

# EVERMIST

*A Tale of The New Universe*

By

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## Chapter Eleven

Elias set his tray down and took his seat on the bench across from Narut and Broat. The root did work, and his stomach was closer to normal, enough so that he managed to eat again without bringing it all up an hour later.

"Narut was explaining to me why we have to take the long way to Evermist, Elias. Why we can't just head straight North."

Elias nodded, sipping at his water. He hadn't thought about that. Evermist should be a straight shot North from Valles, but they were heading in the opposite direction, down around the cape towards Southport and then up the backside of the island.

"The Ilea Isles and the shallows," Narut announced. "Only flat bottomed boats like my father's fisher can safely sail there. The water isn't very deep, there's lots of coral and sandbars. A ship like *Seaspray* would run aground if she tried to go straight through, and navigating through would have her snaking back and forth and there'd always be the danger of running into something."

"So, the 'long way' is actually safer and faster?" Elias asked as he took a spoonful of the stew. It was heavy with fish and spices, but still good. He tore his bread apart and dipped it.

"Yep. Plus, they can trade with the seaports along the way, drop one cargo and pick up another."

Broat shook his head. "It still seems silly to head south around the cape, then up the western side of Paerleon."

"It makes sense to take the safer route when the lives of so many people on board depend on you getting to where you're going," Narut said. "Not to mention

getting your cargo there in one piece. Remember, the Ilea Isles are full of shallows, sandbars, coral reefs and pirates and a ship like *Seaspray* would be a juicy target for them."

"Even with all us Militia on board?" Broat asked.

"Sure," Narut answered. "They could ram us, sink us and take what they want from the wreck. They don't need to go toe to toe with us, and usually they don't. They're dangerous and crafty. My father has always been wary of those waters."

Elias nodded thoughtfully. Broat just shook his head.

When the meal was over, Narut held his arm and Eli stayed where he sat until most of the people were gone from the room. Narut leaned over and, in a hushed tone asked, "Do you know that man? Look casually."

Eli nodded, then pretended to stretch. He caught sight of a rough looking crewman sitting off in a corner apparently watching the two of them. He wasn't particularly remarkable; had a mess of jet-black hair, sun darkened skin and dark eyes. He wore the standard stuff that most of the crew wore; simple enough shirt, short-cut pants without shoes. Eli didn't think he'd ever seen the man before. He told Narut as much.

"It might just be a coincidence, but I see him watching you all the time," Narut whispered. "It's strange. I thought maybe you knew him, owed him money or something. Have you been playing bones with the crew when I'm not around?" 'Bones' was a game played with dice for money that many in the Militia had started playing since coming aboard *The Seaspray*, and no, Eli hadn't played it with the crew, which he told Narut.

"Do you think there's a problem? Should I talk to him?"

"He's leaving," Narut said. Eli turned just as the man left the room. "I don't know. I could be seeing things. It's just that, where I come from, someone you don't know taking too much interest in your comings and goings isn't a good thing."

"Okay," Eli said, not entirely sure that it was.

"I'll keep an eye on him. Just in case. And I'll ask about him."

"You don't have to do that!" Eli argued.

"Nonsense! We're in this together now. Have to watch each others back. Plus, I've been wanting to talk to the second mate since we came on board and this

will give me an excuse."

Eli grinned. The second mate must be the woman he'd noticed Narut watching once or twice. Shaking his head, he followed Narut up to the deck, his mind wondering why the strange crewman had been watching him.

## Chapter Twelve

The city of Southport lay flat where Valles was built upon hills. Like Valles, Southport had a fort to divide the port from the city proper and that fort cut back and forth, with multiple gates to provide defenders with opportunities to fall back when needed. Though no one had attacked a port city in a dozen generations, the forts still stood and the Militia was still vigilant. Also like Valles, Southport had a bustling trade district inside the walls of the fort closest to the docks where traders could load and offload goods from ships directly into their shops and warehouses.

As Eli and his friends stepped away from the ship, their names were entered into the book by the harbormasters assistant. Each Militia leaving the *Seaspray* had to register to be allowed past the gates and into the trade district. Just as in Valles, the risk of desertion was high, so they would not have passes allowing them deeper into the fort or beyond it into the city.

Eli looked out, imagining that he could see past the fort walls, past the inner city with its too close, too tall homes, past the fountains of the Plaza with their dizzying display of water jets that fed from one statue to the next, out beyond the cobblestone streets where the roads were hard packed clay and lead to the outlying ranches. His maternal grandparents lived out there, on a ranch with horses and a thousand places where a boy could find one adventure or another on a too bright day when no one particularly bothered to look for him and he was free to roam and explore.

With a smile, he found himself wishing that he could see them while here. They would only be in port two days and he wasn't sure that there would even be the possibility of getting a message to them, let alone have them come into town.

