

EVERMIST

A Tale of The New Universe

By

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Chapter Twenty-One

Eli stood in the chill night air staring up at the Wall. Sleep would not come this night, but he wasn't alone. He'd stopped counting the other men from his squad who'd been tossing and turning in the barracks before he stepped outside. It seemed that everyone had the same thing on their mind.

The Wall.

It loomed. How something black as night could still be seen was beyond him. The whole thing was beyond him. A Wall that tall, wrapping around an entire island... It was just too incredible to believe.

"They grow it," said a voice that made him jump. Turning, he saw the outline of an older man standing in the shadows of the barracks across from his own. The man moved into the weak light cast by the lanterns hanging on the pole at the crossroads between buildings. He was older than Elias, by at least ten years. His hair was dark but there were flecks of gray in his mustache. Elias moved to meet him at the pole.

"Jaycn," said the man, offering his hand. Elias took it, not surprised at all at the firm grip of this obvious veteran.

"I'm Elias," he replied. "What did you mean just now?" he asked.

Jaycn pointed at the Wall as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his coat. Eli stared.

"The Wall," Jaycn said. "You had that look on your face. I've seen it a hundred times. You were wondering how the damn thing ever got built. Men couldn't manage it."

"So, they grew it?" Eli asked.

"Not men," Jaycn snorted. "The Engineers."

Eli frowned. "What do you mean? Who are the Engineers?"

"The builders of... everything," Jaycn said. "The Magistrate's best kept secret. You'll see them before long now that you're here. Everyone does eventually. They can actually cause the stone to grow the way they want it to. That's how the Wall came to be, it was grown, not built."

"I..." Eli didn't really know what to say. "Wait, how come no one knows this?" he asked.

"They know, they just don't talk about it. Who would believe them? The Engineers aren't seen in public much except here on the island, so if you haven't been here, you probably haven't ever seen them."

"And few of us return from the island," Eli said. "But, you called them 'the builders', said they'd built everything."

"They did, once. All the great cities, including Valles. I don't think they get off the island much anymore. Too much to do here."

Jaycn took a deep breath, then blew it out his mustache. "Anyway, you had that look about you. I'm gonna try and get some shut eye. Tomorrow's ascent will be tough on you lot." He turned to leave, but Eli touched his arm and he turned back.

"How do we...?" he nodded towards the Wall.

"Get up there?" Jaycn chuckled. "There's a road. It's narrow and it snakes back and forth as it climbs. It's hard to see in the daytime, let alone at night, but it's there. Trust me." With that, he walked back over to the opposite barracks and disappeared inside.

Eli spent another few minutes staring up at the Wall before moving back to his barracks. As he climbed up into his bunk, his mind kept going back to one thing that Jaycn had said; they grow it...

Chapter Twenty-Two

Eli dreamed.

He stood before an ancient looking stone temple, overgrown with creeping vines and shrubs. The air smelled fresh and clean like he'd never known it and the sun was warm though not uncomfortable.

He tried to move forward but found that his feet were not listening. Trying to look down, he realized that his head would no longer move. His eyes were locked on the temple before him.

"Go away," growled a deep voice behind him. That voice chilled the air, dimmed the sun. Even the vines fixed upon the stone of the temple seemed to quake and pull back and away from it. There was pain and passion in that voice, anger and rage. Eli began to sweat and it wasn't due to the sun's heat above him.

"This is MY place!" roared the voice. "Sacred to *my* people! You are not wanted here!"

Silence. Again, Eli tried to move, tried to run away. If this place were sacred to that voice he would gladly go anywhere else to be rid of it.

Everything flickered, the images changing. Before him, the temple was still ancient, but the vines were gone, the surrounding green well tended and cared for. The air was still rich, still clean, the sun still warm, but there was something different. A series of great booms, one after the other, drew his eyes skyward. Trails of fire streaked down-

Everything flickered, the vines returned. His stomach roiled.

"I will not," roared the voice. Eli struggled to be free now, to run way from whatever madness had taken him only his body would not respond. He tried to speak, tell the voice he would leave if only he could lift his feet, but there was no sound. Mouth wide and silent, he screamed.

"Until the end of time, if we must," said the voice. "Until you are no more."

Again, the images flickered, the Wall rose before him. Trees were moving, impossibly tall trees, thick branches wider than the biggest trees from his backyard lashing out, tearing away chunks that fell away into the mist below. Men appeared; shooting, throwing pots of oil that burst into flames, licking at the bark, causing the trees to scream in agony, the voice to roar in anger.

Again, he was back. Again, the voice spoke.

"I will never rest until you are all dead."

Eli woke up, his body covered in sweat. He could hear the other men in the barracks breathing, some snoring, and he took comfort from that. Only a dream, he told himself. *Only a dream.*

* * *

In the Tower of Valles, the Magistrate screamed. Valenz stepped from the shadows, swooping down to sit on the edge of the bed. He shook the taller man, gripping his shoulders tightly as the man squirmed and writhed.

"Wake, Master," he said softly. "Wake now. It's over. Only a dream."

Still, the Magistrate struggled. Valenz did not lessen his grip, shaking harder now. "Master," he said louder than before. "Time to wake. Time to return."

With a blood-curdling cry, the Magistrate sat up, hands clutching at his throat as if to hold it together. Valenz jumped back as he leapt from his bed and raced to the bath. After a moment, Valenz followed him and found the taller man standing before the mirror, examining his bare neck.

"He tried to rip my throat out, Valenz," he said hoarsely. "With his teeth."

"I warned you he would be strong this time of year, my Lord."

"You did," sighed the Magistrate. "I should have listened to you."

