

# EVERMIST

*A Tale of The New Universe*

By

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## Chapter One

Elias folded his good white shirt and placed it in the duffel atop his other worldly possessions he was allowed to take with him; two pairs of pants - one black, one dark blue, small clothes and undershirts, three pair of long underwear his mother had made special for the trip, two long, woolen shirts and the jackets to match the pants, the slingshot he'd carved from the tree branch that had caught his eye as being 'perfect' when he was only ten years old, all three books that he had bought with his own money, and the letters from his summer away from Anise tucked away with a red ribbon to keep them together and safe. For Induction today, he wore the gray suit with his black shirt. He knew he'd be issued a uniform as soon as he arrived, but he still wanted to look presentable at the gates.

A small part of his mind wondered how many other young men showing up today could boast three coats and the pants to match. He didn't think there would be very many, if any at all.

Nor would many manage a purse with two golds, twelve silvers and forty-seven coppers. The treasure constituted all the money he had in the world and he didn't know if he'd need it where he was going or not, but he wanted it with him just the same.

A crash at his door announced the arrival of Jaina, her red curls a tangled mass as she bounded in without so much as a knock, legs pumping as she kicked the yellow, frilly dress she wore. She looked a thunderhead, face flushed and hands balled into fists at her sides. Her eyes were red and puffy, and he knew she'd been crying again.

"Talk to Father, Elias! He has to listen to you! He has to!"

Ah. She'd been talking to Father again. No doubt he'd switched her for it as

well. Normally, she'd have bounded in here and bounced onto the bed, but instead she stood just inside the door fidgeting. Oh yes, she'd been switched. He knew that fidget all too well.

Elias sighed, turning back to the duffel and cinching it closed, his eyes straying to what lay wrapped in a leather holster on his bed. A gun. And this was no ordinary gun - this was a rifle. A repeater as well. With this he could fire a dozen shots without having to reload - important that. The inlaid stock, the silver inset with his initials, 'E S R' for Elias sanRian - oh yes, this was as fine a weapon as he'd ever seen and had surely never dreamt of owning such a thing. Yet here it was, with his initials inlaid on the stock in silver as if to shout to the world that he came from a wealthy family.

One that would not buy out his Conscription. It marked him as something; what, he wasn't certain. A failure? A bastard son? Who knew how the story would go, but a story there would be and whether or not it hindered or helped him to survive was yet to be seen.

The saber lay next to the rifle, fit snugly in the scabbard his mother had commissioned for him with its intricate design - dragons battling each other up one side and back down the other. He was almost certain his mother had been responsible for both weapons and not just the saber, but she claimed only the one and not the other. His father had presented him with the rifle just after dinner, his mother the saber, and neither looked very happy about it. She disagreed with this whole mess, but he knew his father would not budge once a decision had been made, and he'd made up his mind about this.

"Father doesn't listen, Jaina. He speaks and other people listen. We've argued enough. There's nothing left to say."

Suddenly she was beside him, eyes staring down at the rifle still wrapped in leather. "It's not every day Father gives you a gun..."

"He has a guilty conscious, and a wife who does not let him rest when she thinks him wrong."

Jaina stared daggers at him. "Why must you make it more difficult?!"

Jaina was the baby in the family, only ten years old, but far too smart and mature for her age. He'd always said so. They never let her be a child and yet insisted on dressing her up like some doll all in lace and frill, hair curled and lips painted. Nor had they let Ari be a child with all their rules - they drilled into both of them a sense of honor and duty that had always grated on him and he feared it would crush his siblings once he was gone. Any attempt to discuss it, though, was met with harsh words and the strap if he were too loose with his tongue.

"I don't think it's very fair that you have to leave," Jaina said while still eyeing the rifle on the bed.

"Life isn't always fair," he said softly. "You should remember that. We don't always get what we want. Sooner you learn that, better off you'll be. Especially with Father."

Elias finished cinching up the duffel and put his arm through the cord, slinging it over his shoulder. Jaina stepped forward and took the saber from the bed, wrapping the belt around his waist easily enough, her face utterly serious. She tightened it, then stood staring up at him, green eyes brimming over with tears.

"I don't want you to go there."

Cupping her chin, he gave her a smile. The best he could manage when all he wanted to do was shout to the stars and rage against the injustice of it all. He smiled.

"I'll be fine, Jaina. If anyone can come back from there, I can."

"You promise?"

"I promise," he said softly, wanting nothing more than to wince for it. He'd never broken a promise to her before, but this one was made without any surety of his being able to keep it. He was heading to Evermist, and no one he knew had ever come back from there.

Hugging her tightly while she sobbed against him, he finally had to pull her free, pick up and walk out of the room.

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The promise bothered him as he waited for the lightwagon. He'd managed to break cleanly with Anise the night before, telling her not to even consider waiting for him. She had to live her own life and not pine after him. It ripped him apart inside to do so, but it was for the better. Even if he returned, her father would never agree to marry her to a Militiaman - and that was assuming a great deal; first, that he'd come back, second, that he would be something more than a simply Militiaman, perhaps an Undercaptain or Officer.

As bleak as he felt at the moment, he didn't consider either possibility to be very likely.

