

# TRIAL BY FIRE

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For Fluffy, who will be the last person to read this.



## CHAPTER ONE

### *Cloak and Dagger*

When Evelyn woke up, she immediately knew she'd overslept. The sun wouldn't have been shining into her eyes through the crack in the blinds otherwise. She threw off the covers and stepped out of bed, wincing as she placed her feet right next to the cow skin onto the freezing wooden floor.

*Emily's going to kill me*, she thought as she quickly put on her clothes: simple woolen, linen-lined pants and a similar tunic, still carrying the stains from the iron and coal she'd worked with yesterday. At least they didn't smell bad, courtesy of the cold.

She walked down the stairs into the living area, where Emily was stirring in a large cooking pot suspended next to the fireplace.

"You're a bit late, Evelyn," she said without looking up.

Evelyn breathed a sigh of relief. At least Emily was still using her name, and not calling her 'daughter' like the time she'd forgotten to lock the pantry and some Nameless thief had stolen three days' worth of food. While Emily wasn't the most physically imposing woman, standing only a bit taller than Evelyn herself, and despite the fact that her wide brown eyes

gave her a very sweet and even somewhat naïve appearance, she could be downright fearsome when angered.

Evelyn was lucky that Emily seemed to be taking things so well, since it was a busy period, with several mercenaries scheduled to come over to purchase war horses. Neither she nor Emily could really afford to waste time. Aside from that, she really didn't have a good reason to oversleep; Durandal, their strongest and most reliable workhorse, had been pulling the wagon of iron and coal Evelyn had bought the day before, and Emily had helped her unload all of it. She wasn't about to disrespect Emily with some weak story, especially since she didn't seem angry.

"I'm sorry," Evelyn said. "What do you need me to do?"

"Derrick has the order for the blankets ready. They should be good for any kind of barding, according to him."

She gave Evelyn a meaningful look. Evelyn knew what she meant. Derrick had the uncanny ability to predict what kind of barding was going to be used on each horse. That a destrier was likely to carry heavier barding than a rouncey made sense, but Derrick seemed to know *exactly* how heavy the armor on each horse was going to be. Emily had always suspected he actually used magic for that, a theory Evelyn reluctantly agreed with. She liked Derrick, but like most other people she knew, she didn't really like magic. It made life too easy. But she also knew that, even if Derrick *did* use magic to know what kind of barding a horse would end up with, he definitely wove all of the blankets the proper way. She'd once watched him do it.

She nodded at Emily, then headed into the pantry and threw on her thick woolen cloak. She stepped outside and took a deep breath. The air was cold, but not as cold as it had been a few days earlier. She saw that Emily had already prepared the wagon, lining the inside with old blankets to protect the new ones from the residue of coal and iron.

Evelyn walked past the wagon, towards the stables. The farm where she and Emily lived had several stables, the nearest of which held their own horses, the ones not bred for

sale.

Durandal was the sole stallion of the three, a black draft horse with a mild temper and surprisingly little fear. Emily's mare, Joyeuse, was a chestnut palfrey who liked to travel long distances, a natural ambler. Lastly, there was Curtana, Evelyn's mare. She was a rouncey, but fiery and willful, only allowing Evelyn to ride her because Evelyn had taken care of her since she was a foal. And even then, if she was in a bad mood Evelyn had to struggle to keep her under control. But somehow, Evelyn had always felt that the whole thing was just a game to Curtana, not really anything done out of malice.

When Evelyn entered the stable, Curtana was quick to greet her from her stall, her white head poking over the stall door. Evelyn patted her nose.

"Good morning, girl. I'll give you some exercise in the afternoon, okay? I need Durandal now," she said softly.

Curtana inclined her head and whinnied softly.

Evelyn walked over to Durandal's stall. The big stallion turned one ear towards her as she approached, but he didn't deem her worthy of any additional attention. He only decided to look at her when Evelyn opened his stall door.

"It's time for work," Evelyn said, holding up the harness that would attach to the wagon.

Durandal snorted, which Evelyn took for approval. She gently attached all the straps and belts, and then led Durandal outside, to the wagon.

Just a bit later she slowly rode off the terrain of the farm, onto the single dirt road towards Bastion. Evelyn and Emily lived at the edge of Greenwall Forest, which sealed off the small village of Bastion from the rest of Sceldrum. In summer, the forest definitely lived up to its name, but now, just past the winter solstice, the branches were bare of leaves.

Durandal was used to walking the trail between the farm and Bastion, so Evelyn leaned back against the wooden back rest and looked over the grasslands. The frozen grass glistened in the light of the sun, and not for the first time Evelyn

reflected on how glad she was to live in an area like this. She wondered how long that would last, though.

She was fifteen, old enough that she'd soon have to figure out what she was going to do with her life. For the time being, she was fine helping Emily on the farm, but in her spare time she'd been trying other things to find out where her passions lay. Thus far, she'd proven quite good at both hunting and tracking, but neither was much of a profession in a village like Bastion. After all, if you wanted good meat, you'd have to catch it in Greenwall, and good luck finding anything there without being able to shoot a bow or read tracks.

Beyond that, she'd toyed with the idea of being a soldier. She was good enough with a sword to go toe to toe with just about anyone in Bastion, so she felt she'd have a shot at it. Derrick, however, had always told her that Bastion wasn't the best place to pick up fighting skills. He used to be a Royal Knight in the same company as Richard, her father, so Evelyn figured he knew what he was talking about. But at the same time, Derrick had also always refused to spar with her, and a part of her suspected that he just said that to avoid losing face.

Even so, it left her in a bit of doubt. Usually, when people in Sceldrum didn't really know what to do with themselves they joined a Seeker caravan, but the last time a Seeker caravan came to Bastion had been more than two years ago. Southern Sceldrum was already fairly unpopular with the caravans because all the major cities were in the north, closer to the Therys, but Bastion's remote location, accessible only through one narrow path through a dense forest, made it an even worse destination for the huge caravans of people seeking their fortune.

Evelyn sighed. Deciding what to do with her future could wait until later. Ahead of her, she saw the blasted, crumbling walls of Bastion. In some places, the wall would be slightly higher than the average man, but in most places it wasn't much higher than a fence. The dilapidated walls were the source of the village's derogatory name, and even the name of



Greenwall Forest, the official name of which was 'Bastion's Green Wall'. Truthfully, though, the forest probably *did* protect the village much better than its ancient walls, which had been erected long before Sceldrian people settled there.

Evelyn rode through the wooden gate, which looked just a rickety and unstable as the walls themselves. She greeted Henry, who was leaning on his spear with a thoroughly bored expression on his face, and she gave him a pitying look. Guarding the gates of a settlement was one of the duties of a guardsman, and in many places further north it was an important one. Not so much here in Bastion. She rode onward over the cobblestone path, which was slightly wider inside the town than outside of it to allow for people to display their wares along the path. With this being the only way in and out, these spots were in high demand.

She saw James and Norman embroiled in a fistfight, and she wondered what it was about *this* time. The two men, a fletcher and baker respectively, often came to blows over the strangest things. Even in Sceldrum, it was rare for people with such different professions to get into fights, but James and Norman did it just because they wanted to. As often as they fought, Evelyn had also seen them drinking together during harvest festivals. As far as Evelyn knew, James won the fights slightly more often. Joan and Emma halfheartedly cheered their husbands on, but for the most part they remained focused on their own wares.

The main street opened up into the town square, the center of activity in Bastion. Everyone who hadn't managed to secure a workshop along the main road had a stall here, and even as early as it was now, people were already shouting to get each other's attention. Every now and then a fight would break out, or a challenge would be issued, but for the most part the entire market was just noisy.

Evelyn rode between the stalls, past the broken, blackened obelisk that marked the center of the village, in front of which she could still see the scorch marks of the traditional bonfire

from the Night of Fire, two nights earlier. The ancient spire still had vague markings of glyphs in it, just like the remains of the walls, but Evelyn didn't know what they did. All she knew was that these jagged, angular glyphs didn't look anything like the smooth and flowing round glyphs the Luminous Empire used.

Derrick's stall was the last one of the central line of stalls, tactically close to his workshop just around the corner in one of the village's narrow alleys.

Derrick was in the middle of talking to someone Evelyn didn't recognize, probably a traveler. He didn't look like a warrior, though she did spot the hilt of a Scintellian steel dagger on his hip. She didn't know anyone in Bastion who could afford such a thing and Edward, the local blacksmith, wasn't able to forge it. Only Derrick still had his Scintellian steel sword from his days as a Knight.

When the man saw Evelyn approaching, he said something to Derrick, gave a curt nod, and left.

Evelyn hopped off the wagon and said, "Who was he?"

Derrick gave a non-committal shrug. "I think his name is Ackley today," he replied.

Evelyn immediately understood what Derrick meant. In Sceldrum, everyone made a point of introducing themselves as soon as possible in a conversation in order to spread their name and profession as far as possible. Certain people were an exception to this, however, like Royal Knights in Serpent Company. They were internal intelligence, among the only Sceldrians who used fake names as part of their job. Names traveled farther than faces, after all. For Derrick to reveal that this man was using a fake name was a fairly strong sign that he trusted Evelyn not to press the issue.

Derrick clapped his hands together, shaking Evelyn from her thoughts. "You're here for the blankets, I presume?" he asked.

Evelyn nodded. "Emily said you had them ready," she confirmed.

Derrick looked behind him at some stacks of low crates, each filled with blankets. He pointed at a stack of three crates.

“Those three are yours. There’s six in each of them, all tagged.”

“Thanks,” Evelyn said.

After asking Derrick what she owed him, she grabbed the pouch of money off her belt and dug up the required golden and silver coins. While quite a few people in Sceldrum still lived by the old Scintellian system of trading, Evelyn was glad that Sceldrum as a whole had adopted the Imperial system of using coins as payment, as well as having standardized units of length and weight.

She was just about to get back onto the wagon to begin her ride home, when she heard someone shouting her name.

“Evelyn! Hey!”

She looked up to see Nicholas, a boy around her age with a love for sword duels, running over to her.

“I challenge you,” he said, without wasting any more time on formalities.

Evelyn sighed. “I beat you last month,” she reminded him, still feeling the faint memory of the bruise on her arm.

“And the month before that...”

She’d spent a whole week limping after that one.

“...and the month before that.”

She’d been lucky not to break any fingers in that fight.

Nicholas shrugged. “New month, new challenge. I can’t set out to become a renowned warrior if I can’t even defeat everyone in Bastion.”

Evelyn hopped down from the wagon. “Fine.”

She held out her hand, and Nicholas tossed her a wooden sword, balanced and weighted as close to a real sword as possible.

“But even *if* you defeat me now, which you won’t, you still haven’t beaten everyone. You’ve never fought Derrick.”