To any other eye, the Magistrate would look fine, but Valenz could tell the strain was taking its toll. He looked tired, more so than he had seen him before, and they had known each other a very long time.

"I do have some good news," said the Magistrate as he splashed water across his face.

"Oh?" asked Valenz. He pushed his glasses up his nose.

What the Magistrate said next was muffled by the towel he used to dry his face. Valenz asked him to repeat it and the Magistrate smiled broadly at him.

"I said, I was not there alone, Valenz. Someone else was in the Dream."

Someone I could feel but not see or hear. I'm sure of it."

"That..." Valenz did not know what to say. "That is unexpected," he offered after a moment.

"Indeed. Perhaps there's hope yet, eh?" the Magistrate grinned. Valenz said nothing more, his mind already deep in thought. Who could have been there? Where did they come from?

How had they missed finding them?

Chapter Twenty-Three

"You look nervous. Are you nervous? I'm nervous," Narut asked. Eli tried to smile at Narut, but he couldn't quite manage it. He did feel as nervous as his friend, more so thanks to a night filled with strange dreams and little rest. His head throbbed just thinking about that.

To take his mind off it, he started rechecking his horse and gear. It seemed a fine animal, better than he thought he would get; a bay dun that frisked while he checked the straps for the fourth time since saddling her, almost as if to say to him, 'Leave it, already'. Honestly, he was simply looking for something to do with his hands. Forget the Wall for a moment, he was nervous about riding, as he'd never done a lot of it before, and most of that as a child. During training, he'd gotten a refresher course, and then it was only enough to keep him from falling out of the saddle. It seemed a silly thing to worry about now, yet he did.

He had his saddlebags in place, stuffed with extra clothes to layer on as they made their ascent. For now, the sun was warm enough that he had only his uniform jacket on with his shirt unbuttoned. His sheepskin gloves were tucked just under the saddle near the pommel where he could grab them quickly if he needed them and his bedroll and water skins were behind the saddle, tied to his duffel.

There were a lot of nervous looks shared between the squad members he knew, and knowing glances between the ones who had been here for a while and were only present to see the rest safely up to the Keep. He rechecked that his saddle was good and tight, realizing that he'd just done that a second ago. The horse gave him another look. Blushing, he looked around to see if anyone had noticed...

"FORM UP!" Sergeant Klen shouted. "This is your first ascent up the Wall, so stick close to the veterans and don't do anything stupid. Everyone keep your eyes and ears open - an attack can come at any time, even here. If you even think something is wrong, speak up! It'll take the better part of the day to make the keep. Now, mount up!"

Elias swung up into his saddle, the dun frisking again before he reined her in. Klen, followed by another, familiar man, approached.

"Elias, have you met Jaycn?"

"We've met," answered the older man.

Elias nodded to the man riding beside Klen. In the light of day, he was no less grim than he'd been the night before. Eli noted two rifles in holsters on his saddle along with the saber on his belt. Eli's own rifle rested in a saddle holster and his saber was on his belt, suddenly feeling heavier.

"Like you, he wears the Marksman's patch - that makes you both my scouts," Klen smiled tightly. "This man will teach and you will listen. Like him, you will ride ahead of us and you will do whatever he tells you without question, clear?"

"Yessir," Elias replied. As Klen moved off, Jaycn moved closer. "About last night-"

"You'll do fine," Jaycn talked over him. "Being a scout, it's up to us to protect the squad. We look for anything that might be coming before it comes. He didn't tell you before this, did he?" Elias shook his head. "Didn't think so. Didn't tell me your name, only that I was getting a new recruit. Here, I got this for you," Jaycn handed him a leather case with a strap.

"What's this?" he asked, opening the case.

"Scope. Let's you see farther than normal - ever used one?"

"No." Elias gingerly took the scope from the case - it looked like a cylinder about the length of his hand with glass on one end and a tiny hole in the other. It was very worn; the leather cracking in some places with areas that were stained and darkened spattered here and there. Looking closely, he decided that those could be spots of blood. Fumbling with it, he nearly dropped it.

"Like this," Jaycn said, snatching it away from Eli. With a quick motion, the older man pulled on the ends to extend it another hands length or more. "Look through

the small end."

Elias took it back and did as instructed. Sure enough, everything far away appeared closer now. Turning, he swept it across the Wall. From here, the top looked like it was just a few cubits away. Amazing, he thought. He could actually see the road they would be taking up, hidden though it was against the dark stone. It snaked back and forth at a steady incline.

"Scouts! Head out! Company, fall in at the base of the ramp!"

"Let's go," Jaycn said as he clicked his tongue and reined his horse around. Elias put the scope back in the case as quickly as he could manage, then tried to be as smooth with his own horse, clicking his tongue and tugging on the reins. She just looked at him and 'whuffed'. "Please?" he whispered, and she started off after Jaycn. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn she chuckled first, but that had to be his imagination.

With Jaycn in the lead, the pair headed towards the ramp he couldn't see from the pier. Squinting, he followed the subtle line of it, zig zagging higher and higher, back and forth until it crested the Wall where he would get his first glimpse of the interior of the island.

That thought sent his stomach churning. He thought he might vomit.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The road itself was wider than he thought it would be, easily capable of having six or seven horses ride side by side without bumping or jostling each other. Eli kept his horse as near the middle as he could, keenly aware of the sheer drop awaiting him over the edge. Luckily, Jaycn kept talking, and concentrating on his voice made it easier to ignore the fact that they were climbing higher and higher with every step forward.

"We won't see much trouble today," Jaycn said. "I've only heard of seeds making it this far over the Wall, never seen it with my own eyes."

"All right," he said, trying not to notice how high they were already; the pier below was beginning to fade behind a haze.