Promising Jaina that he'd come back... It was a mistake, and he knew it, but he couldn't stand seeing her in tears. Dinner the night before had been bad enough and he had no desire to relive it all again. So he told her what she wanted to

hear and that's that. He would try to live up to that promise, and not just for her, but for himself as well. He didn't want to die, he just knew that his chances of survival were not good.

He was going to Evermist, after all.

## Chapter Two

The lightwagon hummed as the driver navigated the streets of Valles. Elias sat in the coach, arm resting on the window sill as he watched the city pass by. No one else had flagged the driver down, so he rode alone and it suited his mood.

The winding road from the hills down to the lower city held little beyond the normal city clamor for him to concentrate on but it was better than the alternative. He watched as the fine coats with tails of the Gentry of the Hills gave way to the rougher, woolen coats of the lower city. The colors had always surprised him, even when he was a child and would take trips with his parents to the lower city to catch a boat to Southport, where his Grandparents lived. Yellows and blues and reds were the colors of the coats here - but always bright. The Hills, everything seemed somehow duller and drab.

Large houses with immaculate gardens and windows full of shine and polish gave way to smaller dwellings where the glass windows were of a lower quality and difficult to see through. Here and there, he still saw broken roofs and decaying walls and wondered why the wealth of Valles had not extended this far into the lower city just yet.

"Fort Sudren coming up Boss," called the driver and Elias rapped the top of the coach as acknowledgment. Gathering his things as the hum of the lightwagon lessened to nearly nothing, Elias waited for it to stop completely before unlatching the door and stepping down onto the street. The lightwagon shifted slightly yet continued to hover just above the ground.

"Two and three," said the driver, and Elias dug the silver and copper from his pocket and handed it over with a small tip. All of it an extravagance he probably couldn't afford anymore, taking a lightwagon instead of walking on his own two good legs, but he'd not wanted to bother with navigating the streets on his own so he counted it well worth it.

"Thankee sir," called the driver as he pushed a lever forward and eased the lightwagon back onto the track and down the street. Elias had always wondered what made them go, but his Father would answer, "That's the Magistrate's business and none of yours!" so he had never learned. He supposed he never would now.

The guards at the gate nodded as he walked through. Each had a rifle on his shoulder and a pistol and saber on his belt. The younger of the two looked familiar, and it took Elias a moment to realize he was the son of a Merchant from down the Row, a man of some import if he recalled correctly. His service here in the guard at Valles had most likely been bought and paid for.

It's what his Mother had wanted his Father to do for him.

The guard didn't look at him with any kind of recognition, and to be honest, Elias could not recall the man's name nor his families name, so he decided it was best not to even speak about knowing him.

Inside the tall walls of Fort Sudren, hundreds of young men like himself were gathered here and there in lose formations, all looking wide-eyed and shocked at where they stood. An older man with closely shaven hair and a piece of wood where his right leg used to be, gestured at Elias with a cane he held in his right hand, motioning for him to step forward. Since no one else seemed concerned with his presence fresh from the gates, Elias obliged the man.

He was at least as tall as Elias himself, nearly five foot seven although it was hard to judge with the peg leg. His hair was shaved closer to his head than Elias had ever seen, barely showing a wisp of brown coloring. His beard, though, was like mixing salt and pepper in a bowl, equal parts white and dark throughout, and cut in such a way that it outlined his jaw and mouth sharply, with nary a hair out of place. His body was lean and muscular and he wore the dark blues of command, a pair of stripes visible on his sleeves and a single stripe down his pant legs. Elias wasn't sure of the rank - not yet, but he'd seen enough of these men come and go from his Father's dinner table to know it meant he was to be listened to.

"Name," the man said as a clipboard materialized in his hand. His tone made it clear answering was not optional.

"Elias sansRian," he answered.

"Elias, Son of Rian," the man replied as he checked something off on his paper. "Sign or make your mark here..."

The man held the clipboard out and Elias signed next to his name.

"You're with L Company - they're on the western edge of the field and flying a blue flag with white stripes. Form up there for Induction. You'll be issued your uniform and processed after the Captain has his words."

"Yes sir," he replied, and the man gripped his elbow like a vice. Elias stared, mouth half open as if to complain, but something in the man's eyes kept him silent. Here was a one legged man who managed to scare the wits right out of him simply by looking at him.

"Good instincts," the man said, his voice like gravel. "But I ain't a 'sir'. Faster you learn that, better off you'll be. These stripes," he said, pointing. "Makes me a Sergeant. I work for a living, you got me?"

Elias could only nod, unable to find his voice. There was something about the man's eyes, all cold and blue, that made him shiver and want to run away. When his arm was released, Elias wasted no time scurrying off to find his company.

He was surprised that none of the other young men looked that different from himself; all wide-eyed and nervous, clutching bags and appearing generally lost. He knew his own face must be a mirror of these others. Another man in blue, this one much younger and without any stripes on his sleeve, lead him out to a spot in the formation and told him to stand there until Induction was over.

Once the other was away, Elias looked to his left and smiled nervously at the young man beside him, who returned it in like. Soon, another man stood to his right and Elias also smiled at him and received a smile in return. This was his company, he figured it was never too soon to start making friends with the men who might save his life one day.

Perhaps a quarter of an hour passed before his company was looking very full, as were all the others. He counted ten companies based on the formations, and all facing a raised platform just in front of what looked like offices of some kind. He knew that the Fort itself was much larger than this one area where they gathered, and guessed that it must spread out behind those offices to include barracks and access to the docks below.

