



Reflections: An Eikasia Prelude
By Illise Montoya

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The Manard House knew something of an awakening when summer came around, because the first week of the month brought about a heavy surge of activity with the weeklong Ortian holiday. The servants bustled putting up fresh curtains, lining the archways with golden wreaths, hanging up sun discs with beveled faces, and sprinkling potpourri along the windowsills. Three days into the special week, Warner was in his study making political arrangements for the new year, Brianna was trying to find some peace painting in her bedroom, and Elmiryn was being fitted for a new birthday dress. She found it hard not to fidget.

“Lady Elmiryn, I *mean* it, I don’t want to poke you. *Please* be still.” Her attendant, Julianna, was a pretty twenty-something with rich caramel colored hair that had streaks of bright gold here and there. Her freckled nose wrinkled as she pinned up a bunch of baby blue silk.

The girl gave a melancholy sigh. “Why *now*? Can’t we do this *next* week?”

“You know very well that your seventh birthday will have passed by then! Don’t you want to look pretty for your party?”

“Don’t I always look pretty?” The girl asked guilelessly. Her mother told her this so much that she had started to take it as a fact—and as most facts went, it lost its charm on Elmiryn.

She watched as a dust mote floated towards her face. Her eyes crossed as it came too close for her to follow. She heard Julianna laugh at her, and the girl gave a happy smile. She loved making adults laugh.

“Yes, lady Elmiryn. You are very pretty. Now unless you’d like to be a very pretty *pincushion* you’ll mind my warning and cease your fidgeting!”

The next day, when Elmiryn was making her dolls swan dive off her dresser into a deadly vat of broccoli soup (smuggled in from the kitchens), her mother, Brianna, came into her room, Julianna and two slaves, a Santian and a Fanaean, behind her.

“Elle, we need to decide on a hairstyle for your birthday party...and what is that? Soup? What have we said about bringing food into your room!” The girl’s mother was dressed in a slate gray dress with jeweled shoulders, the cut opening at the front in an hourglass shape to reveal creamy lace. Wrapped about her waist was a glossy forest green ribbon that tied into a rose-shaped buttress in the back. An abalone clip pulled her warm brown hair back, and her ears held matching earrings. The woman’s face broke into her wide smile, and she sat on her daughter’s bed. “Oh, never mind that. Come here, sweetest!”

Elmiryn would have protested, but Brianna knew that the youth was less likely to resist her request than Julianna’s. The girl pouted, but without an objection, she went to sit next to her mother, whilst Julianna stood off to the side. The slaves, each carrying a silver tray bearing hairdressing accessories, set their burdens onto the dresser. Then they turned in unison, bowed, and quietly left the room. The child attendant sat at the floor of her housemistress, and carefully she reached over and took up the white-bristled silver brush, which had a mirror fixed into the back of its head. The attendant held the mirror-

side to the girl and her mother, and Brianna pondered the reflected image.

“What do you think, dear? What style do you wish to see on your birthday?”

“Can’t we just comb my hair?” Elmiryn mumbled, her lip pouting further.

“You *know* that isn’t an option. Come! Would you like to see braids? A bun? We can put flowers in your hair—now wouldn’t that be just darling?”

“Okay. Whatever you want me to look like, mother.”

Brianna frowned in the reflection. “Oh, Elmiryn! You make this such a *chore*! Not many little girls your age are given a chance to decide their appearance, you know.”

“She’s right, lady Elmiryn,” Julianna said earnestly. The girl’s eyes fixed on her attendant’s pretty face. “Take another look at the mirror. Pretend it’s *magic*, and whatever you imagine will appear. Now think of all the things you like—from art, from the stories we tell you, from what you see in the city—and think what would *you* like to see?”

Elmiryn’s frown deepened, but her lower lip pulled back to a contemplative curve. Her little hands went to the sides of the mirror, and her cerulean eyes lit up with thought. The girl took a deep breath. “I see...”

When the girl trailed off, her mother patted her knee. “Yes, Elle? What do you see?”

“I see branches sprouting out of my head!” Elmiryn giggled out. “And they’ll bloom into pretty red flowers!”

The attendant tried and failed to contain her laugh.

Brianna gave a suffering smile. “That’s...*nice*, dear. But I’m afraid we’ll have a little trouble growing that within less than a day, let alone getting your father’s approval for such a thing!”

Elmiryn’s pout returned full force. With a heavy sigh, she said, “Fine then. I see a ponytail.” She didn’t even look at the mirror this time.

Julianna gave an enthusiastic nod. “A ponytail is good, milady! Very elegant! Very pretty!”

“If you want flowers, we can make a crown for you, sweetest. But not red, I think. *White* is more appropriate.”

Elmiryn just let out another sigh.