"It's always rough when you're new. You'll get caught up really quick. Just do what I say when I say it, don't mouth off to anyone. Everyone needs everyone here. Don't make enemies."

"I hadn't planned on it," Eli said. Jaycn grunted.

"I know you have questions. Now is the time to ask them, before it gets crazy. We'll have time in the Keep, but here it's just us, a couple of scouts." Jaycn clicked his tongue and slowed his horse to ride beside Eli. He set the pace at a quick walk, not quite a trot.

"I don't understand what I'm supposed to do," Eli offered after a moment. He had other questions he wanted to ask, but somehow, they didn't seem appropriate and he didn't want to offend the older man. Jaycn merely nodded.

"It's difficult to explain here where you can't see things for yourself. Up top, it'll be more clear. Essentially, we ride before the patrol. Not out of sight, just a bit ahead. You ever go hiking out in the wilderness?" Eli shook his head 'no'. "Well, it's not like that at all. In the wild, you look for a bent bit of grass, maybe a broken branch on a low tree or a bush, indent in the mud - anything that might point to someone or something dangerous coming your way." Eli nodded; that made sense to him though he couldn't imagine how you would notice 'bent grass', especially from the saddle of a horse.

"Here, you look for anything that isn't right; it can be a bump in the snow on the road, an acorn in your path, tracks in the snow. You also listen. The top, it's quiet; deathly so. You hear a creaking, a rustling, maybe the pop of a branch snapping from the cold, that's the only warning you're going to get before it all happens. You hear any of that, you sound the alarm, warn the men."

"What have you seen?" he asked.

"Everything. Too much, sometimes. I keep trying to leave but the island brings me back."

"I wondered..." Eli didn't finish. He'd wondered why someone Jaycn's age would be here, or still be here.

"Why I went beyond my five years?" Jaycn barked a harsh laugh. "I've left this place three times. Each time, I tried to forget what I'd seen, what I'd done, but I couldn't. There's just something about this island; it gets under your skin, into your head and it won't let go. So I keep coming back until it's done with me. I also make better money here than I've ever managed out there. Not good at much else." Jaycn shrugged.

Eli didn't say anything for a long time. He kept his eyes on the road before him, his hands on the reins of his horse, but something was nagging at him. Jaycn seemed content to ride. When they came to the bend and started up in the opposite direction, he could see the rest of the squad about half way up the first leg.

"Do you have strange dreams?" he finally asked.

"Dreams? Sometimes. I think we all do."

"Do we ever... go inside? Inside the Wall?"

Jaycn blew out a hard breath. "Yes. Not often, but sometimes we have to go in and clear out the ring. It's hard work, back breaking and dirty. They usually use it as punishment for anyone breaking the rules or causing trouble. You only have to do it once to toe the line."

"Have you ever...?"

"Once, yes. I don't recommend it."

"What about deeper?"

"Deeper?" Jaycn asked.

"Into the island. Into the forest."

"No," Jaycn said emphatically. "Never. No one has that I've ever heard of. It would be suicide. Damn trees would shred you."

Eli nodded but he kept remembering his dream and the ancient temple covered in vines...

Chapter Twenty-Five

Eli was lost.

The keep had fifteen levels once you got inside and each one felt to him like a labyrinth of twists and turns designed to make it impossible to know where you were or where you'd been. Signs were posted in most places but the light was poor and most of those signs were dull and faded making it that much harder to find his way around. The tapestries on the walls only made it worse; they all seemed to depict mighty battles but one looked like the next after a while, just as the red and black carpets seemed to have the same patterns from one to the next, causing them to blend together in his mind. Jaycn hadn't been any help, disappearing almost the moment they stepped into the keep and his own friends were struggling as much as he was.

He paused, staring at a tapestry that had an odd battle depicted. Men in blue uniforms were fighting men in gray uniforms-neither of which looked anything like the uniforms he'd ever seen. The entire thing was badly faded, the colors muted with time, but they seemed to be fighting in close quarters, with sabers and knives fixed to the ends of their rifles, which he'd never heard of before. He tried to make out the flags of the enemy armies but he didn't recognize the red, blue and white of the one, nor the orange, blue and white of the other.

Shaking his head, he moved on. His squad, 4th, was now officially a part of L Company, which had twelve total squads of thirty men each. 4th now shared a barracks with 3rd squad on the west wing of the keep, third level. The commissary was on lowest level east wing, which was what he was trying to find by himself because the others hadn't waited for him before running off. As large as the keep was, it looked bigger from the outside, a fact he hadn't been able to resolve to his own satisfaction just yet, but they'd only been here a week now. His only contact with Jaycn had been a hastily scribbled note reminding him they'd be moving out for their first patrol of the Wall three days hence.

"Lost?" called a harsh voice, and Elias turned to find an older man with a thick red beard sprinkled with white standing in an archway beyond the intersection he'd just passed. He had an angry red scar that cut down his face from his scalp to his jaw and one milky white eye and one crystal blue one that was staring at him. When he saw the Captain's bars on his collar, Elias snapped to.

"Yes, sir," he answered.

"So fresh I can still smell 'civilization' on you," the man muttered, rubbing a hand across the stubble of his chin. "Trying to find what?"

"Commissary," Elias replied.

"Name?"

"Elias," he replied. For a moment, he was stunned that he'd left off the 'sanRian', but then the moment passed and he realized it was the right thing to say. He no longer felt like a 'son'. "Private," he added after a moment.