It wasn't much longer until a group of men climbed the stairs and formed up on the dais. One in particular stepped to the edge and faced the assembled companies. From all around them, the men in the blue coats began shouting for quiet.

"I am Captain Sanche, Commander of this facility," said the man in a booming voice. He has jet black hair with beard and mustache to match. His uniform is dark blue with gold cords tied on his shoulders and a chest full of medals that gleamed in the afternoon sunlight. "Each of you has been chosen to serve your people, your families, your home and your Magistrate. Here you will learn the skills to be a soldier. From this point on, you are Militia. You will wear the uniform with pride, and you will serve to the best of your ability until the day your Conscription ends."

The men in blue all around them began shouting that they all raise their right hands. Captain Sanche started to recite the oath, and each and everyone of the men there repeated the words woodenly.

They were Militia now.

## Chapter Three

Still shocked, Elias ran his hand over the stubble on his head. Looking to Narut he gave a small smile to see the other doing the same thing. He and Narut, it seemed, would be bunk mates for the duration of their stay at Fort Sudren. Both had been given haircuts and uniforms and now waited for their instructor along with a dozen other members of L Company, which had been split into 3 squads for training.

Narut was from Southport, eldest son of a fisherman who'd spent most of his life stepping in and out of boats. His skin was dark and his hair had been curly before they shaved it all off. He smiled easily in a way that put Elias at ease. He was the kind of person everyone liked immediately and Elias was glad to have him around, let alone as a fast friend.

"Right!" shouted a voice that boomed like thunder, causing all the young men to jump. "You lot! FORM UP!"

Everyone scrambled to form up two lines as a man wearing gray pants, suspenders and a white, button-up shirt with no collar stepped up and started glaring. Violently. There was a hint of blond in his short cropped hair and his long, thin face showed the lines of a man in at least his middle years.

"You are now a part of Pygon Regiment, L Company, 4th Squad. I am your Squad Leader - that makes me God. My name is Sergeant Fesh. You will address me as Sergeant, is that understood?"

Everyone replied "Yes Sergeant!"

"Good! That is the first thing you have to learn! The second thing is how to run, run, run starting now!" he said as he pointed to a yellow line painted on the hard packed clay road. "Follow the yellow line! RUN!"

Elias turned with the others and started following the yellow line as it snaked through the barracks, Narut running alongside. Both began panting fairly quickly, taking in great gasps of air. Most of the others were no better.

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Elias had lost the toss that morning, so he had to climb into the upper bunk in the room he shared with Narut. He'd wondered why anyone wouldn't want the upper bunk, until he stood there staring at it, body weary and muscles sore and aching. There was barely enough room in the cramped space for both of them to move around in normally, and when they were stiff and sore from a day of training, it seemed that much more cramped and the climb into the top bunk felt a thousand

feet high.

Neither spoke until they were lying down, and then it was mostly groans until Narut managed a complete sentence.

"..do you think it will always be like this?"

"I don't know," Elias replied, shading his eyes with his arm. "I hope not."

"I think I hurt everywhere."

"You too?"

"Fesh is evil."

Elias snickered, causing his aches to flare up again. "He's not evil," he wheezed. "He has to make us strong, teach us to survive."

"I'll never make it..."

"You? You worked a fishing boat all your life! I'm the one who'll never make it – I grew up with servants!"

"Nah, you complain but I think you're the kind'll be here teaching others someday. You'll come back."

Elias sighed. He'd forgotten all about Evermist for a bit. There was always the chance he'd get sent somewhere else, it did happen, just not as often. There wasn't as much need for Militia anywhere else, hadn't been a war in a thousand years. The only thing that needed guarding was Evermist, and they needed reinforcements every year.

"You'll come back," he said quietly, willing it to be true. He liked Narut, he really did. He wanted all of the men he'd met today to come back even though he knew far too many of them would die. There were no guarantees.

Yawning, he turned towards the wall and closed his eyes. He could already hear Narut snoring softly below and sleep came quickly.

## Chapter Four

Elias stepped into the commissary and looked around. Narut stood up from a table against the left hand wall and gave a wave and a smile. Elias returned both before stepping into line behind some other conscripts waiting for their midday meal.

At the edge of the table where a server stood ladling food onto trays, a young woman in brown smiled at Elias and handed him an empty metal tray, one that was only slightly bent. It was also quite clean and dry, unlike some of the others he could see.

"What's on today, Millie?" he asked with a smile of his own.

"Grilled whitefish with greens and potatoes."

"Fish again?" he couldn't help but frown.

Milicent smiled crookedly. "Four times a week. Fish is cheaper than beef or pork. But don't tell anyone I said so. Plus, there's no rice today."

"Yes, but I like rice," Elias said with a smile. He was through the line quick enough and pulled up a chair next to Narut and the other members of L company they'd become friends with. Elias took the seat next to Narut, putting him across from the wiry Fyete with his dark hair, dark eyes and gaunt face. Everyone thought he was ill when they first met him, but he explained that he'd always been small. Fyete had shouted that a few good meals might bulk the man up but Elias doubted it.

Next to him sat Broat on the end, his wide frame taking up most of his chair and the space on either side. His arms were larger than both of Elias' put together. He was the second son of a blacksmith and the business would only support one going forward, so when the Conscriptio came to their village, his name had been put in the lottery. His deep brown hair was in curls the first time Elias had seen him in the courtyard. Now it was as close shaven as the rest of them.