“And you never will,” Derrick added. “I have nothing to gain

by beating either of you. But do me a favor and fight somewhere more spacious, will you? I have customers who probably won't appreciate being interrupted by your grudge match."

Evelyn and Nicholas both agreed to that, and Nicholas joined Evelyn on the bench of her wagon as she led Durandal out of the marketplace, and towards the town gates. As soon as they'd left the confines of village, Evelyn pulled over the wagon on the side of the road, and she and Nicholas jumped off.

"Right, let's do this," Evelyn said. "I don't have a whole lot of time, so..."

She didn't get a chance to finish her sentence, as Nicholas had already launched his first attack.

She clumsily raised her sword and deflected the blow while jumping back. She mentally cursed herself for being so inattentive. 'Always be ready for a fight' was just about the first lesson every child in Sceldrum was expected to learn. She steadied her stance and calmed her breathing.

Having spent his opening move, Nicholas had now brought up his own guard, and to Evelyn's annoyance she didn't immediately spot an opening in it.

With small steps, she began moving closer to Nicholas, who seemed content to let her close the distance.

Evelyn frowned, even as she continued her incremental advance. Controlling the distance was a vital aspect of any fight, and Nicholas was taller than Evelyn. Why would he allow her to get closer?

She gripped her sword a bit harder, preparing to block any sudden strikes.

It was only a small motion, but Nicholas had spotted it, and he blurred forward. Rather than a forceful strike like before, this time his sword arm was relaxed, and he easily moved the weapon around Evelyn's guard. Evelyn threw her body to the side, knowing that with her arms so tense she'd never be able to parry a quick attack like this in time, and once again she narrowly avoided getting hit.

Nicholas was overextended from his sudden attack, but

Evelyn was off balance and not in any position to make use of the opportunity. Instead, she made use of her momentum and moved past Nicholas, turning around and facing him from the other side now.

This was getting annoying. Nicholas was much more methodical in this fight than he had been in their previous confrontations, where his tactics had boiled down to 'keep attacking until something hits'. That style, while dangerous to fight against, still left him open for counterattacks, and it was in that way Evelyn had beaten him three times. Now, though, he seemed intent to not give her a chance to counter.

*Alright, if that's how you want to play this,* Evelyn thought.

She relaxed her arms and began lightly hopping in place. The wooden sword she was using now wasn't, strictly speaking, a very good fit for the dance-like movements of smallsword dueling, but the mobility of the style was probably going to be her only chance.

Nicholas assumed his normal on guard stance and calmly stared her down.

Evelyn took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then breathed out and began to move.

With light, short hops, she began moving in and out of distance. Occasionally, she lightly tapped Nicholas's sword with hers.

Nicholas, however, wasn't letting himself get provoked by Evelyn's light taps. Whenever she got a bit too close, he stepped out of range, only to move forward again when Evelyn bounced back.

Evelyn increased the speed of her movements, now beginning to incorporate half-lunges in her actions. Once or twice she got close to actually hitting Nicholas's hands, but he was always quick enough to either avoid the hit, or simply block the attack.

Again, she increased her speed. She moved in and out of range, and then, without warning, drew her back foot closer to her front foot, began to extend her arm, and kicked off with all

her might.

That was the moment Nicholas had apparently been waiting for, as instead of stepping back, he instead stepped in, seeking to scoop up Evelyn's weapon with his own to use his superior strength and leverage to counter.

But he'd miscalculated. Evelyn drew back her arm and drove her front foot into the ground hard to stop her forward momentum.

Nicholas's parry cut through the air without finding anything, and because he'd completely committed to the parry, he was slow on the recovery, giving Evelyn enough time to make another lunge.

She extended her arm, kicked off with her back leg, and a grin was already appearing on her face. She felt her sword hit Nicholas's ribs...and then she felt *his* sword slamming hard into her shoulder. Nicholas staggered backwards, clutching his side, and Evelyn dropped her sword from her now slightly numb hand.

Despite the pain that was shooting through her shoulder, down her arm, she looked at Nicholas and said, "You're dead. I win. Again."

Nicholas bowed his head slightly, winced from the pain in his ribs, and then grinned at Evelyn.

"And you lost your arm. Second time, I think?"

Evelyn nodded sourly. She'd been so convinced that Nicholas would be too slow that she had overcommitted to her last attack, and because of it he'd managed to get a last counter in. Somehow, she never managed to get a clean victory against Nicholas.

She moved her arm. It hurt quite a bit, but to her relief it didn't seem to be broken. It was probably going to be sore for a while, but nothing she couldn't deal with.

"Well, if that's it, I should be heading home. We've got some warriors coming over," Evelyn said.

She handed Nicholas the sword she'd borrowed from him.

"Right. Good luck with the sale, then," he said. "I'll

challenge you again next month, so be ready,” he added.

Evelyn grinned, despite her sore shoulder. “I’ll beat you again next month, then,” she replied.

Raising her good hand in greeting, she got into the wagon and headed home.

As Evelyn fitted the horses with their new blankets, she mentally prepared for the arrival of the two warriors who were due to come by today to buy horses.

Sceldrum wasn’t, strictly speaking, at war, and yet in a certain way it was. The southern half of Sceldrum was dotted with many small settlements who considered themselves fully independent from everyone else, many of which had some kind of feud going with other settlements around them. Plenty of people made a living by simply traveling from settlement to settlement to act as hired muscle for local conflicts. Some banded together into mercenary groups, but most preferred to travel alone, and most of their work was too small in scale for multiple people anyway. Depending on what kind of work they did, they would benefit from different kinds of horses.

Evelyn had just finished with the blankets when the warriors, Owen and Darren, arrived.

Owen was a tall, broad-shouldered man with black hair and nearly black eyes. Darren wasn’t small either, but compared to Owen he certainly *looked* small. His hair was slightly darker than Evelyn’s, looking browner while still having slight red sheen to it, and his eyes were bright blue.

Emily began to lead Owen around the farm, and told Evelyn to help Darren. To not get in the way of Emily and Owen, Evelyn decided to begin by showing Darren the land, and explaining how Emily and she raised and trained their horses.

“Emily stays in contact with many breeders and warriors across Sceldrum, keeping track of horses which are particularly well-suited for combat purposes, as well as keeping track of a number of wild herds living not too far from this area.

She then compares the traits of the horses and decides if it would be worth getting them here and breeding them,” she explained as she led Darren around the perimeter of the farm.

“You don’t breed from your own group of horses?” Darren asked.

“Sometimes we do, but a lot of the horses here are quite closely related. We’ve found that the more diverse the horses, the better the results,” Evelyn replied.

“Your farm is awfully far away from most other breeders. What makes your horses worth coming all this way?”

Evelyn grinned widely. “If you didn’t think our horses were worth it, you wouldn’t be here,” she replied. “But on a more serious note, we’re here exactly *because* it’s out of the way. Being far removed from most other breeders means we get fewer customers, yes, but in return we’re able to spend more time raising and training the horses, as well as being close to a number of wild herds which make excellent sires and dams, as I mentioned earlier.”

Darren nodded slowly, then looked at the trees that began where the meadow ended.

“Do horses ever stray into the forest?” he asked.

“Not often. There *is* a fence there, though it’s a bit difficult to see. Aside from that, the scents of the forest seem to deter them a bit. Warhorses or not, they’re still quite skittish by nature,” Evelyn replied.

“So how *do* you train them for combat?” Darren asked. “And what about barding? I don’t think you have sets made for every horse you work with, do you?”

Evelyn shook her head. “We train them for combat in various ways. First, we try to get them over their natural aversion to loud noises, by introducing them to lots of clanking, jingling sacks of metal, as well as clashing weapons together in their vicinity. We teach them not to react to occasional prodding and tapping, as might happen if you were to wield a lance. We also use pigs’ blood to get them used to those kinds of smells. We train them for barding mainly using blankets with



weights sewn into them, but in general we leave that kind of training up to the customer, since it's usually very specialized."

Darren seemed satisfied with that answer, and looked across the large meadow, to the group of horses that was grazing in the distance.

"So, do you think we can go take a look at the horses now? Surely Emily and Owen will be done by now," he said.

Evelyn nodded, and gestured for Darren to follow her.

"What kind of horse did you have in mind?" she asked as they walked.

"I've always wanted a destrier, actually," Darren said.

"So you compete in jousts a lot, then?" Evelyn asked.

Inwardly, she sighed. So many people who came here said they wanted a destrier, but only a few of them actually *needed* one. Their reputation as the best of the best when it came to horses had given some people the mistaken impression that they were the *only* good horses around.

As Evelyn had expected, Darren gave her a rather blank stare and replied, "Jousting? No, not really. Why?"

"Because jousting is what a destrier is good at. They're big and strong, bred to be able to wear an absurd amount of barding and still gallop. Most warriors have more use for a courser than a destrier. Coursers are lighter and a bit smaller than destriers, but they're still very strong and capable of wearing medium-to-heavy barding, just not to such an absurd degree as a destrier. Don't get me wrong: destriers *are* used in battle, but mostly only by the Royal Knights' heavy cavalry."

Darren looked impressed. "I...must confess I didn't know that. I'm a mercenary, so I don't really fight much in groups. I need my horse to be fast, and able to travel rather large distances. Barding-wise, I'm probably only looking at medium at most. What would you recommend for that?" he asked.

Evelyn considered. "I'd say either a courser or a rouncey would suit your needs. Which one is best for you depends on whether your horse would be doing more fighting, or more long-distance riding. It's a bit of a simplification, but basically a

rouncey is a riding horse that can fight, while a courser is a warhorse that can also handle long-distance riding passably well.”

“I see. I think a rouncey would probably be my best bet, then. I’ll be traveling a lot, after all.”

Evelyn nodded and smiled. “Well then, follow me,” she said.

She showed Darren several of their rounceys, as well as a few coursers who enjoyed long walks.

Eventually, he selected a chestnut rouncey stallion named Secace, whose primary characteristic was his bravery. Where most horses would run, or at least hesitate, Secace generally preferred to charge in. A good fit for someone like Darren.

“Now, Emily is our farrier so she will be able to provide you with horseshoes, but you’ll have to take care of any barding yourself,” Evelyn told Darren as they were finalizing the deal.

“No problem. Jason of Darnellia will take care of that,” he replied.

Evelyn gave an appreciative nod. While she’d never met Jason, other customers had mentioned him in the past, indicating that he was probably well worth the effort of going all the way north to Darnellia, especially after first buying a horse here in the south. Then again, just because Jason had been *born* in Darnellia didn’t mean he still lived there; after all, Evelyn didn’t live in Corferia, either, despite being named after it.

After Owen and Darren had left, Evelyn began rounding up the horses for the night, as she usually did. It was already beginning to get dark by the time she’d collected them all into the stables, and it was only then that she noticed that there was one empty stable too many.

