branches snapping in the darkness of the forest as the things drew nearer. Allen had been eyeing the long knives that Kaun and Jaun each had at their side, until he remembered that they each fought with a sword in one hand and a knife in the other. He didn’t think that now would be a good time to throw their fighting styles off balance, especially against an unusual foe like this. Gabe was already doing what Allen had planned on doing as his fallback plan, by getting a stout branch from the fire and holding it like a club. Allen followed suit, finding one that was sturdy enough, but not too burned as to be weakened. Then they both naturally went to either side of Liandron.

“So no last minute tips?”, Gabe asked, looking at Kaine and hoping for the same sort of advice that had been given before the battle with the Reborn.

“Don’t die,” Kaine said, looking back at Gabe, then he went back to studying the dark woods.

Allen idly wondered why Raine hadn’t gone around and given everyone a “charge” like she had before their fight in New Load, but the sight of red eyes glowing in the woods quickly erased the question from his mind.

The howling would ebb in and out, sometimes sounding more like a scream than a howl, and sometimes the opposite. Throughout the line of trees, sets of glowing red eyes could be seen slowly advancing, bobbing up and down in time with the creature’s steps. It looked to Allen like some of them might be bigger than others by the level of the glowing eyes, but it was hard to tell if it was just a trick of the rolling landscape. The howling reached a peak and Allen wondered if the Lempakas didn’t win most of their confrontations simply by terrifying their victims to death. One of the creatures finally stepped out of the woods and into the firelight enough for Allen to confirm that his guess was probably right.

The thing looked like a cross between a man and a wolf, except that there was no fur whatsoever, instead it had pink skin that glistened with wetness as if it was a giant wound trying to heal. Other Lempakas stepped into view and Allen could see how he had trouble judging their height. Some of the things were walking on two legs while others were down on all four. Most had their small snouts open to reveal rows of sharp fangs. A quick glance around showed that they were indeed surrounded. Allen was able to count twelve of them standing around; he hoped that was all. With himself and Gabe being close to unarmed, it was three against one, and the muscles rippling under the Lempaka’s diseased looking flesh made it look like they would be fast, and strong.

With no howl of warning or signal, one of the Lempaka’s sprang forward towards Kaine, while the rest of the pack lurched forward as well, all of them bounding and tripping over each other to get at their chosen targets.

A twin metallic ringing announced that Kaine had finally unsheathed both of his swords. He brought one of his swords from the top and swung the other one from below to bear down on the neck of the Lempaka closest to him, effectively scissoring its head off. That was all of anyone else’s fight that Allen had time to see before he was swinging his flaming club down on the head of one of the Lempakas. There was a sickening crunch and a sizzle, but the creature that had been heading for him merely veered off to the side instead of going down, then repositioned itself to attack him from behind. His problems were doubled by another Lempaka springing in to attack him from the front. Allen tried calculating his next move, but was distracted by a scream from Liandron. It wasn’t for a few moments that he realized she had screamed out of danger for him, and not for herself; but those were moments he couldn’t afford to lose. At the last second, he opted for the dumbest plan available and as the Lempaka in the rear ran forward and got close enough, he jumped into the air so that as the thing passed under him, he could land on the its back and use its forward momentum to give his club’s blow extra force as he smashed it into the side of the other Lempaka’s head. Then he jumped into the air again and using the force of his fall, brought the club swinging down with both hands onto the neck of the Lempaka he’d just been riding. He heard another crunch, but this time it was a combination of the spine of the Lempaka being crushed, and his club cracking in half. The Lempaka whose head he had smashed in was struggling to get to its feet, but Gabe swiftly went over to it and started bludgeoning it with his club until it stopped moving.

“Noooo!”, Liandron screamed and this time Allen had no trouble seeing what it was she was worried about, since he had seen it at the same time. Even without a weapon, he bolted into action, catapulting himself off the body of one of the fallen Lempakas and throwing his full weight into the airborne form of the Lempaka that had just about caught Raine in the back unaware as she battled another two of the creatures before her. The creature let out a strangled scream as Allen wrapped his big hands around its slimy throat, even before they both collided to the ground. They lay struggling side by side on the ground, but the Lempaka quickly proved that its mouth was not its only weapon as it brought the long claws on its four feet into play and started flaying the skin on Allen’s chest and legs. He couldn’t suppress a scream as the claws cut deep into him, but he couldn’t release his grip on the thing’s neck, lest it be able to use its mouth once more to bite into Allen’s neck. The Lempaka jerked its four legs again, giving Allen a fresh round of grating wounds, and he screamed once more, but it took him a little while to realize that the creature’s legs had jerked in a final spasm as four separate sword blades were put into its skull by both Raine and Kaine.

“Thanks,” Allen murmured as he tried to sit up, but his chest and stomach lit up with what felt like fire.

“No,” Raine said, putting her hand on his forehead; “don’t move.”

Allen had trouble keeping track of how the battle was going because Raine wouldn’t let him move his head at all. Things seemed to quiet down considerably after a while, so he guessed that it must be over. He could hear light footfalls on the snow that he knew belonged to Liandron. She drew close and let out a muffled scream; he supposed it had been muffled by Gabe who let out an angry “shh!” at her. More footsteps came over and everyone’s faces came into view as they leaned over him; their expressions etched with mixed shock and concern. Allen vainly struggled against Raine’s hand, but she was either incredibly strong, or he was getting incredibly weak, because he couldn’t seem to move his head whatsoever. His eyes struggled to keep everything in focus as the faces of his friends went in and out of darkness. Finally, even through the haze in his mind, he understood what had happened; that the Lempaka had done more damage to him than he’d thought. “How bad is it”, he asked as Kaine’s face swam into view.

“You don’t want to know.”