The four had become fast friends and took their meals together.

"We were just wondering, why is it that Millie always gives you a smile and glares at the rest of us, Eli?" Narut asked with a smile and a wink to the others. Eli froze halfway into his seat, his tray hovering above the table. His eyes shot across the room to where the flaxen haired Milicent stood handing out trays - she met his gaze and smiled again. Eli could feel his face flushing which only made his friends laugh.

"Actually," said Fyet, his voice cracking a bit as he spoke. "We were just talking about lightwagons and glowrods."

"What of them?" Elias asked as he sat and hunched over his tray, glad for the change of subject. He took his first bite of the whitefish and nodded. It wasn't bad, and he'd never particularly cared for fish. He could feel Milie's eyes on him though, and that only made him blush harder.

"They don't exist outside of Valles, and Broat and I wondered why..."

Elias looked at Narut, who shook his head and smiled. "It's true. We use candles and lamps in Southport, and horse or mule driven wagons."

Elias thought back to the times he'd visited his Grandparents in Southport, nodding at the memory of oil lamps and candles and how he'd wanted to learn to ride the horses in his Grandfather's barn.

"You've lived here all your life, Eli. Do you know why they only exist in Valles?" Broat asked, his voice deep yet soft.

"To be honest with you, I've never even thought about it before. I used to ask my Father what made them work, but he would tell me it was the Magister's business and none of mine."

"I'd never seen one til I got here - a lightwagon that is," Fyet said before a mouthful of food. "Nearly scared the life out of me!"

Everyone laughed at that, including Fyet himself.

"Well - what would you think if you saw something floating down the road where that's not supposed to be possible?! Scared me to death!"

Elias laughed again, but his mind wandered. Why did the lightwagons only move on the streets of Valles? Glowrods and bowls? Why didn't they work elsewhere? Wouldn't it make life easier if lightwagons carried people and goods along the roads? If Sherrif's in every town carried glowrods? And how many fires could be avoided if people didn't have to use candles, lamps and torches? These were the kinds of questions his father would tell him were none of his business and to let it lie.

"I once tried to take a glowbowl down off the wall and examine it," he said quietly. The other's looked up.

"Did you figure it out?" Narut asked.

"No," Eli shook his head. "I barely got the cover off to see that there was a piece

of glowing glass inside when my father caught me. I had to cut a switch from the rose bush outside the parlor window.”

Everyone winced. Eli shifted in his seat at the memory. As he took another bite of fish and tried to ignore Milicent's attentive gaze, he wondered if there were anyone aside from the Magistrate himself who might know the answers after all.

## Chapter Five

"Fire!"

Sergeant Fesh's voice boomed, quickly followed by the sound of a dozen rifles going off. Elias had one eye closed as he squeezed the trigger on his repeater and saw the puff of smoke on the other side of the range where the bullet hit the target. He knew it was in the center again. Everyone said he was the best shot, and he didn't believe it at first, but Fesh told him he was a natural and that... That he -was- starting to believe.

He brought the lever down, bringing another bullet into the chamber but he didn't squeeze the trigger again just yet. You learned early to never fire until Fesh told you to.

"Again!"

A dozen more rifles exploded with sound, and Elias saw the puff of smoke that indicated a hit on his bag of sand. Again and again, Fesh gave the order to fire, and the young men lying on their stomachs, weapons stretched out before them, fired until their weapons were exhausted, then reloaded and started again.

"Break!" Fesh shouted, and Elias let himself relax. He pushed up to his knees and took a deep breath. He was sweating like a pig and his skin ached where the sun had turned it appleberry red. He wasn't used to the sun, but he knew he'd get there eventually.

"Elias," Fesh called to him. He rose and stood at attention until Fesh waved him off and told him to stand at ease.

"You're getting better with that rifle. I'd say every shot hit in the two center circles this last round. You're calm and you make each shot count. Not much call for snipers on Evermist, but hitting what you aim at? Most of the farmer's sons we get jump each time their gun goes off. Stick with it and you'll wear the Marksman's Patch on your sleeve. Maybe make something of yourself."

"Thank you Sergeant," Elias said with a smile, and meant it. The Marksman's Patch?

"Dismissed!!!"

Narut stepped up as soon as Fesh was gone, a grin on his face.

"What was that all about?"

Elias grinned back. "He said if I keep it up, I could earn the Marksman's Patch."

Narut laughed. "I told you! But you wouldn't listen. You're too modest!"

"I didn't think I was that good!"

"Nonsense! You're the best shot out here and Fesh knows it! Heck, everyone knows it except you!"

Elias laughed again.

"This calls for a drink!" Fyet said as he and Broat walked up. "Everyone have passes for the weekend?"

Elias and Narut nodded in unison.

"Good! I've heard about a place I want to try..."

## Chapter Six

Elias and Narut passed through the South Gate and down the walk towards the Pier District. A wall encircled the Pier District, intended to act as a first line of defense in the case of an invasion, but really it was to keep drunken sailors and Conscripts from invading the city on a bender, or so Sergeant Fesh had said.

Conscripts were not allowed in the city once their training had begun. No one had said why, but Elias assumed desertions were lower when there was nowhere for the Conscripts to run.