She frowned. Had Emily sold Owen two horses? It was possible — many warriors had more than one horse — but she couldn’t recall Owen leaving with another horse in tow.

She decided to go and ask Emily, hoping furiously that she’d indeed sold Owen two horses.

“Two? No, I only sold Gungnir to him,” Emily replied after Evelyn had asked her. “Who’s missing?”

“Caladbolg,” Evelyn said. She sighed. “I’ll go look for her.”

She walked over to a drawer in the corner and pulled out a sheathed dagger and a belt. The meadow was large and open, so if Caladbolg was there Evelyn would surely have seen her. That basically left only the forest, and Evelyn wasn’t about to go in there unarmed. She also grabbed a lantern; even though its usefulness was doubtful, it was still better than tripping over a root and breaking something. Now properly equipped, she headed back outside.

It didn’t take Evelyn long to find the place Caladbolg had probably escaped from. The wooden boards of the fence lay on the ground, forming a neat gate into the maze of trunks beyond the meadow. She made a mental note to fix that fence first thing in the morning, but for now she still had to find Caladbolg.

*Always too curious for her own good, that one,* Evelyn thought ruefully as she carefully made her way through the tree trunks.

The light was fading rapidly, and the many tree branches were of no help whatsoever as they blocked much of the limited amount that remained.

Caladbolg’s first steps were easy enough to trace, as there was a neat ‘path’ between the trunks right behind the hole in the fence, but soon the vegetation grew denser, and Evelyn had to squat down numerous times to look for tracks.

It wasn’t long before she was forced to light her lantern. In the increasing darkness, the forest had an eerie vibe. Even in the winter, it still had its distinctive smell and sounds, both of which seemed to be amplified by the lack of light.

Evelyn had been here countless times, and while she knew that most animals were more likely to avoid than attack her, she still felt the hairs in the back of her neck stand up with every sound behind her.

Then, to her unending relief, she heard some heavier

noises between the trees, the sort of noise that forest creatures knew not to make.

Following the noise, she quickly found Caladbolg, whose mane had somehow gotten entangled in a low-hanging branch, which was too flexible for the mare to easily snap off.

Evelyn made sure to get Caladbolg's attention before approaching her, and she pulled a carrot from the bag on her belt she always had with her when handling the horses.

"Easy, girl," she said softly. "Easy, Caladbolg."

Recognizing her master, Caladbolg seemed to calm down a bit, and she stopped trying to break herself free from the branches in her mane.

Evelyn slowly got closer, holding up the carrot to keep Caladbolg's attention. She wasn't sure if the mare could see it in the low light, but she figured it was better to be cautious around a skittish horse.

When she was close enough, she fed Caladbolg the carrot, and then set to work untangling the mare's mane from the branch.

"There, you're free. Now, let's get you home and..."

Evelyn fell silent when she noticed that Caladbolg's ears had turned and her tail was lashing. She'd heard something, and it was frightening her.

Evelyn looked in the direction Caladbolg's ears had turned, fully expecting to see nothing but the vague shape of shadowy trees. Instead, though, she saw the bright light of lanterns. She hadn't even realized that she was so close to the road. That was good; it would save her the trouble of finding her way back through the trees.

Then she frowned. Who would be passing through Greenwall this late? Travelers generally made sure to be out of the forest before dark. Even on the solitary road it was all too easy to get injured at night.

She turned off her own lantern and stepped a bit closer to the road, slowly stroking Caladbolg to keep her calm.

The glow of the lanterns came closer, and now Evelyn was able to see the first rider. His armor gleamed in the bright light of the lantern, as did the heavy barding on his horse. His visor was open, probably to allow the rider at least *some* vision in the gloom. Even with the light of the flame distorting things, Evelyn could still see the distinctive rippling pattern of the steel.

*Scintellian steel and barding so heavy it's ludicrous...a Knight?*

She tried to see the other riders in the column. Sure enough, the second rider wore Scintellian steel plate as well. There was no mistaking it: these men belonged to the Lion Company of the Royal Knights, the heralds and personal guards of Edgar, King of Sceldrum.

When the riders got closer, Evelyn realized with a start that the third rider wasn't a Knight. This man wore regular steel plate with a blue overcoat, his horse had a far more sensible amount of barding...and instead of a helmet he wore a thin, Scintellian steel band on his head. A band that simultaneously mocked the incredibly ornate crown of the Luminous Emperor, and signified its wearer as the King.

*The King is here? In Bastion? What could he possibly...?*

Evelyn didn't get a chance to finish her thought. Suddenly, there was shouting from the trees. People in dark clothes and hoods, almost shapeless in the darkness and the dancing light of the lanterns, dashed out of the undergrowth towards the Knights and the King.

Caladbolg, startled by the sudden noise, reared up on her back legs and snorted, forcing Evelyn to divert her attention from the column of riders and their unknown assailants to calm her down again.

She could hear the sound of weapons being drawn and orders being given by the Knights behind her as she softly and steadily spoke to Caladbolg to get her back under control.

Caladbolg was young, too young to be fully trained as a warhorse as of yet, but she *did* have some basic training in dealing with loud, clanging noises, and Evelyn was quickly able to get her under control again.

## Cloak and Dagger

With that done, she chanced a look at the battle and saw that all four Knights and Edgar were fighting an assailant. She also saw a sixth hooded man stepping out of the shadows, rushing over to Edgar with his dagger drawn.

“No!”

Evelyn reacted on instinct. She drew her dagger and ran straight at the man who was making his way over to Edgar.

The man, hearing Evelyn’s shout, had just enough time to pause and turn around before Evelyn barreled into him with her shoulder, pushing him back. He stepped back, tripped over a root in the road, and grabbed Evelyn’s wrist as he went down. Evelyn lost her balance and fell. Her dagger was pointing straight forward. As she landed hard on her knees, she felt her dagger being driven into flesh.

The man made an awful, gurgling sound.

Evelyn couldn’t see where she’d stabbed him, but the sound told her enough. Her dagger was lodged in his throat.

The man opened his mouth, but the only sound that came out was a horrible, strangled croak. A shudder went through his body, and then he fell silent.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The King and the Knights*

Despite the cold, Evelyn's hands felt warm and wet, as well as strangely numb. Her knees hurt from landing on them when she went down. In the faint light of the Knights' lanterns, she could see the vague shape of her dagger protruding from the neck of the man she'd killed.

But even though she could see the evidence of what she'd just done, aside from her physical discomforts she felt... nothing. Sure, she was a bit shaken from the sudden attack, but the fact that she'd just ended someone's life didn't really seem to trigger anything in her. It was a common occurrence in Sceldrum for people to die in fights in the streets, or during attacks on Seeker caravans by Nameless bandits, but regardless, no one she knew took killing lightly. And yet, Evelyn felt nothing. Was that...normal?

"Are you alright?"

In her musings, she hadn't noticed that one of the men from the column had approached her. She looked up into the bearded face of Edgar, King of Sceldrum. He looked her up and down for signs of any injuries.

"I, um, yes, I'm fine," Evelyn said.

## The King and the Knights

After an awkward silent moment, she added, “And you?”

She mentally berated herself for not asking sooner. Perhaps that meant that killing this man had done something to her after all?

She glanced at the body. In the light of Edgar’s lantern, she saw that the man looked to be in his thirties. His hair, cut short, was already thinning a bit. The lower half of his face was red with the blood that poured out from his nose and mouth. It looked quite nasty, but again, Evelyn seemed unable to have any kind of emotional response to the scene.

She was stirred from her thoughts when Edgar said, “I am, in part thanks to your efforts.”

He held out his hand and helped Evelyn get to her feet. She winced momentarily from the pain in her knees, and bent and straightened each leg a couple of times to make sure she hadn’t broken anything.

“My name is Edgar of Therium, King of Sceldrum,” Edgar said.

Before Evelyn could say her own name, however, Edgar said, “And you...you’re Evelyn of Corferia, aren’t you?”

Evelyn blinked stupidly. Why did Edgar know her name?

Edgar chuckled at her confusion. “We’ve met before, a long time ago,” he explained. “Richard was a very dear friend of mine, and I visited him here when the farm had just been built. I needed him and Derrick in Therium with the other Tiger Company Knights and I decided to go and get them in person.”

He grinned sheepishly.

“Lyndon didn’t like that at all. He thought it was a waste of time going to ‘the ass-end of nowhere.’”

Although Evelyn hadn’t met Lyndon yet, she could understand his reaction. Even by Sceldrian standards, you couldn’t get much more rural than Bastion.

“In any case, you were probably only around three years old at the time, so it’s no surprise you didn’t remember me.”



At this point, the four Knights who were accompanying Edgar, having dealt with their own opponents, joined Evelyn and Edgar near Evelyn's victim, who still had her dagger in his throat. They introduced themselves as Lyndon, Irving, Redford, and Tanner, each of them a Royal Knight of Lion Company. Evelyn assumed that this Lyndon was the same one Edgar had just mentioned. She wondered if he hadn't wanted to come here this time, either.

"So, what brings you to the forest in the dark, Evelyn?" Edgar asked.

"Caladbolg, one of our horses, escaped from the enclosure into the forest," Evelyn said. "I had just found her when your group passed by and was attacked by...whoever these people were."

She looked at the dead assassin again. Now, in the light of five lanterns, she noticed that the dagger the assassin had been using was very ornate. The pommel was a dark red gem, and the blade was highly polished. The dancing light made it easy to see the jagged, angular glyph that had been carved into the blade near the guard.

Evelyn frowned. "I've seen markings like that before," she said. "The obelisk in Bastion's village square has glyphs just like those."

Edgar and his Knights exchanged a glance. Evelyn got the feeling they were having an entire conversation in the span of a few seconds. She wondered what it would be like to know someone else so well you could communicate without words.

"Interesting," Edgar said eventually.

He looked at Evelyn. "We were on our way to see Derrick. It *was* going to be a friendly visit under the guise of work, but now, I think we'll have more important things to discuss. Since you fought at our side just now, I'd like to ask you to join us there. I can't promise it'll be very informative, but at the very least I feel you deserve to know what's going on."

Lyndon gave Edgar a strange look, one which Edgar pointedly did not return. Evelyn assumed he was just annoyed

at being in a freezing forest in the dark, apparently without a real reason.

Still, the idea of accompanying the Knights to Derrick appealed to her, if only because it would be fun to see Derrick's face when she turned up with the King. She didn't really expect to hear many shocking things; as a straightforward people, Sceldrians didn't usually keep things secret. Even blacksmiths capable of forging Scintellian steel were more than willing to teach their secrets to any who wished to study under them, if only to prove that no matter what, the master would always be superior to the student even if they were to pass on their entire skillset. Even so, she appreciated Edgar's gesture of allowing her to join the meeting.

"I'll gladly accompany you," she said. "But before we go to Bastion, I'd like to get Caladbolg home. It's getting cold and her coat isn't thick enough to handle it without a blanket."

