

# THE TRAITOR'S HEIR

# THE TRAITOR'S HEIR

Every man has a destiny. His is to betray.

*THE KNIGHT OF ELDARAN*  
BOOK 1

ANNA THAYER



LION FICTION

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To  
*The three who were there from the beginning:*  
*Esther, a faithful bookkeeper; Jonathan, a tireless consigliere; and*  
*Thea, a first-rate “guinea pig”*  
*For your friendship, enthusiasm, and words of courage, my thanks!*

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# MAP OF THE RIVER REALM AND ITS WORLD

THE LAND  
OF THE  
SEVEN SONS



THE  
MERCHANT  
STATES

SKAANIA

LAMIGLIA

ETRAIA

ANOURA

LUSARILIA

GALITHIA

KARLIETTUIA

THE  
RIVER  
REALM

BREKSTIA

CALATIA

MARBORSTIA

GIBLIRIA

MARUKSOSHYK

LIBELSHA

MARBOCIA

DIADOGUS

QUYOSHTANATE

JARMASARIQ

FUERIA

SIB'LEMIA

PLATANIA

THE SOUTHERN WASTES





GALITHIA

THE LAND  
OF THE  
SEVEN SONS



sspd, Gce

SABLEMAR  
PROVINCE

SCARMOST  
PROVINCE

WAKERBAIN  
PROVINCE

DUNWAY  
PROVINCE

Brightwood

Hidden Hall

Dunthruik

Hidden Village

Pinewood

SOUTHDAEL  
PROVINCE

Ashford  
Ridge

SINGSWARD  
PROVINCE

Backwater

GRENE FELD  
PROVINCE

Edesfield

EDESFIELD  
PROVINCE

Second Camp

ALDERWOOD  
PROVINCE

EARLSMEAD  
PROVINCE

KERLIA  
PROVINCE

KANTOCH-HEATH  
PROVINCE

THE WEST  
BANK

RIVER REALM

ORLESTONE  
PROVINCE

KERGRIET-MERLOT  
PROVINCE

BRIDGE  
-WATER  
PROVINCE

BARROWS GATE  
PROVINCE

WORTHISTOWE  
PROVINCE

HASELUNE  
PROVINCE

FOLLICASTLE  
PROVINCE

BEREFORT  
PROVINCE

OKEFORD  
PROVINCE

LARKBURY  
PROVINCE

ARUDIA  
PROVINCE

SHADEBOUNE  
PROVINCE

EASTLEWE  
PROVINCE

TALLENDOR  
PROVINCE

GIBLIRIA

The Source

TUNGOL  
PROVINCE

ESCHERBRUCK  
PROVINCE

ADLERBROCK  
PROVINCE

MINER REGIONS

MARBORISTIA

MARBOČIA

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## THE TRAITOR'S HEIR

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Lastly, I thank my amazing and loving husband, Justin, whose heart for story and eucatastrophe beats in time with mine.

*Leith: Two ways you see, each from the other parts.  
The one with broken stones is packed, and briars  
That rend and grotts that swift devour a man;  
The other upward leads. Though toilsome steps  
They be at first its region is the sun.  
This is no choice! These cannot mingled go.  
Perhaps before this day you might plead blind  
But the dread wheel has turned, and choose you must.*

*Tobias: O cursed all-cleaving soul!  
If I but knew I would not tarry more.*

***The Standard Won,  
The River Poet***

## PROLOGUE

Darkness smothered the valleys and lurked in the curves of the River, shrouding the light of every star.

The slopes around Edesfield were marked with trees that surrendered their leaves to the wind in weeping moans. Beyond them, what had once been a mighty tower lay impotent in ruins. The trees spread blackly up towards it.

Groups of torches moved through the tower copses, combing fiercely back and forth across the muddy woodland. But the lights did not mark every man in the valley that night.

One felt the wind pulling at his face as he moved through the treeline. Branches clawed his face; roots and weeds clutched at his ankles like snakes. The glint of torches was behind him, casting an eerie glow across the trunks of the trees: pillars of harsh, reddened stone.