"Ah, home," Narut said with a smile of his own. "Come! I will show you the best place to eat."

"Don't mention food," Fyete moaned. "I just want to be on solid ground again!"

"Not even you will be able to turn down this food, my friend," Narut said with a smile.

He led them out past the guardhouses and into the cobblestone lane. Eli noticed there were a lot of businesses here; cobblers, blacksmith, chandlery - he even caught a whiff of a tanner somewhere nearby, though he did not see them. He paused now and again, staring in windows or to see what street vendors were offering and remembering what it was like to walk these streets as a young boy away from home for the first time. Some of the excitement came back and he couldn't help but grin.

"Welcome to *The Lady Elle*," Narut said with a broad grin. "Best food in all of Southport."

Eli stared up at the place; like most of the buildings in Southport, *The Lady Elle* was narrow and tall. He counted five rows of windows above the main floor. The walls were painted a yellow/white with green trim along the windows and a darker, wood grain door. A wrought-iron fence with an intricate pattern stood no taller than his knee and a similarly designed sign with the image of a woman in a dress twirling an umbrella behind her creaked on a pole jutting out above the door. A chalkboard covered in a fine, flowing script, showed the menu to passersby.

Narut ushered them inside where it was just as bright and inviting as the outside. Several empty tables were spread around the room, longer than it was wider, and a young boy with a bored look on his face sat near a pedestal staring into space. When he looked up at their group, his face went from bored to shocked to utter excitement.

"Narut!" he shouted, diving off the stool and into the other's arms.

"Ravi," Narut said with a smile and a hug. "Where is momma?"

"In the kitchen! I'll get her!" and the little boy was off. Eli and the others looked to Narut.

"My father is a fisherman, but my mother runs this place," he grinned. "I promise you, the best food in town."

He stepped deeper in and Eli followed him with a grin. "My family lives in the apartments above," he added, waving them to a table. Soon enough, a round woman with a red face and bright eyes pushed through the only other door and quickly enveloped Narut in a bear hug that took the breath out of him. Pushing him to arms length, she stared him up and down, then poked him in the stomach

with a large wooden spoon.

"What do they feed you?" she asked. "Skin and bones, is what you are."

"Momma, these are my friends. This is Eli, that is Broat and here is Fyete."

She smiled at each in turn, a little sadness in her eyes that quickly vanished as she began giving orders and more children who looked very much like Narut started dashing around them, laying out dishes, cutlery and all assortment of bottles and cups. Eli's stomach growled when two steaming loaves of bread were placed in the middle of the table.

Narut's mother took one of the larger bottles and pooled something thick and oily onto a small dish, then repeated it on two more. She followed this up with pepper from a mill, then told Narut to teach them how to eat bread and butter before disappearing back into the kitchen with a 'whump' of the swinging door.

With a smile, Narut tore a piece from the warm loaf nearest him and dipped it into the 'butter'.

"It's olive oil," he told Eli when he asked. "Grown in the hills all around the city. I used to pick them as a child." The flavor was rich and earthy, the pepper strong but not overpowering. Smiling, he tried another piece, then another and soon, they had all managed to finish every scrap of bread and every drop of the oil and pepper.

"Did they teach you to shoot a gun?" Ravi asked. "Do you have it with you? Can I see it? Oh, please let me see it, Narut!"

Laughing, he replied, "Yes, they taught me to shoot it, no I don't have it with me and besides, they taught Eli here better than me. He is a marksman, Ravi. He can shoot the wings off a fly at a thousand paces!"

Ravi stared, wide-eyed, at Eli for a moment, then insisted on seeing to his every need for the rest of the evening.

"Where is poppa?" Narut asked around a mouth of food. Eli was staring down at the widest bowl of pasta he had ever seen in his life. It was filled with all sorts of fish, vegetables and fresh spices in a cream sauce and he had absolutely no idea where to start or how he was going to finish it.

"One week gone," Ravi said.

"He promised to bring me a shell from the Sea People," a little girl with dark hair

and saucer eyes said solemnly. Eli couldn't help but smile at her. Narut said her name was Lalli and she was his youngest sister.

"Well, if poppa said it, then it is true," Narut answered. Ravi rolled his eyes and said, "There are no Sea People, Lalli!"

"Poppa says there are!" she argued. Another dark haired child whipped through and cleared away some dishes. Altogether, Eli had counted seven children of varying ages since they'd entered the place. They all came and went but only Ravi and Lalli were brave enough to spend any time with them; Ravi hanging on Eli and Lalli clutching Narut's arm or leg in one hand, and a ragdoll with frizzy yellow hair in the other.

"Poppa brought me a shell from the Sea People once," Narut said to soothe his little sister. "It was very difficult to get because they don't leave their underwater cities often and they don't trust many sailors, so you must cherish the one he brings you, Lalli. And do not let Ravi play with it, since he does not think they are real."

