

The Western Front  
28 January 1915

It had rained most of the day, and the clouds hung low in the swirling gray sky. Despite the freshness of the rain, the air in the trench was thick and stale.

“Hey, do you want a smoke?” asked Jean-Pierre, offering his pack of cigarettes to Eli, sitting beside him.

Eli turned to the eager-eyed young man, who had a thin mustache and a tuft of hair on his muddy chin. “No, thank you.” Jean-Pierre had stayed close to Eli since he and the other replacements had arrived two days before, but Eli was reluctant to respond to the man with more than just pleasantries. He knew most humans enjoyed friendships—relationships that seemed to bond them together, even in the most trying times—but the concept felt uncomfortable to Eli, who was used to more formal relations.

Jean-Pierre lit his cigarette, then pushed his blue cap back with a mud-stained hand. “What did you say your name is?”

“Eli.”

“Eli the Giant,” smirked Jean-Pierre.

“I’m not a giant,” frowned Eli.

“You’re huge. You’ve got to be two meters! What did your mother feed you?”

Eli started to answer, then simply shrugged.

“You don’t smoke, you don’t drink, you don’t curse—but I still like you,” Jean-Pierre grinned. His brown eyes narrowed. “With looks like you, I bet you have been with plenty of women, no?”

Eli turned to Jean-Pierre. He had inspected the Frenchman’s persona on their first meeting and perceived an ordinary, unexceptional man. But Jean-Pierre was not entirely void; he had a charismatic quality that drew others to him. It was a quality that intrigued Eli.

“What? You toy with me!” Jean-Pierre scoffed. “You haven’t been with a woman? Or maybe you just don’t like to tell, eh?” The Frenchman’s eager eyes narrowed as he studied Eli. He took a drag from his cigarette. “When we get back, I’ll take you to the best brothel in Paris. When they see you, they’ll let you in for free!” he laughed. “They’ll probably give me a discount for bringing you! Ha! I can’t wait to get my hands on one of those beauties!”

Eli’s pleasant smile faded, and he turned away as Jean-Pierre continued his lustful chatter. Eli looked down the crowded trench and thought of the women he had felt an attraction to. They were not a few, but their appeal was more akin to a boy’s crush on his teacher. And unlike Lu and the others, they were cravings he had never acted on. He thought of Ana, the waitress in Sarajevo. He knew she was drawn to him. Eli wondered what would have happened had he acted on her invitation. He shook the thought from his head and stared down the trench.

While there were many things Eli could discern, such as an individual’s unique gifts or the consequences of one’s actions in the complex matrix of life, the repercussions of his own works were less clear to him. Eli’s gratification came by serving, guiding, and protecting mortals—that was his purpose—but human passion had long intrigued him.

Eli knew mutual attraction was a large part of the formula for propagation, but he didn’t understand how such allurements formed. He knew the act of copulation was the practical outcome of that formula, but he wondered why it was used so freely when its consequences were so profound. He knew love between a man and a woman could be lasting and fulfilling or fleeting and painful, but he didn’t understand why.

Eli remembered Plato teaching of love in the shade of the Parthenon. Eli understood *Philia*; affection for mortals was in his nature. It was romantic love or *Eros*, with all of its facets, that fascinated the watcher.

As Eli's mind drifted, his gaze settled on a soldier huddled and shivering near the bend of the trench. The soldier's rifle leaned against the sandbags, his head down, his glasses speckled with rainwater. While Eli had discerned the personas of most of the soldiers in his platoon, this man had somehow eluded him. He nudged the prattling Jean-Pierre. "Who is that at the end of the trench?"

Jean-Pierre paused and turned. "That guy with the glasses? He's called Sébastien. He won't get you any girls. Maybe a book on female anatomy from the college in Paris," Jean-Pierre laughed. When he realized Eli was sincere in his question, Jean-Pierre's grin faded, and he shrugged. "No one knows him very well. I'm surprised he's still alive. He doesn't seem very savvy, if you know what I mean."

"He has no friends?" asked Eli.

"He was friends with Gaubert until..."

"Until what?"

"Until he got it last week," sighed Jean-Pierre.

"He was killed?" Eli asked, turning back to Sébastien.

"Sniper's bullet. Fast."

Eli nodded. "But he's not your friend?"

Jean-Pierre wrinkled his chin. "No, he and I are too different."

"Too different." Eli's eyes narrowed. "But you want to be my friend."

Jean-Pierre shrugged. After sucking in tobacco smoke, he said, "You and I are much the same, no? Women think we are beautiful. They want to have us, eh?"

Eli surveyed Jean-Pierre's face. He thought his missing teeth and foul breath might make him less of a prize. "Have you had any friends die?"

Jean-Pierre's gaze moved to his cigarette. He tapped the ashes off and nodded. "Two."

"What are their names?"

"I don't want to talk about them," Jean-Pierre scowled.

Eli nodded, then turned back to Sébastien. Eli saw in him a tremendous intellect. He envisioned an older, bearded Sébastien teaching at a university. He saw him treating sick people in a hospital and working in a laboratory. Eli's blue eyes narrowed. *This man will cure diseases.* Eli sighed. *That is, if he survives the war.*