His hand slipped on the grizzled bark; he drew his fingers up to his face and tasted blood.

He spat it out. "Light!" he called softly.

A torchbearer came across the dell towards him, struggling not to sink in the mud. A second man came with him, with dark, tousled hair and eyes that glinted keenly under the torchlight. Both wore the Gauntlet's red uniform and had cloaks thrown over them to ward off the September chill.

The second man gave him a small smile. "I bring you light, Mr Goodman."

"Thank you, Mr Kentigern, sir."

"Report."



Cadet Goodman held forward his bloodied hand. The dark-haired lieutenant gestured and at his command the light was directed towards the tree. Goodman winced as the heat of the torch passed his face.

The light showed what he had known it would; blood on the bark, smeared in part by his hand and in part by the flight of the hunted man who had left it there.

The lieutenant turned to the torchbearer. "Fan along this treeline. Concentrate on the north ridge."

The torchbearer swept off; the dell receded into tombed blackness.

The cadet turned to his lieutenant. "He's making for the River?"

A flash of moonlight illuminated the lieutenant's face for a moment, showing a smile. "That he is. Our fleeing friend will be distraught when he finds that we know it!"

Together they moved to the eaves of the treeline. Goodman heard shouts farther up the hillside and saw the flicker of torches fanning out across the stretches of woods. In the heart of the valley below, torchlight sharply figured a rider in black: Lord Penrith. Even with the distance between them, the sight of the Hand chilled Goodman to his marrow. A man in Gauntlet uniform rode beside the Hand; lord and captain surveyed fields and woodland with grim faces.

Goodman swallowed in a constricted throat and glanced at the lieutenant. "What kind of man are we hunting, Ladomer?"

"Concentrate on the matter in hand, Eamon," the lieutenant answered. "You can ask Lord Penrith in person tomorrow, if the mood takes you."

Goodman did not know whether to shiver or laugh. "Do you think me mad?"

"I have known you for far too long, Eamon Goodman, to think otherwise." Suddenly the lieutenant gestured to the trees where another Gauntlet man stood. "Move into the line here with Spencing." His voice had taken on a tone of crisp command. "Barns and Ilwaine will be to your right and left. I want this bastard found, Mr Goodman; so do Captain Belaal and Lord Penrith."

"Yes, sir." Goodman did not hesitate a moment before going into the trees.

Ensign Spencing looked him over with distaste.

"You're with me?"

"Lieutenant's orders, sir," Goodman returned sharply.

"Just don't make an idiot of yourself, Goodman," Spencing growled.

Goodman didn't answer him; they were already moving. Briars snatched at him as they passed into the line of men trying to force their quarry to surface. There were torches to his left and right, but light was poor; his best sense of direction came from the sounds of Spencing's movement.

Suddenly he heard a heavy thud somewhere to his left. He stopped; Spencing glowered back at him.

"The line is moving, Goodman!"

"I heard something," Goodman pinned all his sense on the dark.

"You heard nothing," Spencing spat. "We have orders to search the ridge. The done thing with orders, Mr Goodman, is to carry them out!"

The noise again. What good would it be to follow orders and lose the fugitive?

Impulse shot through his limbs.

"Goodman—!"

He didn't hear the rest but plunged into the thorny thickness of the trees, pushing on through ankle-deep mud and stinging branches. He knew what he had heard.

He came suddenly through the trees into a clearing and stopped. The torchlight was distant.

He heard someone drawing breath.

The wind swept through the trees and a stroke of moonlight illuminated the mud. It showed deep footprints and the shape of a man caved in the roots of a tree. The man clutched at his arm; blood flowed about his fingertips, weaving dark threads in torn clothes.

For a moment Goodman simply stared. Was this bloody wretch the man they had been hunting for so many hours?

It did not matter. He surged towards the fugitive, hand flying to his dagger. As the cadet crossed the clearing the fugitive seemed to see him for the first time; his face went white.