"Okay, Nari," Lalli said primly. Ravi looked disturbed; half wondering if he'd been wrong and was going to miss out on something and half wondering if he were being teased. Eli couldn't help but chuckle.

Looking down, he realized that he'd cleaned his bowl. Shocked, he stared as Ravi snatched it away and replaced it with something layered brown, white and black in a clear dish. He took a bite and found it sweet, cool, fluffy and rich all at once. Eyes wide, he took another bite and smiled.

## Chapter Thirteen

Narut stared. Southport was fading behind them and Elias wondered if it was only just hitting his friend that they were leaving home.

The days spent in Southport had been good ones, with Narut's family keeping the four of them well fed and happy, not to mention the fact that the rest of their squad descended on *The Lady Elle* once they found out how amazing the food was and that Militia received discounts on everything. Narut had said the place hadn't seen as much custom in a season as they had in those two and a half days the *Seaspray* was in port.

They still had weeks before they would port in Evermist, but it seemed as if everyone onboard had become more subdued. A calm and a quiet had come to rest on the *Seaspray*, and as Southport slowly melted away behind them, Elias felt that quiet seeping into his mind.

"Ravi is a good boy," Narut said suddenly. "He does what is asked of him and rarely complains. Momma said he will have to go out with Poppa soon to work the nets. The restaurant cannot support them all. He will need to earn his keep in others ways and let the younger children work with Momma."

Elias nodded, unsure of what he was supposed to say. Perhaps this was one of those times when simply being there was enough.

"Ah, look at me, worrying over family, over things I cannot control. You have a brother and sister don't you?"

"I do," he replied. "Jaina and Aristotle - Ari for short."

"What are they like? Too serious like you?"

Elias frowned. *'Too serious'?* Shaking his head, he considered this for a moment, before answering. "Jaina is the youngest. She doesn't do well with change, so my leaving was hard on her. Ari... I suppose he is 'too serious'. He always has been. Father pushes them both very hard."

"And you? Did he push you as well?"

Eli nodded. "I am the eldest. I protected them," he said softly. "Put myself between them and him. Took the worst he had to give so that they would not

have to. I never thought about it like that before, but it's true. I worry about them without me there."

"Yours is a strange family, my friend. I am sorry to say so, but it is true."

Again, Eli nodded. Thinking about how different Narut's family had been, how happy they had all seemed, he couldn't help but agree with his friend.

Jaina will be fine, he told himself. She was the stronger of the two, but Ari, Ari would cave. He shook his head, trying to dispel the anger he was suddenly feeling. He didn't see any of the pressure put on Narut's brothers and sisters that Eli had felt through the years. Narut had it wrong - his family wasn't strange, it was wrong. Children should not live in fear of their father.

"I will not be like my father," he said softly.

Narut clapped him on the shoulder. "I do not think you are anything like him, my friend."

Eli nodded. Maybe that was why the man hated him.

"Now, if you will excuse me," Narut said with a smile. "I must say hello to Adia." Narut walked off, and Eli smiled after him. That must be the second mate Narut was so interested in.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Two more stops in cities much smaller than Southport that afforded no chances for shore leave had left Eli and his friends restless and, in Fyet's case, quite green. For his part, Eli didn't think a life at sea would ever be in his own future; he simply could not get used to the feeling of confinement below decks nor the motion of the ship and the way it affected his stomach. Were it not for Narut's miracle root, he was sure he would be in no better shape than Fyet.

Nearly two months after dinner with Narut's family at *The Lady Elle*, *Seaspray* slipped into a berth on a cold morning when the sky was overcast and the wind cut even through Eli's cloak pulled tightly around him.

Broat supported the very green Fyet as the four friends made their way down the gangplank and onto the docks. The second mate, Adia, smiled and waved at Narut as they passed by. Eli saw them whispering together more than once over



the course of the journey North, and Narut blushed whenever he mentioned it. Eli was glad to have the chance to make his friend feel the same heat in his face that he'd had to endure about Millie.

Pausing at that thought, he shook his head. How could thinking of Millie make him both happy and sad at the same time? It didn't make any sense. There was none of the talk with her as there'd been with Anise; no 'move on with your life' and 'don't wait for me', oh no. Millie would have none of it. She promised to write to him and made him promise to write back. He had no idea how often he would manage, but it was a promise that he knew he had to keep. Part of him hoped that she did not keep her promise to him, that she met some local guard or better, a tradesman, who could provide for her. Another part raged at the thought of anyone else holding her in their arms.

He shook his head again.

As their boots thudded on the long stone pier, he looked around. They were not on Evermist, but they were as close as one could be and still call it Paerleon; *Corrac'amor*, also known as 'Lands End' because it was the northernmost point of the isle. Some called it the edge of the world. Just out of sight on the horizon, one hundred marks north, lay Evermist. He felt a sudden surge of excitement as he realized that this was the spot where the island had been broken so very long ago. The books he'd read never gave any details as to how the island had been broken in two, but he was sure he'd read something about it long ago. This was the spot.