Then the day of her birthday came. A small ball was held at the Manard estate, and the newly turned seven-year-old was the center of all the attention. She sat aside her mother whilst Warner sat on Brianna’s left. Their head table was decorated with silver and gold linings and generous amounts of confection. Across the room was a long table weighed down with presents. Elmiryn stared at them longingly.

“Elle, your gifts won’t up and walk away,” Her mother murmured to her. “Why don’t you go play with your cousins?”

“Because they’re stinky,” Elmiryn said primly.

Brianna blinked down at her daughter. “Now why do you say that?”

“They play boring games and think they can bully me. Can’t I just open my presents?”

Her mother frowned reprovingly. “Now darling, you know your cousins love you very much, and they came all this way to celebrate your birthday! Just play with them a while, sweetest, and I promise that the time will pass quickly.”

“But mother—”

“Elmiryn,” Warner said, his eyes managing to cut across at her even as he did not move his head. “Do. As. Your. Mother. *Says*.”

Elmiryn shot up very straight at her father's look. The last time he'd looked at her that way, she wasn't allowed to play outside for a *week*. "Yes, father!"

With that, the little girl slid from her seat, her puffy baby blue dress hissing with each step she took. Her eyes gave one last longing look toward the presents before they flickered to her four cousins gathered near it. There was Roark and Lydia, asymmetrical twins with pumpkin colored hair and wide slate-gray eyes flecked with gold. Then there was Berian, the dirty blonde with pickle-green eyes with red sauce on his white night shirt. And finally...

"Hi Adara..." the redhead mumbled as she approached her eldest cousin. Adara was nine-years-old and had long wavy brown hair.

"Hullo baby cousin," Adara said, giving her best adult smile.

Elmiryn resisted the urge to scowl. "What are you playing?" she asked in as neutral a voice as she could manage.

"Family. Roark and Lydia are the babies. Berian is the father. You can be the mother if you'd like."

At this, the seven-year-old blinked. "What are *you* going to be?"

"I'm like a director. Have you ever seen a play? I tell everyone what they're supposed to do."

"But don't the father and mother say that?" Berian interjected sullenly. He was just a few weeks younger than Elmiryn, and the girl actually liked him quite a bit. They both liked racing and wrestling, and once, the boy had eaten an earthworm, which the girl still giggled about to this day.

Adara tilted her head back and gazed at him coolly. "How old are you, Berian?"

The boy drew himself up. "Six-and-three-quarters!"

"Well *I'm* nine-and-a-half, so I know more about Family than you do! That makes me *director*."

Berian's shoulders slumped, defeated.

It went without saying that Elmiryn hated Adara. The older girl was bossy, snobby, and vindictive. It didn't help that once her cousin had snitched on her when the redhead tried to sneak to a party being held at the slave quarters. That was the time Warner had barred her from the outdoors, all thanks to Adara.

Roark and Lydia, who wore matching white and black outfits with silver ribbons, exchanged looks. Elmiryn did not dislike the twins, but they were very much followers and had little to contribute to any game save to just nod their heads. Nothing was duller than two human dolls for playmates.

But Elmiryn wasn't going to give over the night.

"Well it's *my* birthday tonight, and I say, *I'm* the director," she declared with chin thrust out.

This earned her a sharp glare, but the others seemed to perk at the idea. Berian stepped forward quickly, grasping Elmiryn's shoulder. "Yeah! It's Elmiryn's birthday! We have to do what *she* says!"

Adara huffed. "Well what does *she* want to do then?"

Elmiryn smiled, showing all teeth. "We can't play Family without good *toys*..."

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Within a few minutes, the children had managed to escape the watchful eyes of their attendants under Elmiryn's leadership. Giggling at the audacity of their slipping away from supervision, the group followed the birthday girl from room to room, collecting items, before they finally ended in Elmiryn's bedroom. There, they laid out their prizes on the girl's bed sheet: a wooden toy horse, a small porcelain doll, a monocle, a pretty pink ribbon, and her mother's silver mirror brush.

Elmiryn handed these out to everyone, but kept the brush for herself. "Okay, now we all have what we need!" She gestured near her toy box. "This is the children's room," she pointed toward her large bookcase, "That is father's study," she pointed at her small vanity dresser, "And this is mother's room." She waved the brush through the air. "Dinner will be ready soon! Everyone has to get ready. I'll come around so that you can tell me what you want to look like."

The children went off to their respective spaces, but in a few minutes, they were intermingling and slipping into their make-believe roles with excitement and giggles. Even Adara seemed to forget her earlier power struggle in favor of playing the haughty mother. Berian grumphed and harrumphed a lot, smoking a pretend pipe and squinting at everything through his monocle—a very accurate depiction of his grandfather—for his actual father had died years ago at war. The twins cooed and rolled around, playing with Elmiryn's toys.