"No –"

Goodman seized the man's throat and hauled him bodily to his feet.

Goodman smiled. "The hunt is up," he said. But it wasn't.

Someone rushed at him from behind; the unexpected force of the impact shocked through him. A sudden arm latched about his throat.

With a cry he struck at it with his dagger. He drew blood. But before he could follow up the blow, his arm was seized and wrenched harshly backwards.

The fugitive fell from his grip. Goodman spun back and to one side, trying to free himself. He was too slow; both his arms were caught and driven up behind him, wresting his dagger from his hand. He saw the glint of his blade, a shrinking shard of the moon as it disappeared into the trees.

A blow forced him to his knees and he was thrown to the ground; mud plastered his ears and mouth.

He heard men speaking softly to the wounded man. He knew there was torchlight nearby and would have struggled wildly to make a noise – but it was as much as he could do to breathe. Some of his captors disappeared into the woods; they were moving south.

South!

The hiss of a blade being unsheathed. He stiffened. His heart lay in his throat.

Strong hands seized his. He lay still, fearing the worst; but the new hands violently bound his own together.

"Lucky little Glove!" laughed a snide voice. Its keeper delivered him a belittling pat on the shoulder before shoving his face down.

Goodman heard the last of the men vanish as he writhed and gasped in the mud. He did not think about how nearly he had lost his life, nor did he wonder how it had been spared; all he could

think was how easily the men would slip through the Gauntlet's northward-roaming line.

Driving his hands into the mud he slipped and slid them together, trying to escape the ropes. He lost both gloves in the process but eventually drew them free. Shivering with cold and rage he tore his hands across his face, peeling mud from his eyes.

The fugitives were gone.

Staggering to his feet, not stopping to recover gloves or dagger, or to wonder where Spencing was or whether he should return to him, he turned and hurtled through the trees.

His feet brought him swiftly back to the fields. The lines still combed the hillside, moving north towards the River. With a cry of immense frustration, he ran on.

His lieutenant, Ladomer Kentigern, stood with Captain Belaál and Lord Penrith. He could not imagine how he looked to them, a mud-spattered cadet racing madly across the field, but he knew only too well how they would look on him when he delivered his news.

He tripped to a slipping halt before them, only just remembering to bow before Lord Penrith, the Master's chosen Hand over the town and province of Edesfield.

"His glory," Goodman panted. At least while he bowed he did not have to meet their eyes.

"Mr Goodman." Captain Belaál's voice was icy as the biting wind.

"The fugitive, sir," he spluttered, gesturing wildly behind him. "He's aided, he's gone south."

"South?" Belaál repeated harshly, incredulous. The faces of both Hand and lieutenant echoed it.

"I swear it, sir!"

"Leave your swearing until tomorrow, Goodman," the captain retorted. "That's if any of you will merit the swearing." Sensing his displeasure, his horse fretted unevenly. The captain drew his reins tightly into his hand. "By your leave, Lord Penrith, I will redirect search parties immediately."

The Hand nodded silently. With an angry grunt Belaál wheeled

his horse to the side and spurred it towards the northward-roving torches.

Goodman's chest was still heaving as the Hand's gaze settled darkly on him.

"You let him escape."

Goodman blinked hard. "My lord, I was taken by surprise and –"

"Taken by surprise?" the Hand replied contemptuously. "How could that be so, when you were searching in pairs? Unless you disobeyed an order."

Goodman stopped. He had – and with good reason. But he could hardly say that to the Hand.

"Did you disobey an order?" The Hand's tone had grown as pitch as the night about him.

"My lord –"

Ladomer flashed him a warning look.

Goodman quailed. He swallowed hard. "Yes, my lord."

There was an agonizing silence.

"Name, cadet," Penrith commanded.

"Eamon Goodman, my lord." He did not meet the Hand's gaze; he did not dare.

The Hand raised a mocking eyebrow. "The bookbinder's boy?"

Goodman felt Ladomer Kentigern's gaze on him, commanding him not to speak out of turn; he obeyed it. "Yes, my lord."