A bustling area filled with inns and taverns had grown up in the district. Elias' father had slapped him so hard he fell and hit a table the one time he'd gotten the courage to ask about the Pier District. Then he didn't sit comfortably for a week. Still, his friends and he would sneak down and try to see what was going on and make up stories based on the little they could see and hear.

Walking down the cobblestone streets in a Militia Uniform to meet his friends for drinks felt oddly surreal.

"The Widow's Apron," Narut said, pointing to a sign hanging from a two-story building painted in white and green. Music wafted through the open windows, a woman singing accompanied by a lyre.

*"I've traveled all over this world,  
And now to another I go.  
And I know that good quarters are waiting  
To welcome old Rosin the Beau."*

Elias nodded to the ancient tune he'd heard before as Narut opened the door and gave him a shove inside. He had to squint to make anything out in the dimly lit interior of the tavern. The room was fairly large, with tables and benches spread throughout, each one hosting a small candle in some sort of red glass or crystal holder, casting dim, flickering red light that made it difficult to see. A platform on the far side had the most light, and that's where a woman with long dark hair sat strumming a lyre and singing softly.

Elias couldn't help but notice that the laces of her blouse were all but undone, showing the most impressive bosom he'd ever seen, and barely containing it.

"Narut! Eli!"

Elias blinked, then saw where Fyete stood, waving to them. They had to move through the maze of tables to reach the little table where Fyete and Broat sat already nursing drinks and looking far too enthusiastic.

"Isn't she wonderful?" Fyete whispered once they'd sat down. Eli could only nod.

"What'll you boys have?" asked a woman's voice. Eli looked up, about to ask what was on the board but the question died on his lips as he found himself staring at Millicent's winning smile. Fyete was snickering. "My Aunt and Uncle own this place," she whispered to him. "I work part time here, part time at the fort." Clearing her throat she continued louder, "We've dark beer, lager or mulled wine all three coppers cept the beer, that's four. Dark bread's fresh and costs two for a slice or eight for the loaf. Jam's provided cuz I like you lot. If you want stew it's five, spiced pork is ten and whitefish is six."

"Stew, Millie," Fyete said, placing his money on the table. "And another lager?"

"Stew and beer," Narut said. "Pork and a refill on the beer," Broat added, placing his money next to Fyete's where she could see it.

"Ah..." Elias fished out some coins, blushing again as it felt like everyone was smiling at him. "The pork with beer please... And a loaf of the bread for the table." He produced the coins and she gave him a wink and spun away from the table. Before she was even out of sight, Narut was poking him in the ribs and laughing.

*"Here's a story, a little bit gory,  
A little bit happy, a little bit sad,  
Of Lily the Pink and her medicinal compound,  
And how it slowly drove her to the bad."*

The patrons roared and applauded at the popular song. His friends began to sing along, thumping the table with their mugs and stamping the floor. Elias found himself laughing and clapping in beat as Millie returned with the drinks and scooped coins from the table, then she whirled away again.

She wasn't gone long before returning with the plate's artfully arranged on her arms. She would set a plate down and scoop up the coins in the same motion, so fast he almost didn't notice she was doing it. When she set the bread in the center, his coins stayed where they were. He looked up to ask her why but she winked and whispered, "Bread is on me tonight."

Swallowing was hard for the first few bites, but the pork was good, and the beer better, so he was soon relaxing again. Every now and then, Millie would return and clear a plate or refill a drink, scooping coins as she went, and always he would get a smile, a wink or a nod. As he watched her move through the room, she would smile at most, but she never nodded or winked at anyone else, which just made it hard to swallow again.

"To L company!" Fyete cheered, raising his mug. Elias grinned as he joined the others in the toast.

The night passed quickly enough, and soon Elias found himself staggering along with his friends, making their way back to the fort. His bed swayed, tilted and spun as he climbed into the upper bunk, still giggling like a fool.

"She likes you," Narut said from below.

"We're bound for Evermist," Elias countered.

"That's *why* you should see her again. Before we leave!"

Elias chuckled, closing his eyes. Sleep came soon enough, and with it dreams of a flaxen haired girl with such a lovely smile.

## Chapter Seven

Elias stood before the mirror adjusting his shirt, hand straying to the freshly stitched patch on his shoulder; a bullseye with a small rifle laid across it and the word 'Marksman' in white just beneath. He couldn't help but grin.

"Okay, okay - we all know you got the Marksman's patch!" Narut chided him as he entered their room still wrapped in his towel and fresh from the shower. "No need to rub it in!"

Elias grinned. "I'm not! I'm just... I didn't actually think it would happen is all."

"Right," Narut said as he started dressing. "That gets you an extra half silver a month, right? I should have practiced more!"

Elias laughed nervously. The pay increase had been a surprise, the average Militiaman making a silver and a half per month where he'd make a solid two. He almost shook his head at that. His allowance at home had been a silver and a half a *week* for the last three years.

"Three weeks left before... You seeing Millie tonight?"

"Yeah..." Elias answered. The last two weeks he'd spent every moment of leave with Millie just talking, something he realized he'd never actually done a lot of with Anise. There was a way to get onto the roof of the *The Widow's Apron*, through a little window in the attic, and they would lay a blanket out, chew on a warm loaf of bread and stare up at the stars, musing about where they were all supposed to have come from thousands of years ago.