Not much later, Evelyn, Edgar, and the four Knights arrived at the farm.

"If you'd like to warm yourselves up by the fire, you can tie your horses to the stable and head inside. Emily will probably like to see you again if it's been such a long time since you were last here," Evelyn said.

Edgar gave an awkward chuckle. "I don't know about that..." he muttered.

Evelyn wondered why Edgar would say that, but she shrugged off her curiosity for now and led the men to the stables, where she indicated several hooks in the wooden boards to which they could tie their mounts. After that, she quickly stabled Caladbolg and put her new blanket on her.

After making sure Caladbolg was at ease, she began preparing Curtana for riding, which was no easy task. The mare seemed to be exhilarated at being allowed out of her stable, and was so eager to get moving she didn't want to stand still long enough for Evelyn to properly fasten the bridle and saddle.

Eventually, though, Evelyn had succeeded in her mission. She tied Curtana up outside — keeping her a bit apart from the Knights' and Edgar's horses — and then went into the house, where the five men and Emily were seated around the table.

"I'm ready to go," Evelyn said when everyone looked up.

"So I hear," Emily said with a smirk. "Going out to look for a horse, and instead helping prevent an assassination...Richard would have loved it."

Evelyn grinned back. Richard *had* always had a knack for ending up in unlikely situations. She wondered briefly how he felt when he first took a life. It wasn't really something she had ever thought to ask, but now she wished she had. She pushed the thought away for now and focused on the conversation again.

"So, we're hoping Derrick will be able to shed some light on all of this," Lyndon said.

Emily nodded thoughtfully. "He might be."

She glanced at Evelyn, then looked back at Lyndon. "It's good that you're allowing Evelyn to join the meeting. But I wonder if this is just a simple courtesy or something else."

The warning tone in Emily's voice was unmistakable, and Evelyn wondered what Emily was hinting at. To her, being allowed to learn whatever Derrick and Edgar were going to discuss was a reasonable reward for accidentally helping to foil an assassination, especially since Edgar had already said the visit had been meant to be casual.

But Lyndon, who had clearly picked up on Emily's warning as well, shot a meaningful look at Edgar, who inclined his head ever so slightly.

"For the time being, it's a courtesy," he said after a moment.

None of the people in the room, save a still confused Evelyn, seemed satisfied with that answer, not even Edgar himself.

It was odd riding to Bastion with Knights riding in front of her

and behind her, and Edgar next to her. Curtana didn't seem to like the other horses much, and Evelyn had to subtly show her who was in charge repeatedly. It was a very different ride than she'd had with Durandal only a couple of hours ago.

Even so, and despite the ominous atmosphere Emily had created with her cryptic remark, she was in a pretty good mood. She hoped they'd run into Nicholas. The look on his face would probably be priceless if he saw her riding alongside the heavily-armored Knights.

"So, Evelyn, have you given any thought to your future profession yet?" Edgar asked.

"A bit. But I don't really know yet," Evelyn replied. "Bastion's a small village and not many Seeker caravans come this way, so I'm not even sure what my options are."

"You could always travel to a larger town yourself and join a caravan from there," Edgar pointed out.

Evelyn didn't reply immediately, instead staring at the backs of Lyndon and Irving for a moment.

"I could, but for the time being I enjoy training the horses with Emily, and she is glad to have the help," she said eventually.

It wasn't a lie, strictly speaking, it just wasn't the whole truth. She'd thought of heading for a different town before, but it had always bothered her she wouldn't have much of a plan beyond that. She probably wouldn't starve because she knew how to hunt and track, but groups of Nameless tended to prey on lone travelers, and good with a sword or not, Evelyn was just one girl. She wouldn't stand a chance against two or more Nameless who were probably used to fighting and killing fully grown warriors, or at least robbing them and getting away. But she didn't want to admit that she was afraid. That was the sort of weakness that would make her the laughing stock of Bastion, and there was no way she would let that happen.

Edgar didn't seem to notice the slight hesitation in her answer, though. "Well, I'm sure something will come on your path eventually," he said neutrally.

Perhaps she imagined it, but Evelyn could swear he had a small grin on his face when faced forwards again.

Barnett, the guard on evening duty, quickly straightened up when he saw the group of Knights approaching. When he noticed Evelyn among them, he shot her a curious glance. She gave him a cocky smirk in return, enjoying the moment immensely.

Bastion at night was much, much quieter than during the day. Lanterns were spaced evenly along the main road to give nightly visitors some semblance of a bearing, but the streets were mostly empty. People would either be at home, or getting drunk at the Crumbling Fortress, Bastion's sole inn.

When the group rode into the town square, Evelyn could clearly hear the noise from the inn, far to the left behind the now empty market stalls.

"I hope Derrick keeps it short," Redford said from behind Evelyn. "I can't wait to get myself a mug of Hazel's ale later."

"As long as you're ready to ride in the morning," Edgar warned. "I swear that if you're late, or don't put on Morello's barding right, or don't put on your *own* armor right, or *any* of the other things you've done while inebriated on the job, you're cleaning all the Knights' armor for a month."

"That's a bit..."

"Not just Lion Company. *Everyone.*"

Redford sighed deeply. "Alright, alright, I'll behave. Can I at least get into a brawl or two?" he asked.

Edgar shrugged. "I won't stop you. But take off your armor first so your opponent has a fighting chance."

Evelyn chuckled. Hearing Edgar and Redford talk like this it was almost like this was just a normal night for them, even though they'd been fighting assassins earlier. She wondered if Richard and Derrick had ever had conversations like this on missions. They must have; Richard had often told her that a lot of missions were quite boring most of the time. Maybe they'd even been joking around just before they got ambushed and

split up. Derrick and a few others had gotten away. Richard wasn't among them. Evelyn had only been ten years old when Derrick had arrived at the farm, still bearing the cuts and bruises of the fight...

She didn't get the chance to further relive the memory, because they had arrived at the end of the market. The group dismounted and tied their horses to the hooks that all the buildings surrounding the market had in their walls. The alleys that made up the rest of Bastion were too narrow for a horse to comfortably fit through, especially ones wearing as much barding as the horses of the Knights did. Just like at the farm, Evelyn made sure to tie Curtana up some distance away from the other horses.

They headed into the alley and rounded the first corner they came to. Derrick's workshop looked small and unassuming. Unlike many other merchants, he didn't have a large sign above his door painted in the brightest colors imaginable. Standing in stark contrast to the gaudy look of every building around it, the workshop ironically stood out more because of how subdued it was.

Edgar knocked on the door, and a moment later it swung open. Derrick looked at Edgar and the Knights.

He got a curious expression on his face when he saw Evelyn, something she could only barely make out in the dim light.

She smiled at him. For a moment, Derrick's eyes lingered on Evelyn, and her smile faltered a bit. She'd expected him to be surprised to see her, but not apprehensive like he seemed to be now.

Eventually, he turned back to Edgar and said, "Come on in. I expect we have a lot more to discuss than just your trip here."

Derrick led them past his workshop into the living area of his house. A fireplace on the left wall warmed and lit the room, the middle of which was occupied by a heavy, ornate wooden table. Evelyn smiled faintly when she saw it. She could vaguely

remember Richard making the table after Derrick had said that he'd lost his woodworking touch. Richard had then told Derrick that he was to display the table prominently, so he would always be reminded about how wrong he had been. Apparently, he was still keeping that promise even now.

The table was filled with books and scrolls of several sizes and colors, all from the massive bookcase that obscured the entire right wall of the house. Evelyn recognized Imperial writing on several of the scrolls, but some were written in a language she hadn't seen before. Derrick gestured at everyone to take a seat in one of the many mismatched chairs that were scattered around the table. He himself sat down at the head of the table, facing the fireplace.

"First...why is Evelyn here?" Derrick asked.

It annoyed Evelyn a bit that he'd asked Edgar instead of her. It made sense, of course, because Edgar was the only one who'd have the authority to invite her, but still.

Edgar told Derrick about the attack, finishing his story by mentioning the glyph on the assassin's dagger.

Derrick narrowed his eyes. "Anthony told me everything was safe," he growled.

Edgar shrugged. "He can't be everywhere at once and I doubt he combed all of Greenwall. Don't be too hard on him when you see him."

"Anthony? Is that the guy from Serpent you were talking to earlier?" Evelyn asked.

"Yes," Derrick said without looking at her.

Why was he so determined not to acknowledge her presence? She wanted to open her mouth, but Derrick continued talking without giving her a chance.

"Anyway, let's get to business. Since you almost got gutted just now, I think we can assume that the rumors have a bit more truth to them than we originally believed."

He glanced at Evelyn, who was about to ask what rumors he was talking about, and for the first time that evening he gave her a small smile.

He looked at Lyndon. “You won’t mind hearing the whole story again, do you? I know how much you love coming here,” he said with a grin.

Lyndon grinned back. “Just start talking, you prick.”

Derrick turned back to Evelyn. “For some time now, I think about three or four months, rumors have been circulating around Sceldrum, mostly in the large cities. According to these rumors, the Linmaran Republic is planning to invade Sceldrum by breaking through the Buffer, supposedly to reclaim land that used to belong to them. While we doubted that, it is true that in many villages in Sceldrum traces of glyphs can be found which are very different than those used by the Empire. Bastion’s obelisk is one such example.”

Evelyn frowned. She knew that Sceldrum had used to belong to the Empire, but her history books didn’t really go back further than that. As far as she knew, though, it had never been part of the Linmaran Republic. In fact, even to this day Sceldrum and the Republic weren’t officially in contact with each other, because the Buffer separated the countries, all the way from the Valoniae in the north to the Broken Cliffs on the southern coast, and the Imperials fiercely guarded the area. As far as she knew, no one had ever been allowed through. But, like Derrick said, the obelisk in the town square seemed to suggest that at least, people using a different kind of glyph magic had lived here. Had they been Linmaran? The glyph on the assassin’s dagger did look a lot like it, so perhaps it could be true.

Derrick picked up one of the books that had been written in Imperial. “This book describes the history of western Ortellium. It was written around two hundred years ago, when the Empire had only just begun calling itself, well, the Empire. According to this, the people who lived in this area at the time weren’t actually Linmaran, but the author mentions that they were culturally very similar and he mentions that, much like the Imperials, the Linmarans have their roots here in Sceldrum.”

He put down the book and picked up another one. “This book



details the rise of the Empire itself. It claims that the first Emperor, or 'Child of the Sun', as they call him, received the first of their glyphs directly from the sun itself, in a cave in what is currently their capital city of Liyáizáza. Assuming that this is typical Imperial symbolism, I'm going to guess they simply discovered glyphs that had been created by an earlier civilization. If that civilization, as the other book claims, indeed originated here in Sceldrum, then the glyphs carved on the obelisk here in Bastion might also belong to that older civilization, rather than the current Republic. From what I've been able to tell, Bastion's obelisk was already broken when the Scintellians first arrived here."