"So, after three years of cadet training, you are woefully vulnerable to surprise and are incapable of obeying orders? You are a disgrace to your dead father, to yourself, and to your captain, Cadet Goodman," the Hand spat. "You'll be lucky to swear tomorrow."

"Yes, my lord," the cadet answered. It took all his will to keep insolence from his voice. They could not take his swearing from him! He had worked so hard...

"Where's your dagger?"

Goodman looked up. The Hand's gaze pierced him; he knew how condemning his reply would be.

"I don't know, my lord," he said at last.

"I can see that gauntlet work is best left to the Gauntlet," he hissed. His ire was crushing. "You're of no further use here, cadet. You will not present yourself at College until you've found your dagger."

Goodman gaped. Quivering in every limb, he bowed low. "Yes, my lord."

The Hand turned to follow Captain Belaal. Goodman remained bowed until the sound and feel of hoof-beats receded. He was reeling as he straightened; breath fled from him in ragged bursts.

A firm, kind touch alighted on his shoulder. "Are you hurt, Eamon?" Ladomer asked.

Eamon turned his stinging eyes out over the fields and hills. "No," he answered as the lights passed by.

# CHAPTER I

**I**t was a September morning in the 532nd year of the Master's throne. In distant fields the sun was rising, stirring all the world to gold, the sky so clear and crisp that an upward glance might yet catch sight of hidden stars.

But Eamon had eyes for none of it; all his look and thought was bent fastidiously on the filthy dagger in his hands. With a grim sigh he tried to scrape more mud from the details of the small hilt; he had not yet dared to assess the state of his boots or uniform. As he scrubbed furiously at the weapon fatigue sapped his limbs.

For over five hundred years the River Realm had lain in the charge of the Master and, from Dunthruik – the city that had always guarded the river-mouth – the Master's power had kept the land strong against its enemies. To the north, south, and, across the sea, the west lived merchant-lords with whom a grudging peace was sometimes granted by trade; to the east in the land of the Seven Sons roamed strange lordlings who were little more than inbred, misfit chieftains. The Master had held against them and their like and, since the River Realm had been bathed in the glory that emanated from the Master's throne, none had dared to come across the mountains from Istanaria.

The strength and endurance of that power was seen in the Master's Hands and in the Gauntlet, the ancient and noble legion of soldiers that kept his law. To bear their uniform was to be marked as the Master's own, and to serve him was the greatest honour that the River Realm could afford. Though there were regional militia forces across the land it was to the Gauntlet that men aspired: this



was the Master's eyes and ears, his blade and blood. To run them was a dangerous business indeed.

There were few young men who did not dream of setting their hands in the Master's Gauntlet. Training was long, arduous, and fierce; it was not uncommon for cadets to be killed in their extensive preparation, but the families of such men were well honoured. Men who glorified the Master in the Gauntlet guaranteed honour for themselves and for their heirs; the exceptional were promoted and made draybants and captains, and some were taken from the Gauntlet's ranks to join the Hands.

For most, dreams of the Gauntlet were enough. Many young men sought to realize them, and Cadet Eamon Goodman of Edesfield was no exception. He had joined the Gauntlet later than most others, and at twenty-three he was one of the oldest cadets that hoped to take their oath that day in Edesfield province.

But as he sat in the yard of the smithy where he lived, Eamon despaired of it. He had sold his hope in a futile act the night before. He had lost everything with it. How could he have been such a fool? "Eamon?"

A young woman was passing the yard. She had auburn hair, pulled back in loose tresses. As he met her gaze her look grew worried. He realized that his pale face was stained with tears.

"Good morning," he tried, hoping that his tone might mask what his face could not, but his voice sounded frail and hopeless even to himself. He rubbed a dirty hand across aching eyes.

"I've been looking for you since last night." His friend sat down on the wall beside him. As she cocked her head at him her auburn hair flashed like gold in the light. "Have you slept at all?"