Behind him, Narut was drying his hair and eyeing his own clothing. "Hot water! I still can't get over it."

"No hot water in your father's house?"

"No water period. We have a well. I had to bring bucket after bucket in for my mother every day. Now my little brother does it, I guess. We always washed up on the stones behind the kitchen. Never had hot water unless we boiled it."

Elias shook his head. Everyday he learned of something else he took for granted that did not exist outside the city of Valles. Quickly making his goodbyes to Narut, he headed out of their cramped room and into the hall.

Elias looked around as Sergeant Fesh called to him. He didn't want to be late for his date but he knew he couldn't just ignore the older man. Before he could finish snapping to, Fesh waved him off and smiled.

“Walk with me, Eli,” he said quietly. Eli fell into step beside his sergent, who took a right through a quick hallway towards the open area and the main gates to the city. Eli smiled, remembering his arrival at those gates only a few weeks earlier. The hallway came out on the far north end and Fesh took a quick left to lead them under the Commander’s office above, where he paused and looked Eli up and down.

“Date night?” he asked with a smile. Eli wondered if everyone knew about he and Millie. Blushing he tried to explain himself, but Fesh just laughed lightly, something he’d never seen the other do before.

“I’ve known that girl a long time, Eli,” Fesh said. “Her father served as a fort guard for two terms. Not many serve two terms, not with Evermist looming over their heads as a possibility.”

There was a noise above them, and Fesh guided Eli beneath the stairs leading up to the Commanders office. Confused, Eli started to ask what was going on, but Fesh warned him with a look. Someone, a pair of someone’s, were coming down the stairs. Eli waited with Fesh, still confused. He could hear two men talking and his heart sank with recognition of one. Fesh met his eye and nodded. When the men on the stairs were half way to the gate, Fesh stepped out from the shadow of the stairs and motioned for Eli to follow.

“You know him?” Fesh asked.

Eli stared after the two men, nodding.

“My father,” he said.

“Ah,” Fesh sighed. “You have siblings, then?”

“A younger brother and sister, yes. Why?”

Fesh rubbed a rough hand across his jawline. “He made a hefty donation to the Militia – not unusual for a wealthy man. Typically they do it to protect a child from having to go to Evermist, but-“

“He paid to make sure I go to Evermist,” Eli finished for him. Fesh didn’t have to nod, didn’t have to acknowledge him. He knew it was the truth. His father did not want him to come back.

“Be careful, Eli,” Fesh said in a hushed voice. “I like you. You’re the type could be something one day – maybe an officer, save some lives. But a man like that,” he waved after Eli’s father. “He wants what he wants and he’ll do whatever it takes to get it,” Fesh looked him in the eye. “And he doesn’t want you coming

back.”

Eli nodded. Fesh lead him back to where they met and Eli wandered for a bit before meeting Millie. He knew that they never got along, but what had he done to make his father hate him so much?

## Chapter Eight

"Evermist!" Sergeant Fesh's voice boomed as always, but this time everyone jumped over what he said and not how he said it.

"For weeks now," he continued, "You lot have been pussyfooting around the subject. Afraid of what'll happen should you say the name out loud. Well, that ends now."

The man walked up and down the line, making a point to look each and every one of them in the eye. As he met that gaze, those cold blue eyes, Elias suppressed the urge to shudder, instead managing to stand just a little bit taller, a little bit straighter. It almost looked like Fesh nodded, but he was sure he'd imagined it.

"Evermist," he repeated in a softer tone as he ended his circuit through the squad and turned to stand before them. "You lot'll be heading there - you already know this – your orders are in. At least half won't return, probably more. Half of those who do will be maimed in some way. Those remaining few'll be touched by it all. You won't see things quite the same way anymore."

No shuffling, no sound of any kind.

Clearing his throat, Fesh continued. "What you know, or what you think you know about Evermist, is -wrong-. Today, you'll learn what you're gonna face and why."

Some shuffling at that. Elias was as curious as the rest. All he knew about Evermist he'd learned from the few books he'd read. Those only mentioned that Wall had been formed by the Magistrate thousands of years ago to protect the world from an Evil that had broken the island of Paerleon in two. No book he'd ever found really talked about what was inside the Wall, what the evil was or how the island had been broken.

"Evermist," Fesh began again once everyone stopped fidgeting, "Never sees a clear day. You got two kinds of weather on the island," he said as he raised a hand with two fingers. "Rain or snow. Rain comes in the form of cold mist or icy downpour. When the cold gets serious, you get snow, wet or dry but always heavy when it comes. Both mean low visibility, even in the day. You can't see far inland, even from the Wall, but the trees are hot. When the cold rain hits the hot trees, you get fog and lots of it. In the day you have a white blur, in the night, a deep blackness."

Fesh started pacing, hands clasped behind his back. "The Wall stands forty metres tall, each Tower fifty metres tall. The Magistrate's Tower, the heart of

Valles, stands exactly twenty-two metres tall. Think about that for a minute. The greatest structure in the greatest city in the world, isn't as tall as the Wall you will be patrolling for the next five years of your life - if you're one of the lucky ones that makes it that far."

Elias nearly shook his head, both at the last comment and the one about the Towers. He'd been in the Magistrate's Tower recently, had been as high as the fourth tier and had managed to catch a glimpse of the city out one of the windows. He'd been so amazed by it, spread out so far beneath him and now Fesh told him he would walk a wall nearly twice as tall?