"...a whole day off that blasted boat!" Fyete groaned, and Broat chuckled.

Eli grinned, returning his gaze to the city before them, studying it. Where Valles and Southport had buildings of wood, brick and mortar, the buildings here looked as if they'd been carved layer after layer straight from the dark stone of the sharp mountains behind rather than built. The more he stared, the more he decided that was exactly what had happened - an entire city carved from stone rather than built from wood and mortar. He shook his head at that, wondering how such a thing could ever be accomplished. The mountains did not look as if they were very kind or that they would give up their stone willingly. Steep and sharp, they seemed to grow straight and tall, blocking out the horizon. As he looked closer, though, he saw that, though steep, they were not straight - more like the lip of a bowl, slowly curving up and away from the harbor, rising up and up behind the city.

His wonder faded through, realizing that there was no color in that rock except for the white of snow. He saw no green, no shrubs or trees - just stone. Like a reflection of that dullness, the city had just gray or black stone with the occasional

painted door or window shutter. It made it all feel very heavy and bleak when he'd hoped for a moment or two of light and hope after the long journey and the confinement of the ship. He knew this was an ancient city, if not the oldest, but he thought it should be... different, somehow. Brighter. Maybe living in the shadow of Evermist for so long had worn it down.

The air was crisp and clean, but very cold. His breath fogged as he exhaled and he had to wear his heavier coat with a scarf beneath his cloak, pulling his hat down low and wishing he'd thought to add the thicker socks from his rucksack as his toes were freezing in his boots. Everywhere he looked, there was a light dusting of snow; the buildings, the ground beyond the dock - and especially the dark mountains looming behind the city.

A pair of guards in Militia uniforms stopped them as they headed towards the town, trudging through the slush. There were no gates here, no walls or checkpoints or harbormasters - only the two guards.

"There's nowhere to go boys," said the taller of the two. "No roads in or out of Corrac'amor. Only way to get in or out is by sea."

Narut smiled, "Just looking for a place to stretch our legs, maybe get a bite to eat and something to drink?"

"Lots of places for that," smiled the guard. "Looking for anything extra?"

"Ah," Elias blushed. "I don't think so..."

"Try *The Salty Sea*, two blocks up on the left. Always a good pint there for Militia and at a fair price. Mutton is passable."

"Thank you," Narut said, and the others echoed him.

They found *The Salty Sea* quick enough, snuggled around a corner with a bright fire burning and fresh bread and stew waiting for them. Despite the stone exterior, the inside was quite warm and friendly, with red tablecloths on the dozen or so tables, each adorned with a candle in a small, globe shaped holder. Elias bought a round of the dark beer for everyone, and they each ordered meals from the silver-haired innkeeper, who smiled and fussed over them as if they were her own kin back from a long trip abroad.

As the warmth began to take hold, chasing the chill away from their bones, they began telling tales, making each other laugh and lamenting their last night of freedom all while the beer flowed and the innkeeper fussed.

## Chapter Fifteen

When they staggered as a group from the inn, all they could manage was to giggle like fools. Fyret was the first to stumble, causing Eli, who was supporting the other at the time, to stumble as well. This caused a chain reaction and they all ended up on the snowy ground laughing.

Broat was able to stand before the others and he pulled each of them to their feet and pointed them down the lane towards the ship, giving a shove for each to start them walking again.

"That's him," someone whispered. Eli looked around, curious as to who was whispering. He could just make out the shapes of four men standing in their path and well in the shadows away from the torches burning on either side of the inn's door. He smiled at them, about to ask for a hand and wondering how silly they must all look. "Kill him!" the one closest to him shouted and he saw something flash in the torchlight.

"Murder!" Broat shouted at the top of his lungs, diving for the man and shoving Eli aside.

What happened next was a jumble in his mind. Eli half-stumbled into the wall as Broat pushed past him. He heard a grunt and saw that Broat had tackled the man who'd been coming for him. No sooner did he realize that, than someone else was leaping over the two men and coming towards Eli, an innocent look on his face. He saw another flash of steel as a knife shot towards him. He slid aside, then grabbed for the attacker's hands, struggling to keep the knife away from his body. Sounds of fighting all around him, of men grunting and gasping, but he didn't have time to think of that - he had to keep this knife away from him.

Everything was moving slowly. He spun with the other man who looked familiar to his fuzzy brain, each trying to move the knife where they wanted it. Someone hit him from behind and he fell on top of his attacker. Another blow and he saw stars swirling all around him. He knew they were going to kill him, kill him and his friends. More shouting, someone kicking him, causing him to roll/flip off the man he'd fallen on and into the wall. The sound of boots running on stone...