He looked at her sullenly. "No." He fell silent, staring angrily at his dagger.

"Eamon?" she prompted. "What happened?"

"What happened?" He looked at her bitterly, unable to form words. "I ruined everything, Aeryn!" he spat at last. "That's what happened!" He flung the dagger aside, willing it to disintegrate.

Aeryn didn't flinch. "I don't believe that."

Eamon looked at her incredulously. "They're not going to let me swear!"

His words hung in the air. "That's not the drying of the River," Aeryn replied gently.

"Not the drying of the River?" Eamon could only stare at her. "How can you say that? You know how much this means to me!" he cried, pointing to his uniform, its distinctive Gauntlet red barely visible between rips and mud. Eamon let out a cry of disgust.

"I know what you think joining the Gauntlet means," Aeryn told him.

"Do you? Put yourself in my place for a moment, Aeryn!"

"Eamon –"

"You know this is all I've ever wanted!"

Aeryn pursed her lips. "That's not true, Eamon. I've lost count of the number of times that you told me your mother wanted you to go to the university."

"Don't bring *her* into this, Aeryn!" Eamon snapped. "She's been dead for more than a decade; if she was alive I'd still be in Dunthruik, not this forsaken backwater!"

"I'm just saying that it hasn't always been your dream," Aeryn placated.

Eamon glared at her. "How would *you* know? How could I go to the Gauntlet when my father was alone? How could I even talk about it?" He gripped his dagger hard. "He needed me. He wanted me to learn his trade. And we got by without dreams."

Aeryn laughed. "You more than got by, Eamon! You loved it. The smell and the feel of the books, the taste of story on your tongue? Your father practically had to force you to come and play with other children; all you ever wanted to do was read! That was how I first met you – sobbing, because he had taken your books away and sent you outside." Her eyes shone. "Don't you remember?"

Eamon did not answer her. He remembered. The books had seemed his only comfort in a world that had shorn him of home

and mother in a night. He had loved them. He had loved sharing them with his father.

"Yes, I loved it. I loved being the bookbinder's son – even after my father died. I was still a boy, but I scraped by. Perhaps I would have been happy binding books all my days, despite my struggle to buy bread. But the fire finished it all."

She looked at him sadly. "I know –"

"No, Aeryn," he retorted. "You don't. My father and his books were all that I had left. Everything I loved, everything I had worked for, my home and my livelihood..."

Aeryn touched his hand. "You still had hope."

Eamon scoffed angrily. "Being taken in by a kind-hearted smith and given work isn't hope, Aeryn. The Gauntlet was my hope – a chance to do something better, be someone better. A chance to start again. It's been taken from me, just like everything else." He could not meet her gaze. "I've been forbidden to swear."

Aeryn watched him hard for a moment. "What happened last night?"

He paused, and suddenly he was pushing through the trees, the smell of blood and fire in his nostrils.

"You want to know what happened to me?" he said. "I was sent to hunt for a man in the woods and I disobeyed an order to search in groups. I found the fugitive and I lost him. He got away from me and nobody caught him. And because I brought the news of his escape to Captain Belaal and Lord Penrith, and lost my dagger in the process – thus making an idiot of myself – *they won't let me swear.*" His hands began to shake. "I've made a fool of myself and I've lost everything," he said bitterly, "as I always do."

Gently, Aeryn reached across and touched his arm. "You're not a fool, Eamon," she said. "If Hughan were here, he'd say the same."

"How do you know what he would say?" Eamon retorted.

"You used to listen to him," Aeryn answered.

"Yes," Eamon said, and fresh, wrathful tears leapt into his eyes. "But Hughan's been dead for eight years! For Master's sake, Aeryn!"

Aeryn looked at him strangely. "Don't swear by him."

"Don't start with that," Eamon snapped.

"Hughan never thought the Gauntlet was where you should be," Aeryn said quietly.

"Hughan's *dead!*" Eamon cried, and then fell silent. The memory of Hughan stung at him in the long quiet. He pressed his hands into his eyes. "Ladomer thought I could do it," he whispered. "He told me I could do it..."