"Hmmm," the man said as he took several steps and closed the gap between them, his finger going to the patch on Elias' arm. This close, Elias could smell the ale thick on the man's breath. "Marksman, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hmph. Let's hope you shoot better'n you navigate. This is the Library," he said with a wave of his hand towards the doors he'd just walked through. "Back that way about a metre," he thumbed over his shoulder, "then down the stairs and turn left until you cross the wide hall with the green carpet, then right for about a metre and a half. Think you can handle that, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Off with you then," the Captain barked, and Elias moved. He was nearly out of earshot when he heard a second voice speaking to the Captain.

"Scaring the new recruits, Shen?"

"More fodder for the butcher's bill," said the Captain. Elias could only shudder at the certainty in the grizzled Captain's voice. He pushed that away though, curious about this Library. He made a mental note to come back to investigate. Maybe when Captain Shen wasn't around...

Chapter Twenty-Six

Eli, Narut and Fyet stepped into the library the next day. There was no sign of the old man, Captain Shen, which relieved Eli. He didn't want another encounter with him.

He'd been surprised by the number of older men in the keep; he imagined that anyone who survived their time on the island, would escape the moment their terms were up. To find so many older men who had joined again and again was more than a little disturbing.

The library was easily as large as the commissary, which had been built to serve hundreds of men at a time. From wall to wall, there were shelves and each shelf was weighted down by stacks and stacks of books. He'd never seen so many books before in all his life. Suddenly, he thought it might not be too bad on Evermist.

The three men separated, each walking down a different row, eyes wide. Eli ran his eyes up and down the shelves, trying to make out titles. By the time he made it to the end of the row, a frown fixed on his face, he found Narut looking similarly confused. Turning, he saw Fyet taking a seat at a long, wooden table. He had a stack of books and started going through them. Narut nodded to him and they walked over together.

"Fyet?" Eli asked. "Did you find something?"

"I didn't recognize the language," offered Narut.

"Neither did I," Eli agreed. They both looked at Fyet, who was looking through his third book at such a speed there was no way he could've been reading them.

"I'll bet it's Templer," said Fyet. Eli frowned.

"Templer? I've never heard of that."

"Nor have I," said Narut.

"Not surprising," said Fyet. "They don't really like outsiders. I only know about them because I used to make trading runs there with my da. He told me theirs was the oldest city on all of Paerleon. They don't let many people trade with them, but my da makes some of the finest saddle's in our village and the Templer's like em so we always made a trip up at the beginning of summer and came back with a decent amount of gold."

"Where do they live?" Eli asked.

"Up North East near Shelter Bay, just at the edge of the mountains that cut Corrac'amor off from the rest of the island. No idea how big the city is, we only ever got as far as the gates."

"You couldn't see the city from there?" Narut asked.

Fyete shook his head. "They have a wall, not as big as The Wall, of course. But it keeps people out. When they open the gates, all you see is a road leading up into the hills. I think the city is up there somewhere, hidden away."

"What makes you think these books are written by them?" Eli asked.

"I don't think that, not really. It's just - there are signs on their gates, signs we couldn't read. It's the same language. I'd swear it." He pointed to a page, "See this character? I've seen it before. And this one," he added, moving his finger down the page.

Eli picked up one of the books; it had a hard cover of faded blue with chipped, gold lettering across. Opening it, the inside had a textured, patterned paper and the same lettering which he assumed was the title. He'd never seen the language before and he prided himself on the amount of books he'd read. Flipping through it, he found a sketch that didn't make any sense. He laid it flat on the table.

"Look at this," he said. Fyete and Narut leaned in. The image showed a half-naked man with a beard, holding a large bow and apparently killing men who were attacking him. There wasn't a lot of detail. The men, also half-naked, carried round shields and spears or swords. It was very strange. He looked at his friends who shrugged; they didn't understand it any better than he did.

"Why would anyone keep books around that they can't even read?" he asked, closing the book.

"Are there any of these Templer people here?" Narut asked. "Maybe they take care of the library?"

Fyete was shaking his head. "I doubt it. Like I said, they don't like outsiders. I think they pay to keep their kids out of the lottery."

"That's a lot of gold," Eli whistled.

"And doesn't answer why they keep so many books around that no one can read," Narut added.

"Because, it's still history."

All three looked up. The man who stood before them wore the uniform of an officer, causing them to snap to attention. He waved them off with a smile. He was much younger than Captain Shen, with dark hair and dark skin, much darker than Narut.

"You're new?" he asked. They all nodded. "Well, welcome to the Library," he waved around him. "Thousands of books, all written in an ancient language no one remembers anymore. It's sad, really, but it's a part of our history so we keep them."

"Why here?" Eli asked. If the books were as important as he said, surely they should be somewhere other than Evermist.

"Do you know about Paerl?"

They all three nodded. Paerl had been the capital city before Valles. It had been destroyed centuries before. Witnesses reported it there one moment, gone the next - all in a flash of light so bright it competed with the sun. Anyone sent to investigate found themselves ill within days of returning and died soon after that. It had become a quarantined area. They said nothing would grow there, even now.

The Magistrate changed the capital to Valles and went on as if none of it had ever happened.

"Paerl was the capital, it was our greatest city. This library is nothing compared to the one there, and it was all wiped out in an instant. The decision was made to keep everything else here, where the militia could protect it."

"But," Eli said. "No one can read any of these, can they?"

"There are quite a few books here that you could read, and I'd be happy to show them to you. As for the rest, a few scholars make the trip each year to study them, try and translate them. Someday, we'll be able to read these books again and our history will be ours again."

"Does anyone know what language this is? It looks similar to what the Templers use," Fyet offered. The librarian - for that's how Eli was thinking of him now - frowned.

"It does? I wish they had more contact with us. If they could translate these, it would mean so much to so many. We don't know what language they're written in, only that it's one of the ancient dialects. There were so many of them, once, it's possible someone still speaks it somewhere out there." He waved vaguely. "Let me know if you want something you can actually read," he added with a smile, then moved off.