Torchlight flooded everywhere, causing him to squint from the pain. As quick as the light flooded into the little corner, the fighting was over. He sat on the ground next to his friends, everyone licking their wounds while someone pushed a cloth against his head and told him to hold it tight. Looking up caused him to see

stars, but he managed. Militia guardsman were all around.

"He'll be all right, I think," said a woman. She was the innkeeper from *The Salty Sea*. She was smiling at him as she wound a bandage around the cloth. "Have a headache for days," she added. He looked around. Three crewmen from *The Seaspray* were on their knees across the lane from him. A fourth lay sprawled where he'd fallen, his empty eyes staring up at the stars and his own knife sprouting up from his chest. Eli shuddered. That was the man he fell on. Guards stood around them, rifles in hand and ready to fire. One was going through and tossing their belongings on the ground before them. As the last of four matching purses clanked down, the searcher let out a whistle.

"Five gold each," he said.

"Who paid you?" demanded a man in a long, dark coat. Eli couldn't make out his rank. "Were you recruiting or out for murder?"

"Got nothing to say," said one. Eli looked at him. He looked familiar. Turning, he met Narut's eye, who gave him a single nod. This was the fellow he'd pointed out before, the one who'd been watching Eli on the ship. What was going on?

"We'll see about that. Take them to the jail."

"Yes sir," said one of the guards. They started hauling the crewmen to their feet, then led them off one by one. The dead man was left where he lay. The man in the long coat turned to Eli and his friends. Even facing them, his rank was hidden beneath his coat, so Eli was unsure how he was supposed to react. He tried to get up, but everything was spinning. The innkeeper pushed down firmly on his shoulders and he was surprised at how easily she held him there.

"You lot sticking to your story?" the man asked Narut. Before he could answer, the innkeeper spoke up.

"Saw most of it myself. They attacked these boys as soon as they were out my door." Eli stared up at her silver hair, done up in a bun. She reminded him of his grandmother.

"You're certain?" asked the man, clearly an officer.

"I am. Will swear it in court if need to," she replied. He was already waving her off.

"Okay - you three," he pointed at Narut, Fyot and Broat. "Get him back to the ship. Have a medic look him over. And count yourselves lucky - whether it was

murder on their minds or snatching you to sell to the pirates, I don't know. But they were determined to see it through." He spat as if for emphasis before turning and walking away.

Narut was there first, sliding under Eli's arm and pulling him to his feet. "Up you go," he said softly. They each thanked the innkeeper, who smiled and wished them well before disappearing behind the heavy door of her inn. Eli could hear the sound of a bolt being slid into place.

"It wasn't about pirates, was it?" he whispered to his friend. Narut shook his head. Eli did his best to put one foot in front of the other, on the way back to *The Seaspray*, thinking all the way about his conversation with Sergeant Fesh. It seemed a long time ago, but now it was fresh in his mind.

*"A man like that wants what he wants and he'll do whatever it takes to get it. And he doesn't want you coming back."*

Eli shuddered and it wasn't because of the cold.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

Eli lay in his bunk, a bandage wound tightly around his head. Everything was a jumble in his mind. Narut sat on the edge of the bed with a cup of something foul smelling that the medic had ordered Eli to drink twice a day for the next week.

"Putting it off longer isn't going to make it taste any better," Narut laughed. "In fact, I think it gets stronger the longer it sits. Like peppers."

Eli groaned, then took the cup and drained it without a second thought. He used to watch his little sister pin his little brother in the garden, then make him eat dirt. He imagined even that tasted better than this.

"What will happen to them?" he wheezed. It was burning on the way down. He shuddered.

"Probably execution. Or just send them to Evermist and let the island take care of them, I don't know," Narut sighed. "If that happens, we will have to watch for them." He stood up and stretched. "You recognized him?" he asked.

Eli nodded, remembering, then saw stars and doubled over. "I did," he squeaked when he could catch a breath again. Headaches, they told him? He'd never had

a headache so bad his stomach turned queasy. How hard had they hit him?

"Someone paid them," Narut said. "Paid them a lot. To kill you," he added. "Any ideas who would want you dead?"

Eli lay back, trying to breathe. His head hurt, his eyes hurt when he opened them and, for some reason, it even hurt a little to breathe, but there was a warmth spreading through him thanks to the medicine and that made him want to close his eyes and go to sleep. But he needed to be awake for just a little longer. His memory was more than a little foggy and that could be due to the combination of too much of that dark beer and the blows to the head. Still, he was not so far gone that he'd forgotten Fesh's warnings and there was only one person he could think of who might want him dead so much that they would hire assassins and he trusted Narut enough to tell him the truth of it.

"My father," he said after a long silence. Narut whistled through his teeth.

"A very strange family, my friend. You actually believe he would try to kill his son? You think he'd go that far, with Evermist looming on the horizon?"