He shrugged. "Of course, we've never been very good about writing things down, so I can't be certain that they didn't simply break it themselves, but I haven't found any records of any Scintellians fighting against anyone using magic other than the Imperials."

He put both books down away and stared at the fire for a moment.

Eventually, he said, "I honestly didn't expect the rumors to be true. Yes, we have the marks on our obelisk like I wrote in my letter, which Edgar just *had* to come and see in person..."

He rolled his eyes good-naturedly at Edgar, who smirked. Lyndon sighed heavily.

"...but I couldn't imagine the Republic going to war over Bastion, or any of the other pointless, rural villages in Sceldrum. This assassination attempt forces me to reconsider, however."

His expression turned grim. "It makes me wonder what else they might have in store for us."

"Will they be able to try anything else, though?" Redford asked. "Getting a few people through the Buffer is one thing, but I doubt the Empire would let them march an army across."

Derrick nodded. "I don't think they'd be able to, either. I suspect that this assassination attempt is based on them believing that losing Edgar would throw the country into

disarray.”

“But of course, he’s actually entirely useless,” Tanner said with a smirk.

Edgar gave Tanner a dirty look, but Evelyn could tell he was actually amused. There was a kernel of truth in what Tanner had said, though. The position of ‘King’ in Sceldrum had been created after the Battle of Darnellia, just over ninety years ago, and was designed mainly to maintain some semblance of organization in the highly individualistic Sceldrum. In practice, mostly only the six major cities in the northern half of Sceldrum bothered to go along with the plans of the King.

Several smaller settlements in the south were sympathetic as well, but the majority did not care one way or another who nominally ruled Sceldrum, and the King dying wouldn’t change their lives in the slightest.

“Be that as it may, we can’t rule out the possibility that they might send more assassins, and I’d rather not lose more friends unnecessarily, even if they’re too impulsive for their own good,” Derrick said.

Edgar looked like a child who’d been caught stealing candy.

“Yes, Edgar, I thought I knew why you brought Evelyn here even before you explained the situation. And I’m asking you to please reconsider.”

“Reconsider what?” Evelyn asked apprehensively, suddenly acutely aware that everyone was now looking at her.

“Edgar wants you to join the Royal Knights,” Derrick said with an accusing look at Edgar.

Evelyn blinked in confusion. Join the Knights? But she was much too old for that. Only ten-year-olds could join up, and she was fifteen.

“I take it you don’t approve, then?” Edgar said dryly.

Derrick silently shook his head.

“I don’t approve either,” Lyndon said sternly. “And neither did Emily, for that matter.”

Now Evelyn understood the tense atmosphere at the farm

earlier. Had Emily known about this as well? And had this proposal been the reason Edgar had asked her about her plans for the future on the way here? It must have been.

She looked at Edgar. “Why am I the only one who didn’t know you were going to ask this?” she asked.

Edgar shrugged. “You didn’t know me,” he said simply.

“Edgar has a history of making impulsive decisions,” Lyndon said. “Some work out for the better, some for the worse. Paying blacksmiths who can make Scintellian steel plate to move to Therium and work exclusively for the Knights was a smart move, trying to set aside a specific day where people are allowed to issue challenges to each other, not so much.”

“In this case, it’s easy to figure out that he would ask you to join the Knights,” Derrick said, taking over from Lyndon. “You’ve helped save his life, and he and Richard had been friends since childhood.”

“We’d enlisted in the Knights at the same time,” Edgar said. “I was good at organizing and strategizing, but I wasn’t a very good fighter, or at thinking on my feet. Richard suggested that I should try to become a mayor or something.”

He grinned. “I decided to go for King instead.”

Evelyn chuckled. She imagined that Richard would probably have been pretty amused at that.

“But I digress, Evelyn. What Derrick just said is true. I’d like to ask you to join the Knights. I’m not going to lie: it will be hard for you to fit in with kids who’ve been living and training together for five years. But this is the time of year where everyone is split up into the Companies they will be serving in. It’s a fairly ideal moment for you to come in. I would put you in Tiger Company, a group less focused on the battlefield itself, so your lack of training wouldn’t hinder you as much.”

“Evelyn, as much as I like Edgar, I’m asking you not to do this,” Derrick said. “The Knights are different from the life you know. They are a close-knit group. You can’t just go to Therium and expect them to welcome you with open arms. You’ve hunted with a bow, but you’ve never fired a war bow as tall as yourself.

You've only ever trained with a sword, and not with spears, halberds, lances or axes, and even then, you're not nearly good enough to fight any of those people with your level of skill. You're not prepared for this."

Evelyn didn't reply immediately. She hadn't ever really considered joining the Knights, especially since Richard died right around the time she would have had to have made the choice. But the prospect did sound strangely exciting. Learning how to fight, how to handle different weapons, how to work in a unit... it would all be new to her.

She looked at Derrick. His eyes were earnest, and she'd known him long enough to know that he wouldn't be lying to her. There was no doubt in her mind that everything he had just told her was true. But the thought of backing down just because someone told her she wasn't good enough was just laughable. She would show the other Knights just how good Evelyn of Corferia was.

"I'll do it. I'll come with you to Therium and join the Royal Knights."

Edgar smiled, but Derrick just shook his head and sighed deeply.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *City of Chaos*

The first thing Emily did when Evelyn came home and told her about her decision to become a Knight was declare that she'd kill Edgar.

"I knew he was going to ask this," she seethed. "I knew it and I let him live long enough to do it anyway. I don't know if that makes me a bigger idiot than him."

"It was my decision to actually take the offer, though," Evelyn said. "And just in case: both Derrick and Lyndon tried to convince me not to do it."

"As if you'd listen to sound advice," Emily scoffed. When Evelyn wanted to protest, she held up her hand and went on, "And you shouldn't! Don't get me wrong, Evelyn. I'm *happy* that you're making a choice for yourself. I'm *happy* that you're doing what you want, despite people telling you you shouldn't. I'd be disappointed if you let yourself be dissuaded from something you really want just because people, even people you know and respect, tell you that it's not a good idea."

She gave Evelyn an earnest look. Evelyn decided not to mention that her choice wasn't so much a lifelong ambition as a spur-of-the-moment decision, and she waited for Emily to

continue speaking, slightly inclining her head to show that at least she appreciated Emily's support.

"My problem is that Edgar *knew* you'd say yes, and he knows full well that for you to join the Knights now is only going to get you in trouble with all of them."

"He did mention something like that, yes," Evelyn said with a nod.

Emily sighed. "Well, there isn't much I can do about it now." She looked at Evelyn with an expression so piercing that it was almost physically uncomfortable. "But at least know that if this doesn't work out, you're welcome to come back here. I promise you I would not see it as a failure."

Evelyn wasn't certain what to make of that statement. If she failed as a Knight, well, then no matter what Emily said, it would still be a failure. On the other hand, it was also a powerful statement of unquestioning support, especially because of the way she'd said it, and unquestioning support was something very hard to come by in Sceldrum.

Ultimately, Evelyn decided to just thank Emily for the support and then went up to her room, for what might well be the last time. Even if she did come back to the farm at some point, it would be as a guest instead of a resident. As she lay in her bed, she stared into the blackness that was now at once familiar and strange to her. Even in the complete darkness, she knew the positioning of every beam in the ceiling. She knew each line and splinter. Without seeing it, she knew the way her dresser was just a bit lower on one side because one of the legs had cracked.

But now, this room, which had been hers for as long as she could remember, wasn't really hers anymore. Come tomorrow, she'd start her journey to Therium along with Edgar and the Knights, and in a few days' time she would meet the people she'd spend the next fifteen years of her life with, or perhaps even longer if she decided to remain a Knight after turning thirty. Now, on her own, she had to admit to herself that that notion made her nervous.

The Knights-in-training had been living together for five years at this point. They would know each other very well already, even though they had only recently been split up into their respective Companies. Evelyn was confident in her abilities, and she did think that she would be able to keep up with the Knights' regimen given a bit of time to adjust, but still. She'd have to make a strong first impression on them somehow. But how? Should she mention she'd already killed a man? She really didn't feel comfortable with the thought of doing that, partially because her killing of the assassin had mostly been accidental, and partially because her own lack of emotion about it still unnerved her, despite the grisly image of the incident still appearing vividly in her mind the moment she thought about it.

She turned onto her side. *It doesn't matter now, she mentally decided. I'll get plenty of time to think about a way to impress them while we're on the road.* To clear her head of her worries, she tried to imagine what it would be like to hold her own Scintellian steel sword, how it would feel, how it would be balanced. She'd heard that Scintellian steel swords were so good they didn't even *feel* like normal swords. She could almost see the rippling steel shimmering in the light of the sun. She fell asleep with a smile on her face.

Evelyn was up before it was even fully light, and she immediately began preparing Curtana for travel. All Knights-in-training had their own horse, and part of their training as Knights was to train their own mount for combat. While it was inevitable that a Knight would ride many horses other than the one they trained, it was considered vital for each Knight to truly form a bond with their horse. As she fitted Curtana with her saddle bags and riding saddle, Evelyn felt confident that on that front, at least, she certainly wouldn't be lagging behind any of her peers.

Her dagger was on her hip, cleaned and sharpened after its grim use the night before. She was just double-checking all her

bags when Emily joined her outside.

“Can you fit in one more?” she asked, handing Evelyn a large sack. “I’ve prepared some food for the road. It should last you a good two days, and then you’ll be able to stock up at the inn.”

Evelyn smiled and began to fiddle with some straps to make room for the extra baggage. “Thanks,” she said.

She wasn’t sure what else to say. Even though she was of the age when people generally left home, it was still odd that this was the actual moment it was happening, even more so because it hadn’t been planned like such departures usually were. Her chest felt weirdly constricted, and for a moment she wondered if her cloak was caught on something. And the clasp on that bag...was it getting blurrier? She blinked a couple of times to clear her vision, and to try and get rid of that annoying burning feeling in her eyes.

She felt Emily’s hand on her shoulder. “I know it’s hard,” Emily said. “I felt the same way when I left home. I bet it was even worse for Richard when he joined the Knights.”

Evelyn turned around, looking at Emily’s smiling face through still blurry eyes.

“It just means you’re growing up. Your life is wholly yours now, even if you *are* a Knight. Every achievement you reach from now on will be your own, gained through your own merit and hard work.” Her smile widened, and Evelyn could see unmistakable pride in Emily’s expression. “Evelyn of Corferia, I wish you all the fortune and prosperity in the world on your journey. May your name reach to Scintellium and beyond.”