The redhead took to her role of "director" with relish.

"Roark, you have to pretend you're a doggie. Of course children do that! I did when I was a child! And Berian, put your finger under your nose. There! Now you've got a mustache! Adara, *look* Lydia is crying. Stop being a bad mother and go make her feel better!"

When enough time seemed to have passed, Elmiryn announced it was dinnertime. She came around with her silver brush mirror and held it up to everyone. "Now what do you see yourself wearing tonight?"

Berian announced he was going to wear a cloak of snails. Roark and Lydia decided they too wished to wear a cloak of snails. Berian complained that the twins were copying him, so they changed to wearing diapers and golden crowns with big fat jewels. Adara whined that they were ruining the game. Elmiryn snapped that she wasn't even trying to be a mother, just a snob. This made the older girl declare that they were all stupid children in real life, and she didn't want to play with them anymore.

And just like that, the fun was over.

As her cousins left to return to the festivities, Elmiryn stayed behind to hide her stolen "toys" under her bed. A clear voice reached her from the doorway, and the girl froze, her face turning red. Turning, she saw Brianna and Julianna standing there—her mother with her hands on her hips, and her attendant with one hand over her mouth. Standing behind them with downturned heads were her cousins.

*Snitches!* Elmiryn thought with clenched teeth.

"Sweetest, come here please," her mother said ominously.

The girl sighed and obeyed. Gripped in her hand was the silver brush.

Brianna raised an eyebrow at her as she reached down and took away the brush. "Elle, what, may I ask, were you doing with all those things?"

"Playing Family?" she mumbled.

"Are these things *yours* to play Family with?"

“No...”

Brianna just shook her head with a slight smirk. “Sweetest...” With two fingers, she gave the girl a smack on the forehead that stung, and then pointed down the hall wearily. “Just get back to the party before your father sees.”

Elmiryn didn’t need telling twice. She ran, her cousins in tow, back to the guest hall where the partygoers were just settling in for their first serving of dinner. The redhead glared at Adara. “You snitched, didn’t you?”

“Did not!” The older girl snapped back. She pointed at the girl’s face. “It was *your mother’s mirror brush* that got us caught! She was looking for it to freshen up before dinner was served!”

Elmiryn pouted, but said nothing further. The rest of the evening went well enough, and Warner never heard of her daughter’s antics. That night, the girl received as presents: a new doll house, many new dresses and accessories, and a young live horse, which she excitedly named “Scabby” due to how the filly’s ruddy brown coat reminded her of the scab she had on her left knee (but this was vetoed by her mother and father both, who quickly renamed the animal, “Rose.”)

That night, when Brianna was tucking Elmiryn to bed, she stroked the girl’s hair and said with a smile. “Sweetest, mother has one more present for you. Are you ready?”

Her daughter gave an eager nod, all appearances of sleepiness fleeing her, and her mother laughed. From beneath the bed, she pulled out a slim white box, and held it out to the girl. Elmiryn took it and opened it quickly. She gave a small gasp.

Inside was her mother’s mirror brush.

“I know you love it, so I wanted you to have it, Elle.”

Elmiryn gave a huge grin, hugging her mother. “Mama, thank you!”

Brianna laughed, hugging her daughter back. “*Mother*, not Mama...but you are welcome, Elmiryn. I love you very much.” She pulled back, holding the mirror side up to her daughter’s face. “Well? It’s a new year for you! You had fun playing Family with your cousins, didn’t you? And what role did you play? *I think I see a very lovely wife in the future!*”

The girl just blinked at her mother. “That’s not what I see.”

Her mother gave her a puzzled look. “Oh? Then what do you see?”

Elmiryn smiled at her mother as if she were being silly. “I see me, mother. Just *Elmiryn.*”

Brianna laughed again, a full and beautiful sound. She thought the girl was just being overly literal to make herself seem more mature. She kissed her daughter goodnight and left her to sleep. Elmiryn settled into her covers with the mirror brush clutched to her chest, more secure than she had ever felt before, because in her heart, she knew she had answered the very question her mother had meant.

*What do you see?*

*I see me*, the girl thought with a sleepy smile. *Just me.*

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## **About the Author – Illise Montoya**

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Illise Montoya was born and raised in California. She's married to an incredible Air Force soldier and owns three cats: Freya, Xena, and Captain Nathaniel Garro. Her interests include video gaming, film and animation, comic books, and of course, literature. When she's not shooting feral ghouls or watching her favorite drama show, she's either studying, spending time with her family, or writing either one of her ongoing free web serials: Eikasia and Akumu Love Panic! Her zodiacs are the Dragon and the Sagittarius. She's a proud brony (or pegasister if you prefer), she's openly bisexual, her favorite color is red, and the Uncanny X-men are her absolute favorite superheroes. Did we mention she's a geek?

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