"I don't know," Eli muttered, trying not to shake his head. He suddenly worried over Millie. He'd written a letter to be delivered to his mother and left it with her. In it, he'd asked a lot of questions, some of them very difficult to even think about. She promised she would not deliver it herself, but what if she had? What if his father learned of her and decided she was the perfect weapon to use against him? He burned even thinking about that.

"You can send her a letter, warning her," Narut said, and Eli realized he'd spoken his thoughts about Millie out loud. "Adia will carry it for you, I'm sure she will."

"Thank you," he said. "He really doesn't want me coming back from Evermist. I told you that. I'm a disappointment to him. I wasn't the child he wanted me to be, the person he wanted me to be. Everything he wanted for me, I failed or refused. In the end, I suppose I had one last chance to redeem myself in his eyes, and I failed even that. It's the only thing I can think of, the only reason for any of this. He can't forgive me for failing him."

"What was it? This last thing?" Narut asked.

Eli didn't answer. He turned to the wall, sleep whispering to him now, his body relaxing, the pain dulling. He didn't want to talk about this anymore, didn't want to believe what he'd come to believe, but it was the only thing he could think of that made any sort of sense.

Weeks before his conscription, weeks before any of this had started, his father dragged him away from the Tower of Valles, face flushed red, anger raging in his eyes. He told him that day that he'd failed him for the last time, and that night he'd been strapped til his father's arm could no longer lift the strip of leather.

All because of something he had absolutely no control over.

The Magistrate alone could choose his Apprentice.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

In the Tower of Valles, where the walls are covered in cream and gold and the floors are of the finest marble inlaid with silver patterns that swirl and intertwine in intricate designs that delight the eye and mystify the mind, the Magistrate stands before a crystal sphere suspended within a gilded frame. Beside him, the diminutive man with the horse-shoe of silver-white hair adjusts his spectacles before returning his gaze to the image inside the misty interior of the sphere; a ship can be seen tying off at a black pier that he recognized at once. That was the pier at Corrac'amor, northernmost point of the island and the last refuge for any on their way to Deisarch Dain, the Southern Keep of Evermist. The smaller man nodded thoughtfully.

With a dismissive noise, the Magistrate touched the frame with a finger, careful of his lacquered fingernails and the image faded back to a mist that roiled within the sphere.

"Much needed reinforcements, my Lord?" ventured the small man as he pushed his spectacles back up his nose with one finger.

"This last attack was the worst in my memory, Valenz. He very nearly succeeded this time," the Magistrate said with a sigh. He moved away from the sphere, stroking his dark beard as his gaze wandered out the windows and towards the sea.

"I don't understand Him, Valenz," he said quietly. "But then, I never have."

"Yes, Lord."

"And how many have I seen in the last four seasons?" he said, changing the subject dramatically. "Five hundred? A thousand? And still not a suitable

Apprentice to take on the burden!"

Behind him, Valenz rubbed at his forehead and nodded sadly. "It's the solstice, Lord," Vlanez offered after a moment to get him back on track. "Always stirs Him up."

"Is it? Already?" the Magistrate asked without turning from the window. "Which one?"

"Summer, Lord," Valenz answered.

"Ah. How the time flies. What year? Never mind, I don't want to know. I miss the sea, Valenz," the Magistrate all but whispered. Before Valenz could say anything to that, the Bells of the Tower began to chime calling the fourth hour of the morning.

"The Triad will be climbing the Tower steps," Valenz announced quietly; always a touchy subject.

"Ah, my trusted advisors," the Magistrate snorted. "I'd have you deal with them, well, with the Merchant at least, but I don't think his replacement would be any better suited to the task nor any brighter. Might smell better. Does the man bathe in urine or just sleep on a bed of feces?"

Valenz smiled sadly, "Not that I am aware of, Lord."

"This last attack, Valenz, it was the worst I can recall. He nearly breached the wall and the casualties... I think the Engineers are hiding something."

"Perhaps," Valenz acknowledged. Personally, he felt that the Engineers were hiding quite a bit, but he had no proof. Their Towers were the only places in the world denied to him. Which rankled.

From beyond the gilded doors of the Sky Tier comes the sound of a gong to announce the arrival of the Triad. The Magistrate sighs again, turning to cross the few steps between he and the Dark Throne, taking his seat carefully so as not to be stuck by the thorns so deceptively hidden throughout it. They were there as a reminder, as if he or anyone else who'd ever sat in this chair needed to be reminded of the danger they were in.

"Time to return to the shadows, Valenz," he said over his shoulder, waving those lacquered fingernails in his direction. The diminutive man smiled and bowed, backing into the sole shadow of the room and seeming to vanish within. Clearing his throat, the Magistrate called out, "Who seeks to be in my presence?!"



"The Triad seeks to learn the status of the Wall!" cries the Harker beyond the door as he strikes the bronze gong.