Evelyn shakily returned the smile. “Emily of Gedria, I will spread your name across the land to all those who wish to have the finest mounts. I wish you fortune, fame, and prosperity. May I hear your name spoken with awe wheresoever my journey may take me,” she said.

Then she wrapped her arms tightly around Emily. The hug wasn’t a part of the ritual, and Evelyn knew that it wasn’t a very common thing to do, but she didn’t care. Nothing about the



journey she was going on was normal, anyway. Why should the farewell be? She let go of Emily, now able to give her a genuine, strong smile. She untied Curtana and got in the saddle. Raising her hand in greeting, she began to ride towards the road, where Edgar and the Knights would be waiting for her.

Apart from the riders' slow hoofbeats on the dirt path, Greenwall was eerily quiet, a feeling somehow increased by the lingering fog in the early morning light. Everyone was wary for another attack, especially when the group rode past the spot of last night's struggle. Evelyn made a point of not looking at the ditch in which Lyndon and Tanner had dumped the bodies of the assassins and instead focused on the route they'd be taking to Therium. After crossing Greenwall, they would follow the road north for about two days, after which they'd reach the Red Fox Inn, located at a fork in the main road. In the past, Evelyn had only ever gone northeast from the Red Fox, to visit her birthplace of Corferia near the Buffer. This time they would head northwest.

Even though it was still a couple of days before she'd go into unknown territory, she was already getting excited. Therium was a vastly different city from all the other cities in Sceldrum, even the other five major cities. It was bigger, and its walls had apparently been constructed with the help of Imperial architects when Sceldrum was still a part of the Empire. Located on the southern bank of the Therys, the largest river in Sceldrum, it was a major trade hub to and from the Empire, as well as being the fastest way to get to the port city of Scintellis further downstream to the west. The land around Therium was said to be some of the most fertile land in the entirety of Sceldrum, which drew in even more people.

The result was a city with, by Sceldrian standards, a massive population. It was often said that the expression 'I'll succeed or die trying' wasn't exactly a figurative one in Therium, with competition over just about anything imaginable being incredibly fierce. The city even had a large arena built

just to be able to regulate the many, many duels to the death that would otherwise be fought in the streets — and even then Evelyn had heard stories that some of the streets in the central districts had been permanently stained red by the all the blood that was spilled there on a daily basis. But for all its violence, Therium was also the capital city of Sceldrum, home to the Royal Castle and the Royal Knights, and it would be the place Evelyn would spend most of her time in the years to come, and Evelyn couldn't wait to get there.

To Evelyn's relief, Curtana was getting more and more used to the horses of Edgar and the Knights, and so she had to struggle less to keep her under control as the day went on. The road they were on went mostly straight north, and was bordered by fields and some scattered trees, and occasionally a small brook. Being accompanied by the King and four Royal Knights did very little to make this part of the trip more exciting, especially since Evelyn had traveled along it more than once. She knew there were a few scattered farms here and there, but they weren't easily accessible from the main road and mainly belonged to people who didn't like living around others, and Evelyn had never personally met any of the people who lived there.

Conversation wasn't very interesting, either, as Edgar and his Knights mostly discussed administrative matters. Evelyn wondered if she would have to learn to properly organize and lead people as well in her training. She supposed she would, since the Royal Knights were supposed to serve as commanders of the normal soldiers in wartime and often performed governing duties for cities and villages in peacetime. Listening to Edgar and Lyndon discussing funding for repairs to the docks made her glad that at least she wouldn't be in Lion Company, since they were the ones most often involved with governing affairs. Then again, Tiger Company was a fairly diplomatic company and was often sent to liaise with the Empire, which was sure to be fairly boring in its own right.

Evelyn liked actually *doing* things, as opposed to simply *talking* about doing things, as did most people in Sceldrum. That was one of the main reasons most people didn't much care for positions like mayor or king: you were spending all your time dealing with the problems of others instead of doing what you wanted to do. But for now, it was much too early to worry about things like that. She wasn't even officially a Knight yet, not until she'd taken the oath, and she'd do that once they got to Therium. So, rather than listening further to the conversation Edgar was having with his Knights, Evelyn settled down in her saddle and gave Curtana a bit of slack, letting her mare take control of the journey for a bit. To her relief, Curtana didn't immediately attempt to break away from the group and kept in pace with the others.

Evelyn patted her on the neck and whispered, "Good girl. See, these horses aren't so bad, are they?"

Curtana moved her head a little bit and gave a small, almost sarcastic snort, but since she still didn't decide to act up, Evelyn figured she just liked to be contrary for its own sake. She smiled and leaned back a bit, and let her thoughts wander as she looked out across the grassy plains.

After spending the night just off the road in a field near a copse — Evelyn noted with some satisfaction that Curtana stayed quite close to the Knights' horses when she was allowed to run free for a bit — the group continued their journey towards the Red Fox Inn early in the morning. This day, much like the last one, was spent mainly riding through open fields with the occasional tree and farm to be seen.

As they headed farther north, there would be more trees and some fewer fields, and the landscape would get just a little bit hillier and less flat, but on the whole there just wasn't very much to see, and so Evelyn once again spent most of her time daydreaming, only occasionally joining in the conversation between Edgar and the Knights.

They reached the Red Fox about an hour after sunset, and

Evelyn was glad to feel the heat of the fire when she stepped inside.

“Good evening, Edgar, Lyndon, Tanner, Redford, Irving...and Evelyn! You have some interesting company today,” Carolina, the Red Fox’s owner, said as soon as she spotted the group.

“I’m on my way to Therium,” Evelyn replied. “I’m joining the Knights.”

Carolina cocked her head. “The Knights? At your age?” She looked from Evelyn to Edgar, who nodded. She looked back to Evelyn with a smile. “Well, considering your traveling partners I guess it’s not that surprising. Why don’t you all take a seat close to the fire, and I’ll get you something to eat.”

Not much later, Evelyn and the others had large bowls of steaming hot stew in front of them, and the men had large tankards of beer. Evelyn, who’d never liked the taste, simply went for water.

“We’re not going to come across many inns in the next few days,” Edgar said, after taking a large swig of his beer and sighing appreciatively. “It’ll be four days until we reach the Quarry Path Inn, and from there it’s just over a day to Therium. Before we get there, though, we’re passing through the Endless Woods, and Nameless like to hide out there and ambush travelers.”

Evelyn nodded slowly. The Endless Woods, while far less dense than Greenwall, were much larger, though they had become considerably smaller over the years as more trees were cut down for wood. Still, it would take nearly two days of travel to get through them, and two days was plenty of time for trouble.

Irving, noticing that Evelyn looked a bit concerned, said, “Don’t worry. Most Nameless know better than to mess around with Royal Knights, *especially* if those Knights are from Lion Company and wearing Scintellian plate.”

“Well, those assassins tried it, didn’t they?” Redford said.

Irving shrugged. “Yeah, and guess who’s currently lying dead in a ditch? If any Nameless try it, they’re going the same

way.”

“True, as far as assassinations go, this attempt wasn’t particularly good,” Redford admitted. “I hope you’ll be a better one, Evelyn.”

“Uhm...what?”

“You didn’t know? Tiger Company isn’t just the diplomatic unit of the Knights. You’re also the assassins,” Redford said.

“I didn’t even know we *had* assassins,” Evelyn confessed. The image of the Linmaran man lying dead with her dagger in his throat flashed before her eyes. She wasn’t sure if she was too keen on becoming an assassin. Though, perhaps, given her lack of emotion about it, she might turn out to be a pretty good one.

“It’s not exactly common knowledge because it isn’t done often,” Lyndon said. “But Imperial nobility can be more than a little corrupt when dealing with Sceldrians, and if we find out our merchants are being ripped off when they go to the Empire, we send in Tiger to...solve the problem, one way or another.”

“And the Imperials just let that happen? They don’t instantly know who was behind it?” Evelyn asked incredulously.

Lyndon grinned. “Well, these nobles tend to have their fair share of enemies anyway, so it’s generally pinned on one of them, and besides, we happen to have an entire unit of Royal Knights dedicated to diplomacy to smooth things over. Convenient, don’t you think?”

Evelyn shook her head in amazement. Somehow, she didn’t think a real assassination was that easy. Still, the conversation did make her realize how little she actually knew about the Knights. Despite living with a Knight for the first ten years of her life, she really didn’t much more than anyone else did: there were five Companies. Lion Company served the King and were basically heralds and judges, Tiger Company was foreign — in practice just Imperial — diplomacy, Wolf Company were experts on the battlefield, Bear Company were siege experts, and Serpent Company were mostly spies.

“Don’t worry too much about it,” Edgar said. “During your

training, you won't be alone. Your teammates and instructor will help you, so you won't have to figure everything out by yourself. Besides, it's not like being a Knight is all business, either."

"No," Lyndon agreed. "Sometimes you have to wait for an hour because the King has lost his crown somewhere in camp, only to then find out he'd stashed it in his saddlebags while packing, which was the absolute first place I told him to check, which he said he had."

While he was saying all this, he was looking at Edgar with an exasperated look.

Edgar coughed sheepishly and said, "I did check. Just not that pocket."

"It only has one, you dick."

Evelyn laughed. She hadn't expected Lyndon, who thus far had been the most serious person of the group, to engage in banter like this.

"The sad part is, all of this is completely true," Irving said. "I couldn't make something this stupid up if I tried."

"Yep. This is the guy you'll be pledging loyalty to, Evelyn. You can still back out now. No one will blame you," Tanner said with a grin.

Evelyn grinned back at him. "I think I'll be fine," she replied. "After all, it's not like I haven't done stupid things myself. For instance, the other day..."

The group spent the evening telling each other stories of dumb things they'd done over the years. Unsurprisingly, the Knights had far more stories to tell than Evelyn, but she was having a great time listening to theirs. She wondered if this kind of thing was common for Knights to do. Friendships like this were quite rare in Sceldrum. Usually when people were telling stories, they were boasting of their accomplishments, and not sheepishly telling of their stupid mistakes. But maybe this was just the kind of thing you did after spending so much time together. After all, the Knights didn't *have* to boast about their achievements. Being a Knight at all was an achievement

in and of itself, so it seemed kind of logical that they would instead be trying to one-up each other with their embarrassing moments. Evelyn hoped that, in time, she'd be able to have evenings like this with her future teammates.

A day-and-a-half later, the group rode into the Endless Woods. At first, Evelyn hadn't even really noticed they had entered the woods at all. The trees had just gradually gotten more numerous around the road, until they were suddenly everywhere around it. Even now, though, the road was easily wide enough for them to ride side-by-side, as they had been doing for the past couple of days.

Having gotten to know the Knights a bit better during their stay at the Red Fox, Evelyn was now a bit more active in the conversations on the road, and Curtana had grown fully comfortable around the other horses as well, meaning Evelyn could just let Curtana do the walking, while she was talking with Redford, who rode behind her.