Nicer than Shen, Eli thought.

"I swear, it's Templer," Fyet said half to himself.

"I still don't understand why they're here," Eli said. "Why not take them to Valles? Why not have all of our scholars working to translate them? If they really are pieces of our history, it doesn't make sense to keep them all hidden away here on the island, does it?"

Neither of his friends could argue with him.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Eli hopped from right to left foot, trying to get some sensation back into his frozen toes. He had every stitch of clothing he owned on in layers and he still felt the bite of the wind.

They were sheltered just outside the main stable of the keep, a few dozen steps away from the top of The Wall. He was feeling nervous, but the cold was a good distraction.

His horse whuffed at him, the same dun he'd rode from the pier. The hostler'd told him she was assigned to him for the duration of his stay on the island and suggested that he not only get to know her, but that he make a point of caring for her even when he wasn't on patrol.

"Best way to get an animal to trust you is to spend time with em, let them get to know you," he said. "It's important for the horse to trust you."

Eli nodded to himself. It made sense.

Jaycn appeared as if out of nowhere, nodding his head away from the others. He lead his own horse on its strings and Eli quickly followed him. The older man led

him out of the stable and into the thick snow. Large, fat snowflakes were falling so thick he could barely make out the other man just a few feet in front of him.

"Okay, this is your first patrol. Your job is to stay behind me, watch what I do, keep your ears open and don't get us killed," Jaycn said over his shoulder. Eli wanted to laugh, but there was no humor in the other man's voice; none at all. "Your horse knows how to get around up here better than we do, so let her do her thing. Trust her."

That's the second person to tell him that trust with the horse is important in the past couple hours. Absently, he patted the horse's neck and she 'whuffed' in response.

Klen was suddenly there, speaking in a low voice to Jayn before nodding to Eli and moving back into the stable.

"Time for us to move out," Jaycn said, mounting his horse. Eli did the same. "Stay close," Jaycn added as he clicked his horse forward and started up the ramp. After a pair of heartbeats, Eli Followed.

The snow was thick, the wind biting at it whipped over the crest of The Wall, causing him to reach for his scarf and pull it up to cover his ears and the lower half of his face. Blinking through the cold, he spurred his horse forward and onto The Wall.

The sky above was white with clouds and snow. The sound of his horse's hooves changed from an almost hollow clop to something deeper and more ominous as she picked her way through the ice and snow. He was sure that sound was simply his imagination playing tricks on him.

Looking out, he saw nothing but a white, deep haze all around him.

"It's there," Jaycn said softly and Elias noticed that there wasn't really any other sound up here; the rest of the squad were still in the stables and hadn't even begun moving up the ramp. "The forest. Just behind that mist and fog. Waiting. You'll see it before the weeks out. Most times you can hear it too - creaking. On the really bad days, you just feel it, like a pressure building, pushing in on you."

Elias nodded again, eyes squinting. Hoping he had the time, he pulled the scope out of its case again, extended it and put it to his eye. Through the snow and mist, he could just barely make out... something. It could be a tree, but that scared him because a tree as tall as the Wall would be the biggest tree in the world. Imagining a whole island full of such trees just made him shiver.

"Best get moving," Jaycn said as he turned his horse east. Elias followed him, fumbling to replace the scope in its case. "We look for anything out of the ordinary," Jaycn reminded him. "Cracks in the wall, no matter how small, get reported to the Engineers. Anything green, shout your head off. Stick close. The rest of the squad will follow in a few minutes. Ready?"

Eli wanted to say 'no', but he nodded instead. Jaycn looked at him, face blank, then turned and spurred his horse forward. Eli followed.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The first few days of patrol blurred together quickly, filled with heavy snow and endless riding. It didn't take long for Eli's backside to go beyond pain and well into numb. Walking became a chore whenever they would dismount to spell the horses or setup camp at one of the way stations.

These were curious places where a path led down the outside of the Wall to a wide landing that seemed to cling there unsupported. He knew that couldn't be and tried to put the engineering of it out of his mind. He'd spent each night in such a place; they had shelter against the snow and the wind seemed to flow right over without touching them. There was even a small stable for the horses, food and water stores and coal for burning to provide heat. Jaycn told him these stations existed the length of the Wall for the patrols to use and that wood was expressly prohibited for obvious reasons.

"When you're ready, we'll split watches," Jaycn said the first night as he handed him a mug of something hot and steaming. He sniffed it and couldn't place the scent. A taste and it was bitter, but warm.

"Kaff," Jaycn said. "Helps with watch duty. Keeps you awake, alert."

Elias nodded, taking another sip. "How long before you think I'll be ready for my own watches?"

"A few weeks," Jaycn answered, sipping at his kaff, eyes scanning the darkness beyond the wall. Elias looked out as well, but his eyes could make out nothing.

"What do I look for at night?" he asked.

"Same as in the day but the real tell will be what you hear. S'quiet at night. You

listen for anything shouldn't be there. Trees rustling make noise, they creak and swish and at night, it's louder and carries farther. Don't think we'll have to burden the watch every night on our own, Klen will start a rotation and every squad member will have a turn. We need our sleep too."

Elias nodded again. It made sense. On a whim, he closed his eyes and tried to see if there were any noises like Jaycn described, but all he heard was the other man's breathing.

"Don't be disappointed," Jaycn said softly. "Not hearing something is a good thing. Means tonight, everyone lives to see another day."

"Right," Eli said. Thinking for a second, he decided to ask something that had been bothering him ever since Fesh told them about the island. "How come these trees have to be kept behind the Wall, but the ones in my mother's yard," he refused to say 'father' even if it was his house, "Aren't any sort of danger?"