"There is one Tower every ten marks, one main keep and three smaller outposts. The main keep in the South is called Deisarch Dain. North is Tuaisarch Dain, East Oirtharch Dain and the Western is Iarthach Dain. You will walk the Wall in the chill, thin air. You will sleep in the beds of the keep and the outposts and way stations, but you'll not ever see the inside of any of those Towers. That is reserved for the Engineers alone, and the Magistrate should he decide to visit, may He live forever.

"From the Wall, you will see the Evil that must be contained, even if only through the haze of rain and snow and fog. You'll see that the land for one mark inside the Wall is blackened and burnt, kept that way for the last hundred years or so. You'll help maintain that burn line."

Elias frowned at that, his mind trying to understand how the trees were hot when the rest of the island was so cold? And how could a place so wet, where it either rained or snowed all the time, be made to burn? Wouldn't the land be too wet for fires? Fesh kept right on talking as if answering the unspoken questions.

"When the Fire Brigade here in Valles puts out a fire, they use lightwagons with pumps that shoot the water out in a steady stream. On the wall, those same pumps use oil. Keep the land black and dead, keep the Forest at bay."

Elias stared. Forest? A few whispers behind him, confused.

Fesh didn't give them time to let that settle in. "The Forest. Trees as tall as the Wall in the middle. Used to be, back in the day before the Militia learned to burn the land closest the Wall, those trees would grow right up to the edge, and over the top. That's when the trouble would start, whole Forest trying to come right over, slapping stones out of the wall to make breaches, things leaping from the highest branches to attack - lost a lot of men back then, more'n we do now. Think on that."

Elias was still trying to wrap his mind around it all. The Wall was there to... keep trees locked away? The rest of the squad must have had similar looks on their faces because Fesh stopped pacing and looked at each one in turn, nodding,

before continuing on.

"That's right. The Wall's there, we're there, the whole Militia, to keep that Forest in check and make sure it don't ever get out again."

"Why?" someone behind Elias asked even as he realized his own mouth had the question half-formed.

Fesh looked grim. "Because they think, they move; they kill. I've seen it with my own eyes; men ripped apart as trees try to reach the Wall, try to breach it or vault it and get to the rest of the world, branches snaking out to rip at the stones or to snag a man right off the wall, or slice through him altogether like a saber through flesh." His voice sounded suddenly hallow. He shook himself and looked at his men again.

Elias fidgeted, trying to imagine what Fesh was seeing in his own memories. Trees moving? Grabbing men, killing them?

"Get's worse," Fesh said, causing every head to snap back up from their thoughts. "There's other things in that Forest, things that walk like us, things that don't. Sometimes they get uppity too, worse'n the trees, working with them. Trees'll launch em at the wall like a canon firing. Cats are the worst. Bigger than a horse, claws like swords and a tail that can lash out with poison needles that'll kill you slow and painful. You see one of them kill a man, you won't ever forget it."

Elias shuddered now.

"Imagine them lose in Valles, lose anywhere in the world. Now you know why we got the Wall, and why we walk it every day. But I know you won't believe it - not 'til you seen it with your own eyes, watching as the men beside you are torn apart."

Fesh met each one of them with that cold gaze again, holding it for a moment before moving on. When the last trainee had met his eye, he nodded.

"Last thing. Sometimes the trees try to launch their seeds over the Wall, or snake their roots deep under it. Some will patrol the outer wall lookin' for sprouts and green popping up through the snow and sand or seeds floating in the ocean. When you see it, you burn it and salt it all the land so nothing can grow."

Elias could only stare. Fesh cleared his throat again, clapping his hands together.

"My job has been to make you as ready as possible. Local Guard'll show you what you need to know once you get there, but it was time to tell you why we

have the Conscription - why we're all here. *The Seaspray* will port in a day or so, and you lot will be shipping out on her once she's loaded down again. Dismissed."

Elias stood there as Fesh walked away, and the other members of his squad started heading off in different directions. He was vaguely aware of his friends as they crowded round, the same bewildered looks on their faces as he imagined to be on his.

It's all about trees?

## Chapter Nine

“You’re so tense.”

Eli felt the warmth of Millie lying beside him, hugging against him. They lay together on the roof of *The Widow’s Apron*, staring up at the sky. Her scent is strong when they are this close, her head tucked just under his chin, her arm draped across his chest. The blanket is only part of the reason he is so warm in the chill of the night.

“It’s your father, isn’t it?” she asked.

He nodded, eyes focused on the stars above. Part of him couldn’t help but wonder, as it always did, where they came from. Legends told it was from somewhere up there, that they’d traveled on boats that cut across the night sky instead of the oceans. That was so long ago, though, that no one knew for sure if it was the truth, or simply a tale someone had told once to amuse a crowd.

From the time he first heard the story as a child, he’d wanted to know more, know the truth. He’d spent hours upon hours in the library at school, looking for any books that might contain more information, but all he ever found were more myths and legends and most of those contradicted each other.

“You can’t let him get to you,” she said, squeezing him closer. He smiled, briefly. It did bother him. More than he ever thought it could. How could any man feel for a son the way his father felt about him? It made no sense. Yes, they had their disagreements, their arguments, but to do the things his father had done recently meant it was far worse than he ever could’ve imagined.