"Honestly, this trip is one of the most exciting things we've done lately," he said. "See, most of the work we do in Lion Company is administrative. We go to places that are 'officially' part of Sceldrum and collect taxes and the like, as well as acting as judges if there are disputes they can't settle for themselves. Aside from that, we try to convince 'independent' villages to become part of the kingdom as well."

"What difference does it make, being part of the kingdom or independent?" Evelyn asked.

"It's mainly for protection. There are a *lot* of feuds between villages, which often end in mob battles which injure a lot of people, which in turn really hurts the local economy and farming output. If a village is part of the kingdom, they can call on us for help and we'll try to mediate the conflict...or end it decisively. In return, of course, they pay taxes."

"That sounds like hiring mercenaries with extra steps," Evelyn said.

Redford nodded. "It is, which is why so many villages simply

don't bother and remain independent. We try to entice them by sending Seeker caravans their way if they've just joined up, but that's a lot of hassle in itself."

Before Evelyn could ask any other questions, Lyndon held up his hand. "Stop," he said.

He drew his sword, and the other Knights and Edgar immediately followed suit.

Evelyn drew her dagger and scanned the between the trees, which were fairly dense in this part of the woods, but she couldn't see anything. Confused, she looked past Lyndon and Irving onto the road ahead, but all she saw was a single person in a dark traveling cloak.

"You Knights are a paranoid lot, aren't you?" the man in the road said with a smirk that was barely visible behind a bushy, brown beard. He had his hood up, and brown hair just as messy as the beard was visible underneath it. "Rightfully so, I might add."

He glanced up at the trees, and Evelyn followed his eyes. Her eyes widened when she saw the archers between the dense branches, all clad in brown gear that made them very difficult to see unless you were actively looking for them.

"What do you want, Nameless?" Lyndon asked in a voice so cold it made Evelyn shiver.

The man in the road shrugged. "That depends entirely on what you have. All that armor looks mighty expensive. The barding on the horses as well. It's useless to us, of course, but the steel itself will fetch a nice price, I'm sure. Speaking of steel, I've always wanted a Scintellian steel sword.."

His eyes fell on Evelyn and his grin widened. "But perhaps, I can be persuaded to settle for something a bit...warmer than all of that cold steel."

Evelyn gripped her dagger tighter. She wasn't really sure what she'd be able to do with it, but she'd sooner die than give herself over to these Nameless bandits.

"And yet, cold steel is exactly what you're going to get, unless you let us pass," Lyndon said.



The man in the road didn't look impressed. "Big words, but I'm not the one with a dozen arrows aimed at my head," he said. "We might not be able to kill you Knights in your shiny shells, but Edgar and the girl are a lot squishier. We don't really need her to be alive for our purposes, anyway. It'll just save us the trouble of killing her afterwards."

Evelyn felt her heart beginning to race. Was she really going to die before even reaching Therium? But what could she do? There were too many Nameless for her to really stand a chance.

"If you kill Edgar or Evelyn, none of you will live another day. Your little hunting bows can't pierce Scintellian steel, and I don't believe for a second any of you are good enough shots to hit the articulation points with those branches in the way. The moment any of the archers leave the trees, they will die, because the four of us are more than strong enough to hack you into tiny pieces."

Lyndon fell silent for a moment, and although she couldn't see his face, she could imagine him grinning coldly when he went on, "But don't think you'll be getting easy deaths. People who anger the Royal Knights die very, very painfully."

He glanced around at the archers in the trees. "I have a proposition for all of you. You can either follow your leader's orders and attack us, which will mean your deaths...or you shoot him, right now, let us go on our way and then get out of this forest before I return with soldiers to hunt you down and flay you alive."

"You waste your breath, Knight. My men would never—"

The Nameless bandit was interrupted when an arrow struck him right in the throat. His eyes widened in shock and he looked up at the man who shot him...and then collapsed into a heap. It must have taken less than a second, but to Evelyn it all seemed to happen very slowly.

She looked at the archer who fired the shot. Everyone else, from Edgar and the Knights to his companions, did the same. He was a young man, looking to be just a few years older than

Evelyn, and he looked shocked at what he'd just done.

Then, recovering his wits somewhat, he said, "Fuck this. I'm not throwing away my life by attacking fucking *Knights*."

"Smart man," Lyndon said mockingly. "Once we're out of view, you will come out of those trees and depart in any direction except the one we're heading in. If I see any of you in this part of the forest ever again, I won't be so merciful."

Without wasting another word, he put away his sword, quickly followed by Edgar and the other Knights. Evelyn didn't feel comfortable enough to put her dagger away yet, and as they began moving again she kept her eyes on the archers in the trees, expecting one of them to try and shoot them anyway, but nothing happened. The Nameless bandits simply stared after them in silence.

Evelyn briefly wondered what would happen to the young man who had shot their leader, but she decided she didn't care as long as she never had to meet them again. How on earth had they gotten out of that alive? They had been outnumbered, and the archers were in the trees. Edgar wore armor, but his head was uncovered aside from a warm hat, and Evelyn herself wasn't armored at all, just wearing padded winter clothes. There was no way they could have won a fight, was there?

"Are you okay?" Edgar asked after a couple of minutes, in which Evelyn had repeated the whole encounter in her mind about a hundred times.

"I don't know," she said. "I can't believe we're still alive..." she whispered just loud enough for Edgar to hear her.

He reached over, put his hand on her shoulder, and gave her an earnest look. "Lyndon is more than just the most responsible Knight in this group. He's also very, very good at his job. Royal Knights have a certain status. Even in the smaller, independent villages people know who they are. Remember what Irving said when we were at the Red Fox? Even most Nameless don't mess with the Knights."

"And that's for the better, too," Lyndon said from ahead of them. "Because it was only that reputation that got us through

this. If they'd decided to shoot you, there was nothing I could have done."

He turned around in his saddle to look at Evelyn. "This is one of the lessons you'll have to learn as a Knight. Often, fighting isn't the answer to a tricky situation. Bluffing your way through might be a better option. As a Knight, you'll have a certain mystique around you. Even Nameless will have a degree of fear for you simply because you're a Knight. Use it to your advantage. Play the part well, and you can get through difficult moments without having to raise your hand in battle."

"But you said you could kill all of them," Evelyn said. She was still struggling to make sense of everything.

Lyndon shook his head. "There was no way we would have won. The only reason they didn't try to shoot us was because I said they wouldn't be able to, and I said it convincingly. They didn't believe they could kill us, or shoot the joints in our armor from the back, and so they didn't dare to try. If they had, they would have won. They had more than enough arrows and archers to be sure of a number of good shots. Irving, Redford, Tanner, and I could probably have escaped with minor injuries, but you and Edgar would have almost certainly died. But they were afraid of us, and so they shot their leader instead. Never underestimate the power of fear, Evelyn."

Evelyn nodded wordlessly and Lyndon turned to face forward again. For the rest of the day, Evelyn kept glancing up at the trees, expecting to see an archer on every branch, but to her great relief nothing else happened for the rest of the day, and by the time they made camp for the night she was feeling a little bit better. Even so, when she was in her tent that night, she kept her dagger drawn, and slept with one hand on the hilt.

It didn't surprise Evelyn that this night was the least comfortable one she'd had thus far. Every time a twig snapped in the woods, or the branches rustled in the wind, she sat up straight on her bedroll with her dagger in her hand, expecting a wild-looking Nameless to stand in her tent, but each time it

turned out to be a false alarm.

When the sun began to come up at long last, she was far too exhausted to feel relieved. Fortunately, Edgar and the Knights didn't seem to hold it against her, and because Curtana was now used to walking in formation with the other horses, Evelyn was able to doze off for a bit in the saddle, but of course she wasn't really able to make up for the sleepless night and so she felt incredibly relieved when, at the end of the day, they reached the Quarry Path Inn.

At the insistence of Edgar, she forced herself to eat something, but as soon as she'd emptied her plate she retired to her room, dropped into the bed, and was out before she'd even fully pulled up the cover.

The final full day of traveling led the group through a slightly hilly terrain. Behind the hills to the west were the quarries, from which the stones for Therium's fortifications were sourced, while to the east there were a number of farms. As they got closer to Therium, the number of farms steadily began to increase, and the end of the day they reached Therium's Vanguard, a small lodge built specifically to accommodate people who came to Therium from the Quarry Path and the Endless Woods, and give them a more-or-less comfortable night's rest.

The lodge wasn't the most popular destination, as most people elected to continue riding for a couple more hours to make it to Therium itself, but Edgar said it was best to spend the night here, because that way he could send a messenger ahead to make the final preparations for Evelyn's arrival the next day, wasting as little time as possible for her future teammates.

When Evelyn got up that morning, she was incredibly excited. This was it. In just a few hours, she'd finally see Therium for the first time. What would it be like?

As they drew ever closer to the city, the number of farms continued to increase. These farms were all much bigger than

Evelyn was used to seeing around Bastion, and the fields were tended by a far larger number of people.

“A lot of these farms are communal,” Edgar explained as they rode between the fields. “There simply isn’t enough room for everyone to have their own extensive farms, and thus the fields are divided up among the farmers.” He grimaced. “We have our fair share of disputes over the fields, as you can imagine, but there haven’t been any deaths in a while. Harvest Festival is fantastic here, though, just you wait.”

The first thing Evelyn saw of Therium was its huge wall. They had just reached the top of one of the slightly higher hills in the area, and now, for the first time, Evelyn saw Sceldrum’s capital in front of her. The wall was immense. Built out of massive blocks of gray stone, the wall seemed to fill the entire horizon with its width, and it was higher than anything Evelyn had ever seen.

“It’s thirty meters high, eight meters wide, and around seven-thousand-five-hundred meters around,” Edgar said. “Over fifty thousand people live here and in the surrounding area, and many more pass through here every day on trade voyages to and from the Empire and from the other cities in Sceldrum.”

Evelyn’s mind reeled from the numbers. She couldn’t imagine so many people living so close together. She could see the many guard towers along the wall, each topped with catapults and ballistae. She could see several gates along the curvature of the wall, but the one she and the others were riding towards was the biggest by far. It looked big enough for someone to pull an entire house through it. Maybe not Evelyn and Emily’s farm, but certainly one of the houses in Bastion.

The guards stationed at the gate were clad in full plate. It wasn’t Scintellian steel, but it looked a lot more impressive than the disheveled mail the guards in Bastion usually wore, on those rare days they could be bothered to put on any armor at all. Upon seeing the approaching Knights, they immediately stood at attention.

Evelyn noticed that the gate through which they rode had three separate portcullises, a frankly ridiculous number. Each was made of thick, black iron with nasty looking spikes at the bottom.

And then, they were through, and in the main street of Therium. Unlike in Bastion, this street began to branch almost immediately, but that wasn't what Evelyn noticed first.

