

~ Chapter 1 ~
A Most Mysterious Mist



LOSING WASN'T AN OPTION. EREVAN WAITED TOO LONG for this moment. The sword of his opponent warned him not to rise under the cloudless midday sky, but Erevan's boots twisted the soft grass beneath them anyway.

Ignore the pain, keep fighting, Erevan thought, leaping from the ground and brushing dirt off his sleeve. He hoisted his blade and charged three swift paces along the field. One good swing was all he needed to bring down the man before him. His father.

Missed.

“You’re not even close,” his father said, dodging Erevan’s slash in an effortless sidestep. His feet moved far faster than an ordinary man his age. Then again, he wasn’t an ordinary man. He was Sir

Lee, the finest swordsman in the entire country of New Lanassall. Maybe the finest swordsman in the whole western world and Erevan wanted... no needed, to beat him.

"I'm not giving up!" Erevan yelled and let out a flurry of swings at his father, only to watch each one be parried and tossed aside.

"Think. Don't just act. Plan your second move before you go for the first," his father lectured, waving a hand in the air. Erevan swung again, this time with all his strength.

Sir Lee spun around him and cut at the back of Erevan's neck. Or. He would've, if they'd been using *real* swords in a *real* battle. Thankfully for Erevan, the swords they wielded were made of wood, fashioned into blades from the branches of a nearby dying oak tree. Their real swords were still sheathed on their belts.

"You fail," his father said with a disapproving grunt before tossing his wooden sword down and adjusting the sheath of the blackened blade on his waist belt. Then the man walked to the oak tree and sat down by their things, two adventuring packs and a hat made of straw. They rested against a gnarled trunk that smelled of wild, scurry-happy critters.

"How long before I can try again?" Erevan asked, readying his stance in the grassy farmland fields and practicing his swordsmanship against an opponent he could actually beat. *The air.*

His green make-shift hooded half cape swishing as he did so, while little drafts of wind slipped in the patched-up holes of his tattered, dirt-ridden clothes.

"Hmm, give me a moment to think," Sir Lee said, blocking the sun from his eyes until he put on his wide hat. A gift from Erevan's mother, the hat was thin but tall and weathered, like Sir Lee himself. The man went nowhere without it.

“The last time you said that, it was five months before I got another chance,” Erevan noted.

“And apparently that wasn’t enough time.” His father gave another grunt. Then he closed his eyes and laid back against the tree trunk.

“I am trying,” Erevan said, still slicing the wind attempting to perfect his form.

“But you aren’t learning,” his father said, sighing.

Erevan stopped and looked at him. “I thought I was getting better.”

“You are.”

“Then why can’t I beat you?” he asked, studying his father’s face for a clue, but it was as stoic as an ancient tortoise. The thin, greying strands of hair on his head signified wisdom and experience, a far contrast from Erevan’s full head of black, twisted locks with golden tips. They both carried scars on their faces. Years of close calls with death as a mercenary were visible on Sir Lee’s square face. Erevan, however, received most of his from a life growing up on the streets of Bogudos. A large cut across his left eyebrow sat as the crowning trophy on his round head.

“You’re not improving at the right things. You’ve gotten faster, your footwork is good, and your instincts are impeccable for someone your age.”

“But?” Erevan pressed, knowing what was coming next.

“But, you’re too reckless,” his father said, shaking his head. “A man must think before he acts.” One of his father’s many, *a man must* quotes, most of which he’d told Erevan a hundred times before.

“You always say that.”

“It’s always true.”

“You told me to be aggressive so I could punish my opponent’s mistakes.”

“I also told you to be patient to avoid making mistakes of your own,” his father said, sighing. “And yet even with those big pointy ears of yours, you only managed to hear half of what I told you.”

“You always say that too.” Erevan frowned. He felt the tips of his slightly pointed ears, proof of his half-elven ancestry. He looked at his father’s ears. Rounded, like any other human. Only able to hear half as far and clear as Erevan could. Ears were one of the two easy ways to tell humans and elves apart. The other clue was their eyes. Like his skin, Erevan’s eyes were brown with a little amber, but their color was more vibrant than a human’s and they saw twice as far.

Unfortunately, it was like that for all his senses. The stench of cow droppings was impossible to miss coming on the breeze from a nearby farm. Their next destination.

The local townguard captain wanted to meet with them, and supposedly, there was someone of mild importance in his care.

“You’d think some elven wisdom would’ve passed down to you. Or that you’d inherit some patience at least,” his father said, shaking his head.

“So, if I learn to be more patient, can I try again today?” Erevan asked, holding his breath for the answer. He knew he could beat his father... *probably*.

“Trying again today would be the opposite of patience,” Sir Lee said, chuckling. He stood, and his heavy armor clattered. Then he nodded off to the west, where a red and white barn stood half a mile away surrounded by fields of wheat. “Let’s get this over with. It’s a long road back home.” He slung his pack over his shoulders and walked toward the barn.

The assortment of items within the pack jingled as he did so, coin, torches, a compass; the man carried everything in that bag. Then he lobbed the other pack to Erevan which contained their rations and carried the welcoming scent of bread. Erevan tossed the bag over his back as well and followed his father.

“This job wasn’t too bad, you know. I can see why you chose this life,” Erevan said.

“Escorting a traveling merchant wagon along the safer roads of the country is not my typical mercenary work, and that’s the only reason I let your mother talk me into allowing you to come. Things might’ve went fine this time, but it didn’t involve bandits, goblins, or any of the deadly creatures in the wilderness of this country.”

“I’m not afraid of them, I’m a better swordsman than every town guard in Bogudos, you said it yourself.”

“Being a mercenary is about a lot more than your skill with a blade.”