"Ladomer is a Gauntlet officer," Aeryn pointed out. "Isn't it possible that his opinion is biased?"

"He was my friend long before he was my officer," Eamon answered. It had been Ladomer who had finally convinced him that it was not too late to try for the Gauntlet, and Ladomer who had encouraged him, guiding him through every part of his difficult training. "Ladomer knows me, Aeryn."

"So do I."

As Eamon looked across at her injured face, some of his anger ebbed away.

"I'm sorry, Aeryn," he said at last. "I didn't mean to get so angry with you. It's just..."

There was a pause. "I know what you've been through, Eamon," Aeryn told him, "and I know how much you have longed for this day, and how much of your hope you've set on it. But I don't believe for a moment that you are lost if you don't swear. Something greater might come of it."

"Like what?"

Aeryn shrugged. "I don't know," she said, "but something will come. It always has before."

Eamon drew a deep breath. He looked down at the patches of black beneath the caked layers of mud on his boots, then back to Aeryn. He wondered whether she might be right.

"I expect I look like a beast," he exhaled miserably, though not quite as miserably as before.

Aeryn brushed some of the dirt from his sleeves. "Red isn't your

colour," she said with a smile.

"Maybe," Eamon murmured.

They sat together in silence, the just peeking over the walls of the yard. The air chimed with the sound of the smith at work.

Eamon heard approaching footsteps. He blinked against the light. It wasn't until the man stopped right in front of him that Eamon recognized him.

"I wasn't sure whether you'd be here or still playing at wraith in the woods," the man said.

"I'm here," Eamon answered, somewhat wistfully.

"To judge by the colour of you, I reckon that you'd make a good wraith."

"Thank you, sir," he said sarcastically.

"You found it?"

Eamon nodded and pointed to the muddy thing on the ground. With a laugh, Ladomer picked up the discarded blade.

"I'm impressed," he said, flicking it pensively back and forth across his hands. He smiled. "Very impressed, and glad, too; I won't have to lend you mine."

"Lend me yours?" Eamon looked at him, confused. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Because I wouldn't want you to go and see the captain without one."

Eamon glanced at Aeryn; she shook her head blankly.

"You know far too well that I'm not going to see the captain," Eamon told him.

Ladomer sighed and shook his head. "Eamon, Eamon! When are you going to learn that I know a good many more things than you do?" With a small grin Ladomer came and perched on the wall at Eamon's other side. "Captain Belaal has asked to see you."

"Asked to see me?" Eamon snorted bitterly. "And why might that be? So that he can dress me down a little more?"

"Whence all this discouragement?" Ladomer laughed, laying his hand grandly on Eamon's shoulder. "Anyone would think that you

weren't going to swear today!"

Eamon shook Ladomer's hand away. "Were you even listening when Lord Penrith raked me?" he asked belligerently.

"Yes."

"Then you already know that I'm not going to swear!"

"Were you even listening when your lieutenant said that he knows more than you do?"

"Yes –"

"Captain Belaal wants to see you," Ladomer told him, "and he's going to ask you if you're prepared to swear."

Eamon gaped. "*What?*"

"Wake up, Ratbag!" Ladomer laughed, tapping Eamon's forehead like a door. "They want you to swear!"

"But –" Eamon stared at him. "But Lord Penrith –"

"– has clearly changed his mind."

"I don't understand –"

"Nothing new there! Do you honestly think you're the only cadet who has ever been threatened with revoked swearing?" Ladomer asked. "You're just the kind of man the Gauntlet wants: able and keen to serve! At least that is what I, biased as I am, think. Captain Belaal seems to think so, too, because he said that he wanted to see you in an hour. Of course," he added, pressing the dagger into Eamon's hands, "it *has* taken me a quarter of an hour to find you, which doesn't leave you much time to get cleaned up."

The thought snapped Eamon out of his trance like a thunderclap. "It doesn't!" he yelped, and leapt to his feet.