The stars twinkled above and he wondered if, like their origins, this would be another great mystery to plague his life.

“What if you write a letter?” Millie asked. “Tell him how you feel. I could deliver it.”

He was shaking his head as soon as she mentioned it. Leaning on his elbow, he sat up to look at her.

“Absolutely not. Fesh was right – my father is powerful, he’s rich and he gets what he wants. The last thing I want is for him to know about you, put us together and decide that maybe the best way to get to me is through you.” He pushed an errant hair away from her face, hooking it behind her ear with a smile. “I don’t want you to be hurt,” he said softly.

“Okay,” she said, mouth a thin line. She was only able to keep the stern look for

a moment before a lopsided grin spread across her face. "So, you really care for me then?"

She looked up at him, eyes wide and lovely, lashes batting at him and he felt all the moisture in his mouth dry right up. He tried to say something and it came out as a hoarse croak that made her giggle. Somehow, she managed to wriggle her way even closer to him, which he didn't think possible.

"I watched the ship dock this morning..." she murmured in his ear, her breath hot against his skin, sending shivers down his body.

"I..."

She shifts, slightly, one leg snaking up and around his leg. Her hand, resting upon his chest just beneath the blanket, slowly slips to down his waist...

"...no," he says, breathless. "I never.. I mean.. I'm not trying to... I wouldn't..."

"I would," she whispered. "I want this, Eli. Want you to come back to me. If you don't... I want this, Eli."

Elias pulled her closer, his lips meeting hers, a fire suddenly burning in his chest like a monster beating against a cage, demanding to be set free.

...and the night passes all too quickly.

## Chapter Ten

Elias gripped the railing tightly. With every swell of *The Seaspray*, he felt his stomach churn and rumble. Any moment and he knew he'd lose what little food he'd been able to eat so far, and he'd only been on the ship two days. How would he feel after a week? A month? At least he wasn't as bad as Fyet who spent most of his time in bed groaning.

*"I can't believe you talked me into this," he said, handing Millie the letter he'd written to his mother, not his father. He thought that safer. It had as much as he dared ask about his father. He knew that his mother was no happier with his going to Evermist than he, and that his parents had fought about it more than once. Maybe, just maybe, she would be able to tell him more.*

*"It's the right thing to do," she said as she stuffed it behind her belt. She was wearing a sky-blue dress and had her hair pulled around and draped down her left side, exposing the right side of her neck. He wanted nothing more than to bury his face there, pull her close again. But people were watching.*

*"You'll be careful?" he asked.*

*"I will," she nodded. "It will not come to her by my hand. I'll use one of the boys, the apprentices from the trade district – they're always looking for extra coppers."*

*Before he could object, she was there, arms wrapped around him, body pressed close, whispering in his ear...*

He could still feel the weight of her pressed against him, even here on the ship.

Narut appeared at his side, an easy smile on his lips. "Thinking of pretty girls?" he asked.

"You know me too well," he answered, then the pitch of the ship sent his stomach spinning and he ever nearly lost its contents right there on the deck.

"Take this," Narut said, offering Elias something that looked like a root. Even the thought of eating was too much for him though, let alone some raw root, and he shook his head to refuse it. "Take it! It'll help. Just chew, don't swallow."

Elias took the root but made no attempt to eat it. It looked like any other plant root he'd ever seen before; brown, hard and not particularly appetizing.

"What is it?" he asked instead.

"Old family secret for sea sickness. You just keep a bit in your mouth, chew it but

don't swallow it. When it loses its flavor, spit it over the side and replace it with another chunk. Works wonders."

"How does anyone stand it?" Elias asked, breaking a bit of the root off and chewing it. He trusted Narut, but part of him wondered if it weren't a prank of some sort while the other part prayed that it worked. He couldn't take much more of this. If it worked, he'd share with Fyete and see if it would be enough to get the other man out of his bed.

"Some don't," Narut replied. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, smiling. "It's good to be on the sea again."

"If you say so," Elias grunted. Narut laughed. "It's better out here on the front of the boat. When I'm inside, it seems worse."

"Bow."

"What?"

"You said 'front of the boat' - it's called the bow. The back is called the 'stern'. Left and right are port and starboard." Narut stomped his foot, "And this is the deck."

Elias followed the sound and looked down. That's when he noticed Narut was barefoot, his pant legs folded up to his upper calf. He'd seen the crew working the deck barefoot and now Narut as well? Should he be barefoot too?

Narut laughed lightly. "It's easier to be barefoot on deck. Your feet grip better than any shoes, balance better with the rocking too, especially if you have to climb the rigging." Narut pointed up and Elias followed the movement, taking in all the ropes weaving through the masts.

"They climb those?"

"Sometimes."

"But you aren't going to, so why no boots?"

Narut laughed again, almost sadly. "Reminds me of home."

That, Elias could understand. Standing in the front-*bow*, he reminded himself. Standing in the bow of the ship, chewing on the root that was bitter but actually beginning to help his stomach, Elias wouldn't mind something to remind him of home. Suddenly, he thought of Millie in her sky-blue dress, smiling at him, tears in her eyes and his stomach seemed to settle all of its own volition.

*Evermist: A Tale of The New Universe by Patrick Hester*

Was Millie where 'home' was now?