“Then why are you making me beat you in a duel before you let me join you as a mercenary?” Erevan asked. And when his father didn’t answer, Erevan continued, “I’ll listen to whatever you say while we’re on a job, I promise.”

Sir Lee grunted. “That would be a first.”

“If it’s two of us working, we could take on bigger missions and earn more coin,” Erevan pointed out. He needed gold, and lots of it to fix his mistake from two years ago. But that wouldn’t convince his father. “Besides, we both know someone who could use the extra coin for the school she wants to build,” Erevan said, and his father’s face went flatter and drier than an old prune.

“Don’t bring your mother into this. She’d have my neck if I got you killed.”

“Well, I could use the extra coin to—”

“Egg the townguard barracks?” Sir Lee asked, cutting him off and clearly trying to shift the conversation away from what Erevan was going to say.

“That was a long time ago. I’m mature now,” Erevan assured.

“Is that so? I seem to recall them chasing you through the city rather recently,” his father said with another of his grunts.

“You’re just getting old. The last time that happened was when I was fifteen.”

“You turned sixteen last month,” his father said. Erevan grinned.

“Like I said, a long time ago,” Erevan repeated, holding back a chuckle. “And I was only being chased because they thought I was selling magic dust. Like I’d ever do that after what happened two years ago.”

“Running from them doesn’t make you look very innocent.”

“You’re the one who told me to be wary of the townguards.”

“I also told you to follow their orders,” his father said.

“You give a lot of conflicting advice.” Erevan frowned.

“It makes perfect sense, son, you’re simply too young to understand. That’s why you aren’t ready to be a mercenary,” his father told him. “Now, let’s see what the good captain wants,” he said with what might’ve been a hint of sarcasm in his ever-calm voice.

They were a little ways from the front of the barn, but Erevan could still see the three people that stood there. One was the townguard captain of the area. They’d met only once and already weren’t on good terms. He’d been the one to inspect the merchant wagon Erevan and Sir Lee escorted to the capital city, and the captain had made more than one rude remark about the city of Bogudos and all its inhabitants.

The captain's glossy, leaf-colored badge shone on the chest of his leather armor as he tapped a finger on his sword's pommel, waiting for an excuse to unsheathe it. He stood there; his nose turned up as though having to walk on his own two feet was beneath him.

Lurking nearby was a stranger with a black hood pulled so far over their head that their face couldn't be seen, even under the noonday sun. Their hood extended into a long dark cloak that covered them down to their fine leather boots.

Before them both was an old lady with creaky old bones, white hair, and dirty farm clothes. She held firm to a shovel too heavy for her to lift as she cowered in the presence of the captain and his dark-hooded companion. Erevan perked his ears up and listened as he walked.

"Whether or not you can spare it is not the issue. Taxes are owed," the captain said. The old lady's head drooped. She gave a quick glance behind her. A couple cows sat indifferently in their stables, unaware of their owner's predicament. Next to them, behind a barrel, was a small child hugging a stitched toy and eavesdropping on the conversation.

"We can hardly afford to eat," the old lady said. "Trade with the home country has slowed so much since the war—"

"I don't need a history lesson. I was there," the captain said, raising a hand to cut the old lady off. "You must understand these are challenging times for all of us."

"Are they challenging times for you?" the old lady asked, pointing a finger at him. "You and your men come and take from us, and for what? Where's our coin going? That's what I'd like to know?" The hooded person shifted at the old lady's words but didn't speak.

“Consider it an investment for a brighter tomorrow,” the captain said, revealing an unpleased smile.

“Those aren’t your words. That’s what they told you to say,” the old lady said, scowling.

“If you’d like more information, there are weekly meetings not ten miles west from here in the capital to discuss—”

“I can’t up and leave my farm to go stroll down there, I have mouths to feed,” she said, stopping him. “Are my grandchildren supposed to tend to the farm themselves?”

The captain rolled his eyes. “Where are their parents?”

“Dead,” she said with a glare. “I had to hire a field hand just to keep the place running. He’s a hard worker, but I can barely afford to pay him.” She pointed a finger out into the wheat fields where a black-bearded dwarven man who stood maybe four and a half feet tall fumbled a bushel into a sack.

“I am, of course, willing to overlook your offenses due to the circumstances. If you can offer me something off official records. Otherwise, you’ll need to come with me.”

“I have nothing except the clothes on our backs. If you’re here to arrest an old widow for non-payment, then do what you must. But please, make sure my grandchildren aren’t left here to fend for themselves.”

“No promises,” the captain said, grinning slightly.

“Leave her alone!” Erevan yelled, hurrying their way. The captain turned to Erevan and his grin widened.

“Ah, the boy from the city of swamprats,” the captain said, tightening the grip on his sword.

“And yet none of them are as filthy as you,” Erevan snapped back.

“That’s enough, son,” Sir Lee said from behind him. The captain’s face shuddered at the sight of Sir Lee, and he promptly released the grip of his sword, but he continued to tower menacingly over the old lady.

Erean looked back at his father. “I won’t sit around and watch them treat her like this.”

“We won’t,” Sir Lee said.

“Evlynna bless you two,” the old lady said. Sir Lee forced a smile in return. Sir Lee was many things, but unlike his wife, he was not a believer in Evlynna. Erean had yet to fully make up his mind on the matter.

Crack. Breaking bone. A scream pierced the air. Erean snapped his head to it. An eerie growing cloud of fog swelled, already the size of the barn. Inside of the swirling mist were a faint pair of eyes as it enveloped the spot the dwarven man had been in the wheat fields. And the mist was expanding.

Erean’s feet were already moving. “He needs help!” he shouted. Without another thought, he rushed to the screams which grew more desperate with every step. And to *the fog*. Losing sight of everything, even himself.