"The Wall still stands," the Magistrate replies, attempting to sound as grave and serious as he should. He hated all the ceremony.

## **Chapter Eighteen**

*"Dear Millie..."*

Eli stared at the small piece of parchment. He'd bought several sheets just in case. Narut was right, Adia had agreed to carry the letter herself and without hesitation when they asked. She even offered to carry others as her duties brought her back to Evermist. But he still had to write them and that was where the difficulty began.

He didn't know what to write. Telling Millie that someone had just tried to kill him seemed strange. How do you start that off? What do you say?

*"I miss you,"* he wrote instead. Simple enough and he meant it.

He thought about Millie for a moment, about her fair hair, the way it framed her face and fell across her shoulders, about her smile and how it melted him because she rarely smiled for anyone the way she did for him. For just a moment, he could still feel the warmth of her body next to his, bringing a smile to his face. Then there was her scent, that mixture of fresh herbs and sea air that quickened his pulse. One of his shirts still had a hint of that scent on it.

He'd refused to launder it.

Millie wouldn't want him to lie to her, to hold anything back. She'd demand that he tell her everything on his mind, so that's what he did, laying out the trip North as concisely as he could manage until he had to flip the page and start on the back. He told her about the crew member who'd been watching him, and how he and some others had tried to kill him and his friends before they even reached Evermist.

Then he detailed the coin they'd been paid and his suspicions about where it must have come from.

He also cautioned her to be careful.

*"...if anything happened to you, I wouldn't know what to do."*

Surprised at himself, he stared at the words on the page. How had she done it? How had she settled herself so firmly in his heart when he'd been so prepared to push everyone away before going to Evermist? He tried to think back, to see if there were any one moment that stood out. To his surprise, they all stood out, brightly.

He almost shook his head, then stopped himself. Aware that he still saw stars now and again if he moved too quickly. The medics told him he was healing well but not to overdo anything. Behind him, Narut snored. He'd come in late again, spending the greater part of the evening with Adia.

Checking the letter over several times before he decided it was ready, Eli folded it onto itself, then folded another sheet around it. Finally he sealed it with a spot of wax from a candle he was burning. Without a seal, he used the flat of his knife to press the melted wax down, then turned it over and wrote Millie's name on the front.

He would give it to Adia first chance.

Blowing out the candle, he crawled back into his bunk and closed his eyes. It was done. Even if it did take months to reach her, Millie would have word of him and she would know everything that had happened. He felt as if a weight had been lifted and realized that every time he'd seen Millie, a similar feeling had come over him; a calm.

How did she manage that even when she was so far away?

## Chapter Nineteen

Elias stood on the bow of *The Seaspray*, staring out into the fog side by side with several other Militia. If he weren't nervous enough about Evermist, this fog only served to make it worse. And the quiet! There was no wind, no breeze, only the sound of the occasional cough from those around him or the oars splashing in the water pushing them towards the island. Or was it pulling? He'd need to ask Narut about that. The crew had taken to the oars as soon as they entered the fog and the winds had died. Looking up at the riggings he didn't see the slightest hint of a breeze touching the ropes or the sails, but he could make out the frost on the masts.

Rubbing his hands together for warmth, he marveled at how quickly the temperature had dropped - had it always been this way, did the island itself somehow make it colder? Corrac'amor had been cold, but this was worse, cutting through him as if he wore nothing at all and from the looks of the others huddled around him, cutting through them as well. His breath misted in the air and he wondered if he didn't have a little frost on his cheeks to match the masts above. He looked around for his friends, but they were nowhere to be seen.

The sailor he'd asked had told him it would only be a couple of hours to Evermist, but it felt like half the day had passed since entering this fog. Looking at the eyes of the others around him, he knew they felt the same apprehension he felt, and waiting was only making it worse. He just wanted to get it over with, put his boots on Evermist and be done. How much longer?

The question had barely crossed his mind when there was a horrible wrenching sound and he felt himself flying through the air, being flung up and over the railing. Reaching out, he managed to grip the rail with his left hand, swinging painfully and slamming back into the ship's bow where his other hand quickly wrapped around the rail post. He could hear people screaming as he scrambled to pull himself back over, his left shoulder on fire, boots scraping along the wood of the ship, trying to get some traction. Slamming against the deck again as the ship swayed and jostled, part of his mind realized that something was horribly wrong. He started sliding across the deck and towards the starboard railing as soon as his boots hit the deck. Catching himself, he tried to stand up, scanning the deck for anyone who might know what in hell was going on. Had they grounded?!

That's when he saw it - the tree limb sweeping out across the deck and spearing men wearing the same uniform he wore. Lifting them high in the air, he took in the entirety of the tree, the largest tree he'd ever seen in his life with a trunk as

wide as a house and a gaping maw of a mouth, complete with wooden fangs that glistened with blood from its victims. The men speared on the limb were tossed into that maw where the fangs closed in on them, tearing and ripping them apart. The screams were horrible and echoed in the fog all around him.