The buildings here were far higher than those in Bastion. In some places, elaborate walkways had been constructed between the higher levels of the buildings, and it was only upon noticing the walkways that Evelyn realized that the city seemed to have an entire second layer to it, some ten meters off the ground. The walkways and their supports were all very ornate and beautifully rounded off, displaying masonry the likes of which Evelyn had never seen. The buildings as well contained intricate, swirling details in their stonework, which seamlessly went from building to building, even across the stones which made up the very street on which they rode.

But more than the size or the architecture, Evelyn was stunned by the sheer number of people in the streets. There were people on foot, on horseback, on wagons, and every single one of them seemed to be entirely focused on reaching their destination, fully ignoring the people around them. No one greeted one another, like the people in Bastion and even Corferia generally did.

"This street features some of the more expensive stores in Therium," Edgar said as they slowly rode through the street, stuck behind a wagon drawn by two large oxen. Whatever lay in the back of the wagon was covered by a plain, white canvas, but it appeared to be very heavy, and the wheels of the wagon bent outward at an angle just short of worrying.

"Since this is the main gate, many merchants try to sell their wares here to all passersby, but because people began to advertise their wares in front of stores they don't own, it's now forbidden to stand outside and advertise. People have to go into a store of their own volition now. Of course, the *really* expensive

stores, selling mainly jewelry, finery, and fancy food, can be found in the Royal District in the center of the city. That's where we're headed."

Evelyn nodded wordlessly, trying to take everything in. It was incredibly confusing trying to look at two layers of city at once, but the people of Therium seemed entirely unfazed by the architectural marvel in which they lived. Even the smaller streets that branched off from the main road were still wider than Bastion's main street, and even these had elaborate walkways constructed above them. At nearly every street corner, there were intricate staircases to allow people to ascend to the higher levels.

Every interaction that Evelyn could see that wasn't some sort of business transaction seemed to be a fight. It was just mad. Among the people on the streets were many guards, but they didn't bother to separate the fighting people, or even to keep an eye on the situation. They seemed to be looking for different things altogether, things far more important than some people beating each other's faces in.

Every now and then, the riders passed streets that were just as wide as the main road they were on.

"These wider roads serve to separate the districts," Edgar explained. "Therium is built a bit like a wagon wheel. The center of the wheel, where it joins the axle, is the Royal District. Then you have the areas between each spoke of the wheel, which form city districts. The concentric rings that run through these districts separate the blocks by relative wealth... more or less."

He smiled apologetically. "This city was designed by the Imperials and built by the Sceldrians. Since the Imperials haven't been here for a *long* time, their original intentions have disappeared for the most part. While the residences and stores closer to the Royal District still tend to be more expensive, and each district still tends to have an overall function, each district has a little bit of everything else as well. Therium is chaotic, but you'll get the hang of it quickly enough,

I promise you.”

Evelyn doubted that, having not even really understood Edgar’s explanation all that well, but she decided not to mention that and just take Edgar’s word for it for the time being.

Eventually, Evelyn, Edgar, and the Knights came upon another wall. This one was much lower than the outer wall, standing maybe half as high. It wasn’t even as high as some of the buildings opposite the road from it. It also featured only a single portcullis in the middle of it.

“Evelyn, welcome to the Royal District,” Edgar said as they rode through the gate.

This gate was guarded by two Royal Knights, each clad in full Scintellian plate like Lyndon and the others. They eyed Evelyn suspiciously when they saw her, but they stood at attention and let the group pass without comment.

The Royal District was far less noisy and crowded than the rest of Therium had been. The buildings and streets were even more ornate here, with statues that looked like fully armored Royal Knights lining the street at regular intervals.

“Every building here belongs to the Royal Knights in some capacity,” Lyndon said, taking over from Edgar as the one to introduce Evelyn to Therium’s intricacies. “The buildings here at the outside of the Royal District are mainly stores. While everyone is welcome to shop here, you need to be very wealthy to afford the goods and services that are being sold here. The owners, by and large, are retired Knights, or craftsmen who have so impressed either a Knight or the King that they’ve been invited to come here. You can’t even open a store here without first being screened and approved by either me or Edgar. It’s a restriction put in place so that the Royal Knights can enjoy the rewards they earn by giving twenty years or more of their life to the service of the King.”

He stopped talking for a moment to let Evelyn look at some of the stores. At that moment, they were just riding past a jewelry store. Some of the pieces Evelyn could see on the stand outside looked absolutely incredible, featuring many highly



polished metals and gemstones. Wearing such a thing would make someone a prime target for Nameless thieves, but it would also show beyond doubt that you were rich and had done well for yourself. As beautiful as the jewelry looked, though, it didn't look very practical, and Evelyn couldn't really picture herself wearing any of it.

"Deeper into the District are the smithies where all the Scintellian steel plate in Sceldrum is produced, as well as the barracks of the Royal Knights. Well, I say 'barracks', but really they're more like massive housing complexes. All the companies have their own blocks, while the unsorted children live in the buildings closest to the castle. The educational facilities, armorers, sparring halls, and bathhouses are also located within each company's block, as well as stables for the personal mounts. The farriers and general stables are on the other side of the castle," Lyndon said as they rode on.

Evelyn tried to remember everything Lyndon and Edgar told her, but already she was beginning to mix things up in her head. It was all so much to take in, and for a brief moment she wondered if coming here had been a mistake. She couldn't even remember the layout of the city!

Lyndon apparently saw the stress in her face, because he laughed and said, "Don't worry. No one gets Therium when they first get here. You'll be fine. Look up ahead, there's the castle."

Evelyn looked in the direction Lyndon was pointing. The castle was a massive building, its square shape contrasting heavily with the rounded shapes of nearly every other building she'd seen in Therium thus far. Its walls were made out of a darker stone than the city walls had been. Four towers, each dark and forbidding, had been placed at the corners of the wall. Walkways lined with merlons extended between the towers. On each tower, there was a stand bearing the deep blue banner of Sceldrum. It occurred to Evelyn that this was the first time she'd seen the banner so far, even though Therium was the capital city. Next to the entrance of the castle, a stable had been built. It was nearly as big as the stable at Emily and

Evelyn's farm, but it appeared to be nearly empty. Evelyn only saw three horses in it.

"This is the stable for the King and his retinue," Edgar said. "We'll leave our horses here for now while I take care of some things. After that, Harold will take you to Tiger Company's barracks where you'll be meeting your teammates." He smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid they probably won't really be in a good mood. They haven't been allowed out today because I want them to meet you first."

Evelyn said nothing. The odds of her new teammates liking her had already been low, according to Derrick and Emily, but now they were basically nonexistent. She felt a wave of pinpricks down her back as her heartrate spiked. Her mouth was getting dry. Eventually, just to show Edgar she'd heard him, she gave a single nod.

They stabled the horses, Evelyn making sure that Curtana was as far away from the three strange horses as possible to prevent any problems, then walked through the ornate wooden doors into the main hall of the castle. It was dark there, despite the many small windows in the thick walls. The hall was large, and featured a deep blue carpet that led straight to an ornate throne on a dais in front of the center of the far wall, directly beneath a series of stained-glass windows in various shades of blue, from dark at the top to so light it was almost transparent at the bottom. Next to the throne was a smaller, though still comfortable-looking, chair. The stones of the floor were the same kind of dark stone that made up the outer walls. Combined with the bluish light that fell in through the windows and the few chandeliers on the high ceiling, it gave the castle a rather eerie vibe. On either side of the throne, there were doors.

Edgar told Evelyn to wait for a moment, then walked through the left door. Evelyn glanced at Lyndon, then at Redford, Irving, and Tanner. All of them gave her small nods, and Lyndon even gave her a small, encouraging smile, which Evelyn appreciated all the more because of his initial reluctance for Evelyn to

come here at all.

Not much later, Edgar returned, followed by a tall, broad-shouldered man with dark hair and deep, dark eyes.

“Evelyn of Corferia, my name is Harold of Therium. As of this moment, you are my apprentice in Tiger Company. The circumstances of your joining us are unusual, and as such the taking of the oath will not take place right away. It will instead happen tomorrow evening, after supper. Follow me. I will take you to meet your new team.”

Without waiting for a reply from Evelyn, Harold began to stride outside. Evelyn looked from Harold to Edgar in a moment of confusion, and Edgar pointed at Harold.

Evelyn nodded, quickly raised her hand in greeting, and then ran after Harold.

“Evelyn, there will be no running unless I tell you to,” he said curtly when she slowed down next to him.

“Okay,” Evelyn replied.

“You will answer me with ‘Yes, Harold,’” Harold said sternly.

“Yes, Harold,” Evelyn said quickly. Was she really messing up already?! This was going to be a long day, at this rate.

Once outside, they immediately headed into the stable. Evelyn quickly untied Curtana and mounted her. From the corner of her eye, she could see Harold looking at her and she turned to face him. His eyes narrowed a bit when he saw her looking at him, but he said nothing as he mounted his own horse, a large, brown courser.

“Follow me,” he said. Evelyn followed him wordlessly, unsure of whether or not she was supposed to say ‘yes, Harold’ in this particular case.

In silence he led Evelyn through a couple of streets. Evelyn tried to memorize the route, but after a few turns she decided it didn’t matter: the castle was easy enough to find anyway.

Eventually, Harold stopped next to a stable filled with horses of all shapes and sizes. “These are the mounts of Tiger Company. Your year’s section of the stable is Five. Stable your

mount and then come with me,” he said.

*He really doesn't mince words, does he?* Evelyn thought as she looked for a place to stable Curtana.

To her great relief, the section at least seemed to have one small stable per horse, so Curtana wouldn't have to share her space with any strange horses.

Though her faithful mount was a bit restless when Evelyn led her into this strange stable filled with unknown scents, sounds, and sights, she calmed down when Evelyn soothingly patted her and slowly fed her one of her last carrots. She would have to find some more in the days to come.

“Leave your gear for now. You will have time to retrieve it later,” Harold said.

“Yes, Harold,” Evelyn said, then quickly joined him as he walked outside, and headed through the thick double doors into the building adjacent to the stable.

They strode through a long hallway. Though the same kind of carpet was on the floor here as in the main hall of the castle, the windows were much larger and made of regular glass, giving this hallway a much more vibrant look. Eventually, Harold stopped in front of a large door marked with an ornate ‘5’.

“These are your barracks. Go in and acquaint yourself with your teammates. You will be retrieved for supper, make sure to have all of your things moved to the barracks before then. Dismissed.”

Without saying another word, Harold strode away.

*Supper? It's not even lunch time yet...* Evelyn thought as she watched him go.

After Harold had rounded a corner and disappeared from sight, Evelyn faced the door and took a deep breath. This was it. She was finally going to meet the people she'd be spending the next fifteen years with. She turned the handle, opened up the door, and stepped inside.