Jaycn sipped his drink. "Don't rightly know for sure. But I've wondered that myself." He shrugged. "I don't know as there's anyone who could tell us one way or the other," he turned and looked Eli in the eye. "Of course, have your mother's trees ever killed anyone?"

"No," Eli admitted, swallowing hard. He turned back to the haze of the night, determined that no trees would kill any men that night. Or the next one, or the next.

Four days in, the weather changed suddenly and he found himself riding with his shirt open and a wet cloth around his neck. The heat was oppressive, the air thick with moisture - he'd never experienced anything like it. Jaycn told him it was rare but it did happen from time to time. The haze that was the interior of the island seemed to be moving like clouds pushed upon the wind. Jaycn was particularly disturbed by this and kept his eyes open. Eli tried to do the same.

That night, they found large paw prints in the snow of the way station and Klen ordered the watch tripled. That night, the snow returned with a vengeance.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Elias reined his horse up and whistled to Jaycn, who was riding between he and the rest of the squad to let Elias see if he could scout on his own. It was the twelfth day out from Deisarch Dain and the weather had cleared again, leaving the sky above bright and blue and the sun hot. He'd already stripped away his heavy coat and had kept his gloves behind his belt all day.

Jaycn trotted up and Elias pointed to a point in the Wall where a crack had formed and a tiny stalk of green no more than a cubit tall poked its way out and into the sunlight. It had a single leaf about the size of his thumb.

"Right, good eye. I'll tell the Sergent. Stay here and watch for *anything*, understood?"

"Yes." For some reason, Elias felt the need to pull his rifle from the holster on his saddle. He tried to take in everything from the Wall, to the crack, the fog that hid the forest - even Jaycn as he trotted back to the rest of the squad. He'd found the crack and the plant, but he still felt like he didn't know really what he was supposed to be doing.

"All right, everyone spread out facing the interior of the island," Klen ordered as the squad rode up. "We take positions along the Wall, weapons out and at the ready - keep your eyes on that fog! Jaycn, on your way, bring back the Engineers."

"Aye, Gunny," Jaycn said, then rode to Elias. "The Engineers live in the Towers and only they can deal with this. Keep your eyes and ears open, I'll be back in an hour or so."

"Right." Elias dismounted as someone came and took his horse. The rest of the squad had already begun taking positions along the Wall, rifles ready and pointed at the trees no one could see. Jaycn spurred his horse and sped off.

Elias took the spot next to Narut, who gave him an uneasy smile. Staring out from the Wall, he could see the blackened earth Fesh had told them about back when they were in training, and that felt like a lifetime ago even though it was only a few weeks. It extended for a mark beyond the Wall, and he couldn't imagine anything being able to grow out there and wondered how anything managed to grow at all with all the snow they'd seen. Then he thought about the fact that it had snowed for days straight, and yet there was no snow on the ground below. Plus, there was this heat today that he didn't think could happen - yet it did, almost as if the island itself was radiating a heat from within. That

thought soured his stomach. How could an island radiate heat? It had to come from somewhere, right?

"How was your watch?" Narut asked him softly. Neither took their eyes away from the space beyond the Wall.

"Quiet," he said, just as softly. "And creepy. I did hear the trees rustling just before my watch was over."

"Oh." His friend looked green. "You saw those paw prints?"

Eli nodded. Larger than the hoof prints left by the horses, larger than anything he'd seen before, really. He had to study them with Jaycn, who pointed out that his hand fit fully inside the middle while the three toes could each hold another hand spread out.

"I heard about the cats," Elias said slowly.

Jaycn nodded. "Big ones. Take a horse right out from under you and drag it over the wall with you still in the stirrups. Ever heard a horse scream?"

Elias shuddered. "No."

"You will. In a full attack, I've seen vines come whipping out of the mist, drag a man off or pierce him through. Branches too. Those deaths are immediate. Trees don't need fresh meat."

Elias got as comfortable as possible, sighting down his rifle towards the trees. The sight at the end of the barrel glared in the light, so he licked his thumb and rubbed it on the sight. It was going to be a long afternoon and he wanted to be ready for anything.

Chapter Thirty

The sound of wagon wheels on stone could be heard long before Elias actually saw the wagon itself. The horses became visible first; a team of four whites gleaming in the midday sun. They wore harnesses of red leather and pulled a coach painted bright red - even the Coachman wore red from head to toe. Two flags flew on poles above the coach, whipping in the wind - one red and black and one gray and black. He had no idea what they meant and couldn't remember ever seeing them before; Paerleon's flag was a black tower against a red and white checkerboard.

Jaycn rode beside the wagon yet apart, surrounded by four riders all in black. They wore helms of black with great big plumes that fluttered and swayed and masks that covered their faces. Long black coats covered them to their high boots of polished black leather. Twin sword hilts could be seen over their shoulders and they each carried two rifles just as Jaycn did. Looking back to the Coachman, he noticed that he or she was also masked. Each mask appeared to be a sculpted face; the Coachman wore a smile, the Black Rider's an angry snarl.

Klen stepped passed him, causing him to jump as he made his way to the coach just coming to a stop. Klen waited patiently for the Coachman to come down and set the steps in place. Jaycn hopped from his horse and tossed the reins to the hostler - the men on horseback flanking him stayed mounted, each moving to positions where they faced the squad but were between all but Klen and the coach, their angry masks slowly scanning the soldiers. Eli shared a quick glance with Narut, who shrugged.

"The Elites," Jaycen said softly as he came to stand next to Eli. "Advice - don't stare at him."

"Who?"