Elias tried to run but with his second step, he felt a fire in his stomach and looked down to see the limb of a tree sticking out where it should not be, sticky and wet with blood - his blood! Horrified, he tried to call out, screaming for his friends to help him as it lifted him up and that gaping maw started laughing. He could see *The Seaspray* down below, being ripped apart by trees as they sprung up out of the water, limbs lashing out like spears, rending the hull apart in great chunks that splashed out into the water.

Then he saw the eyes. Glittering and gold, hanging in the air above the deck of the ship, they seemed to burn from within. They stared at him, bodiless, stared through him and he felt a hatred from them and a terror that he had never known. They knew him, knew who he was, everything about him. There was nothing he could hide from those eyes as they bored into his soul and that sent shivers through his body. The tree limb lurched, hurling him towards the gaping maw of wooden teeth. A sound erupted from his throat, half guttural scream, half agonizing wail-

*-and Narut shook him awake.*

"Eli?" Narut asked. "You okay? Eli?"

"I'm-... I'm fine," Elias croaked. He was soaked in sweat and his blankets were all tangled around him.

"You were thrashing around a lot. Bad dream?" Narut asked as he turned and started dressing.

"Yes," Elias answered as he draped his arm over his eyes. The pain was still there in his head, dull, but it was there. After a few days in Corrac'amor while the ship offloaded supplies to the city, he was well enough that he could mix his own medicine now, which was both good and bad as far as he was concerned.

"Well, feels like we're getting ready to shove off again. I wouldn't mind some breakfast, how about you?"

"I'll meet you in the mess in a few minutes."

"All right," Narut said as he hustled out the door. Elias smiled weakly. Narut always hustled out in the mornings to eat and he suspected it had something to

do with a certain second mate who also took her meals early. He had to admit she had a pretty enough smile, but not so pretty that he could look past that too wide nose and muscled arms that were nearly as thick as Broats!

Closing his eyes again, he saw *The Seaspray* being ripped apart by giant trees and could only shudder. *Only a dream*, he told himself, but had to admit it had seemed so real. *...and those eyes.*

## Chapter Twenty

Elias' first view of Evermist was indeed through a misty fog that had rolled in while they crossed the channel. Like the dream, the temperature had dropped, the wind had died and the only sound was that of the oars in the water. Unlike the dream, there had been no attacks by giant trees; only a sailor high up in what Narut told him was the eagles nest, shouting something every few minutes until someone out in the fog started shouting back. Then a light appeared in the distance that would wink in the fog. Each time the light appeared, the ship shifted her course slightly towards it.

As the mists parted, he saw an impossibly tall wall of black stone that stretched as far as he could see left and right and high into the sky. Far above, on the edge of the clouds, he could just make out a keep carved within the rock of the Wall.

Eli stared up, finding it difficult to swallow.

*The Seaspray* slid in next to an ancient stone pier that stretched far out into the water. Several buildings were clustered here, but Eli found his eyes creeping back to that impossible wall. However it had been made, there did not seem to be enough stone in all the world to have built it, and that bothered him more than he could say. He squinted, trying to see the seams of the stones or some sort of discoloration that would indicate stones from a different quarry the way bricks sometimes looked. There was none that he could see.

Suddenly shivering, he pulled his coat tight.

Narut stepped up beside him as he stared. "They're tying off." Elias nodded, taking his eyes from the wall and running along the pier were he saw men in uniforms gathering and pointing at *The Seaspray*.

"Looks like we're here," he said idly.

"Looks like."

"We'll get through this," he added. Narut clapped him on the shoulder.

"Together," he said.

"Together," Eli agreed.

Eli and Narut made their way down the gangplank and looked out where several men were shouting out squad names.

"There," Narut said, pointing to a man with a dark, short beard that only framed his mouth. Eli followed him over.

"Fourth squad to me! I am Sergeant Klen! Form up!"

Eli fell into formation with the other men of his squad. There was a nervous silence once everyone settled down.

"Welcome to Evermist," said the sergent. "We'll be spending the night in barracks L, then moving out at first light to make our way up the Wall. It will take the better part of the day to get to the summit and the keep. It will be colder on top than it is here by at least half if not more so keep your thermals at hand. Questions?"

No one spoke. Eli looked around at the other men and saw blank expressions reflected in their faces. He felt much the same.

"When you hear the bell chime four times, report for chow - building S. For now, report to your barracks and get settled. Dismissed!"

Eli shrugged his duffel over one shoulder and his rifle over the other as his friends stepped up. Everyone looked at each other, but the silence stretched on. Narut was the first to start walking, then the others fell in around him.

They were finally here. Evermist.