The door to the coach opened and a tiny little man stepped out and down the stairs. Klen bowed to him and started saying something Elias couldn't make out. The man seemed to ignore him, waddling by Klen and towards the plant. He waddled on short, stubby legs, hunched over, his upper torso parallel to the ground and his knuckles dragging on too long arms. He wore the same red color that the coach was painted, all in odd-fitting robes that looked like silk or some other kind of shimmering cloth right up to the tall, conical hat that covered his head and neck. His skin was pale as the snow, his eyes rimmed with black circles - but there was no color within, they were completely white and separated by a long, bulbous nose.

"ThisistheGreen, yesss?" he said in a hissing voice as he stood above the plant. "Tsksktsk, HetriesohHetries, yesyesyesyesYOU!"

Elias jumped as a bony finger shot in his direction. The little man-creature, for that's how Eli thought of him now, wasn't even looking at him. His eyes were fixed on the sprig growing from the rock of the Wall.

"Me?" Elias squeaked.

"DidyoubetouchingGreenwhenfindingyoudidit, yes?"

"Touch it? No! No one has touched it," Elias answered.

"NobetouchingoftheGreenfindingwhendoit, understandingitisohyes, understandingwatchnow," said the man-creature.

"Eyes inward!" Klen ordered, and everyone turned. "Elias! The Engineer told you to watch so watch."

Elias nodded and turned back to where the Engineer had taken what looked like a glowrod out from the coach. He'd seen the Sheriffs using them in Valles before, but they'd always been white rods about the length of a forearm whereas this one was blood red and about half the size. The Sheriffs used them to stun law breakers - all they had to do was point it in the direction of the person, the rod glowed briefly and they just fell, like a puppet with their strings cut.

As the Engineer pointed the red glowrod, a line of light shot out and the plant turned to dust. Changing the angle of the glowrod, he directed the light at the crack in the Wall and the trees began to stir beyond the fog, creaking and rustling loud enough for everyone to hear. The line of light from the rod ceased and Elias could see that the crack was gone, the stone healed and yet the trees still rustled.

"Crackissealedtreesforwatchhournow," the Engineer said to Klen, then he turned his white gaze to Eli. "Learnmustyouforfuture, yes?" he whispered. A quick, chopped cackle and a shake of his head and he returned to his wagon. The Coachman turned it slowly, the wheels creaking on the stone. The four black riders fell in like an honor guard and they headed back the way they had come. Eli stared after him until they disappeared into the mist.

"Right!" Klen shouted. "The Trees'll be uppity for a while so everyone keep your eyes open and watch for anything at all!"

Eli retook his spot next to Narut, who leaned over and whispered, "What did he do? I didn't hear anything."

"He used a rod - like a glowrod only red, and it turned the plant to dust and sealed the crack. I-" he hesitated. "I think it was Magic."

Narut whistled softly. "If it can turn a plant to dust, why not just make a big one and turn it on the Trees?"

Elias shook his head. He had absolutely no idea.

* * *

Seven weeks and four instances of saplings and cracks in the Wall of varying sizes and Elias was looking forward to his cot in Deisarch Dain and a week's worth of sleep that didn't involve snow, ice and a bed of cold stone. Of course, there was no guarantee he'd get that week's worth of sleep, but he could still dream about it. They'd made it exactly one quarter the length of the Wall, then turned around to head back. In just a few days, he *would* be in that cot.

The day had dawned with a light snow falling, and that light snow had turned heavy by midmorning. With just a few hours left til sundown, he could barely see beyond his horse's head, so he was taking it slow and easy, riding point with his scarf covering the lower half of his face and the brim of his hat pulled low. Snow lay heavy on his shoulders, his hat and his horse - he had quickly grown very tired of snow.

The clip-clop of his horse's hooves echoed as he passed through the last Tower on the last leg to Deisarch Dain. For a moment, he imagined he could feel the white eyes of an Engineer upon him, but he knew that was only his imagination. He did take a moment to brush some of the snow from himself and his horse before passing out the other end of the tunnel that bored straight through the Tower. The snow kept falling and it didn't take long before he was covered again.

Shivering, he tried to keep his eyes focused on his task - he was the point scout today, after all. If there were a way to see a speck of green in all this white, he didn't know it, but still he tried. He wasn't far beyond the Tower when he thought he heard something, so he reined his horse in so he could listen closer. Cocking his head to the side, he concentrated but whatever it was, it didn't repeat while he waited, patting his horse on the neck softly.

****whump****

His rifle slid out of its holster at the sound, like something hitting the Wall. He wasn't sure if the bit of black he saw on the Wall ahead was real or not because it vanished again in the white of all the snow coming down. The steady clip-clop of a horse announced the arrival of Jaycn, who slipped up beside him, a rifle in his hands and ready.

"What is it?"

"Heard something," Elias whispered. "Thought maybe I saw something too... Just there..." he pointed with his rifle dead ahead on the wall.

****whump****

"Dammit!" Jaycn whistled loudly, giving the signal for the rest of the squad to ride up double time. Even as he turned to whistle, Elias saw the black again - something coming straight at them at a dead run - something sleek and fast.

His rifle came up and he let the breath he'd been holding slowly leak out as he sighted down the barrel and squeezed the trigger, his rifle sounding louder than he remembered it from his training. He stood in the saddle now, his hand bringing the lever down to fire again and again. With the third shot, Jaycn's rifle joined his. He would have sworn that his first and second shots were right on the money, but whatever was running towards them didn't even flinch. With the third shot, it stumbled. As he and Jaycn fired repeatedly, it finally staggered and fell.

"Reload!" Jaycn shouted.

Elias nodded, reloading as Jaycn pulled his second rifle out. It had all happened so fast, he hadn't even realized he'd fired all twelve shots.

****whump-whump****

Elias looked up to see two more black shapes in the snow. The rest of the squad was coming up behind them when the Wall itself rocked and he was thrown from his horse as it bucked. A sound like thunder surrounded him for a moment, and he thought a huge storm had hit with lightning striking down on them. When he managed to get back on his feet, half the wall in front of them was gone and two, giant black cats were leaping the gap.

He'd been thrown from his horse but he kept hold of his rifle. He brought it up now, firing a dozen shots into the first cat, sending it sprawling back beyond the Wall while the second one landed on a screaming, riderless horse and began ripping it to shreds. Quickly, he reloaded. He tried not to think about the fact that

the cats were at least as large as a horse.

The squad was in disarray, with more than half the men sprawled on the stone and the other half trying to rein in horses gone wild with fear. The cat leapt from the now dead horse, catching a rider and dragging him and his mount to the stone while both screamed. Again, Elias fired until his weapon was empty, but the cat didn't go down so much as just look at him, mouth bloody and nearly grinning at him.

He tried to reload as the cat slowly stalked towards him, but he knew it would not be fast enough. Just as he was about to drop the rifle and pull his sword, a series of shots rang out and the cat staggered, falling as a final shot ripped through its skull with a spray of gray matter and brown he took as blood.

"Grab that supply horse, we may need the pitch - someone start that fire!" Sergeant Klen shouted, then turned to Elias and tossed him something. "Wrap that wound. Can you see all right?"

Elias blinked, then realized that his face was warm. Reaching up a tentative hand, he winced at the cut above his eye where he'd hit the wall. His glove came away bloody, so he took the bandage and quickly wrapped the wound.

"We'll have to get the Engineers to fix this," Klen said as he surveyed the gap in the wall. "Haven't seen it this bad since-"

Elias looked up as Klen was cut off, watching in horror as a branch shot up and ripped into the Wall where he stood, tearing chunks out that tumbled away as Klen himself fell.

The next few moments were pure chaos.

* * *

Narut appeared with a clay pot in his hand, throwing it for all he was worth at the tree. It shattered and flared, flames quickly licking up and down the branches. Another and Elias saw that there was a tiny flame in the top. When it shattered, more fire flared and the tree flailed and smashed at the Wall. More clay pots flew from Militia and where they struck, fire spattered like raindrops.

The tree did not have a face the way it had in his nightmare, no gaping maw of wooden fangs, but he still imagined that he heard it screaming as the fires danced across its skin.

"More cats!" someone shouted, and Elias brought his rifle back up. Sure enough,

there were about a dozen cats on the wall just across from the damaged area. He was sighting down the barrel, trying to make his shots count instead of blindly emptying his gun at them, when he saw something that made him blink. Wiping at his eyes, he tried again. He counted a dozen cats on the other side of the gap, but one of them... One had a rider.

His first thought was to take out that rider, but the cats began to attack, and the rider vanished in the blanket of snow, so he shifted easily enough, coming down on one knee and bringing his rifle to bear on them. He focused on the cats alone, ignoring the chaos with the tree and the men screaming and dying around him. A deep breath and suddenly, everything else melted away.

He squeezed the trigger, watching as a cat's head flared brown and the animal fell. The lever came down and he waited for his next shot, still holding his breath as the first of them leapt up to cross the gap. He took it mid-flight, the impact knocking it back enough that it missed this side of the gap and went tumbling down the Wall.

He was about to take out another when he saw the rider again. He tried to get it in his sights but the winds moaned and the snow flared and it disappeared in a blanket of white. He shifted quickly enough and took out another cat.

"ELI!"

The branch that hit him was covered in flames. He could feel the heat as it slapped him and threw him back a dozen feet. Some part of him tried to roll with it, but he felt something snap in his leg as he hit the stone and half rolled half tumbled - his rifle slipping from his hands and skidding across the ice and out of reach.

There were more trees at the Wall now, impossibly tall and moving faster than they had any right to move, ripping and rending at the stone as he crawled to where his rifle lay. Grunting, he used it to get into a sitting position where he could shoot again. The cats were leaping across the chasm in the stone, ripping through the men as easily as the trees were ripping through the Wall and he had to do something - the breach was nearly through to the other side now and there were few squad members left to stop them.

His mind raced to the rider again, and he closed an eye to sight down the barrel, trying to find it. He couldn't even remember how many shots he had left, if he had any at all, but still he had to try. One breath, then another, eye scanning through the snow, looking for any sign of the rider, men screaming, horses screaming, stone cracking, crashing with a sound like thunder on the ground far below. He didn't know why it had to be the rider he shot, but something inside

screamed that it was the right thing to do, so he did his best to ignore everything else and search.

A cat slinked in to kill a soldier trapped beneath his screaming, wounded horse, and Eli couldn't let it happen so he squeezed off a single round and watched the massive creature crumple. More stones were being ripped from the Wall and he stared into the snow again, watching, searching for that speck of black he'd seen before, the one he knew was a rider that had to be taken out. His leg had ached at first, but now he felt nothing there, nothing at all as if it were not even a part of him anymore. The cold was seeping into him as it never had before, and his eyes began to water.

Then he saw it, the rider; no more than a shadow on the back of a cat larger than the others. Elias squeezed the trigger, the rifle cracking like thunder. He brought the lever down even as the rider staggered and the trees truly did scream, and the cats screamed - the very forest he had not yet seen, screamed. The sound was deafening and it ripped through him, through all of them. It shook the island.

Branches lashed out in a rage now, whipping him into the air and hitting him so hard that he flew head over heels into the Tower wall. The last thing he heard before darkness took him was a sickening crunch.