



Tooth and Nail: An Eikasia Prelude
By Illise Montoya

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Table of Contents

[Tooth and Nail: A Prelude](#)

[Lexicon](#)

[About the Author – Illise Montoya](#)

[Connect with the Author](#)
[Other Books and Stories by Illise Montoya](#)
[Preview – Eikasia: Tributaries](#)

Tooth and Nail
An Eikasia Prelude
[Back to top](#)

"No!" Nyx shouted, scuttling far beneath her bed.

Her mother, Fotini, extended a hand to the shying girl. "My little night shard, please come out."

"No! No, no, *no!* I don't want him to see!"

"Nyx, your brother misses you. I hardly think he'll care if--"

"No!"

Fotini hissed, a sharp sound from the back of her throat. The young girl squeaked, and she tried to press harder back into the wall as though it could swallow her into safety. She bumped her head on the bed in her struggle, and her eyes teared. The seven-year-old covered her head and started to cry, her wails audible even as she tried to smother the sound. A hand grabbed her by the ankle and she was pulled out from under the bed with one strong tug.

A sigh. The girl was gathered up in warmth and soft wool. She turned her face into her mother's bosom and clutched at her. Her soothing scent filled the youth's lungs.

"My little girl, my Nyx of the night. Haven't you learned yet? Your struggles hurt you in the end. *Ehna, ehna*, shhhh...let A-ma see." Fotini took her head and brushed back Nyx's hair to see the scratch on her scalp.

Nyx sniffled. "Is it gone yet?"

"Yes my darling." Fotini kissed her forehead. "It's gone. It was only a scratch after all."

Just then a small kitten came tumbling through the doorway, batting at dust. At the sight of them, it began to mewl. Her mother let out a low growl. "Atalo, you were to *wait* for us!" Like lightning, the woman snatched out and caught the kitten by the scruff of the neck. The kitten went limp as she picked it up and glowered at it.

Nyx snickered even as she wiped away the last of her tears.

Fotini pinched her ear and the girl squealed, "M'sorry, m'sorry!" Tears cropped up anew.

"Don't think you're free, Nyx. You *will* run with us tonight. *All* of us. Last month you made me look the fool, disappearing like you did." The woman gave Nyx's ear a tug as she was forced to her feet and led out of the room.

"I don't know why you're making such a fuss." The woman went on to say. "I, for one, think it looks lovely."

Nyx whimpered as she was led to the kitchen. "I look *stupid!*"

"You do *not*. You look beautiful. There are plenty of other girls that have manes." The woman paused, releasing the girl after guiding her into a chair. "Oh...well I suppose there aren't any in Tosmai..." she admitted reluctantly.

"That's because only *boys* have manes. Why do *I* have to have one?"

Fotini sighed. "Oh, Sweet Aelurus, this child is so tiresome! Nyx, *leave the matter alone*. At the least, I can assure you, you didn't get the trait from me. You must've gotten that from your father."

"I'm going to shave my head," Nyx mumbled.

"Enough!" The woman snapped. She started to rifle through the cupboards. "Focus on something else. Help me decide what's for dinner tomorrow."

Nyx sighed and laid her head down, gazing around the kitchen. "Huckleberry bread and white honey," the girl said.

Fotini smiled patiently. "That'd be good for *dessert*...What about *dinner*?"

"Fried vegetables, and..." Nyx thought for a moment. "Beef," she said decisively.

The girl hopped up from the chair and stepped over her little brother, who'd taken to rolling on the floor. She hefted herself up onto the counter with the aid of her mother and pointed at the brown sugar. "I read somewhere that if you rub the raw beef with brown sugar and let it sit overnight, it tastes good."

"Where'd you read this?" Fotini asked, frowning.

Nyx blushed. She'd used her allowance to buy books from an elven merchant that had been coming near the village. One of the books she'd bought was a cooking book, since her mother was always making her help in the kitchen. "From one of my classmates," the girl said shyly.

Fotini squinted her eyes in suspicion. "It's another one of those elven books, isn't it?"

Nyx swallowed and bowed her head, instinctually covering her ears.

The woman helped the girl down. "Nyx, it's fine that you want to read. But why can't it be Ailuran books? Aren't they interesting?"

The girl frowned. "A-pa said they lie."

Fotini sighed and covered her face with her hand. "Sweet Aelurus...Alvis...even *now* your actions haunt us..."

The mother turned and knelt down. "Nyx, listen to me. I can understand reading a cooking book. Your tip was very good. But *please* my little nightshard...try and appreciate *our* culture a bit more. There's nothing wrong with reading about your own people!" The woman stood, her long dark hair sweeping. "Now run along and get dressed. We leave in less than an hour...and no more *fussing!*"

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Nyx carried Atalo in her arms. He was still in the form of a kitten. She glowered at him. "Why don't *you* get your ears pinched? Why is it always *me*?"

As if answering her, her brother pressed his paw against her nose, making her look like a pig. The girl cuffed him on the head. "*Cajeck!*" she snapped.

The cat yowled at her, biting at her purple smock with tiny teeth.

"You two *behave*," Fotini warned. Her mother was dressed up in her finest set of clothes--a tanned leather shroud with the hood down, the hide embroidered with black silk thread. She had on fur boots, and a beaded belt. Her long dark hair was pulled back with an obsidian clip.

"Aren't you going to make him shift back?" Nyx asked, still glaring at her little brother, whose drool was soaking her collar.

Fotini shook her head as she grabbed her large sling bag off the hook. "It's far too close to night. Remember your lessons? Shapeshifting too much back and forth can tax your spirit. It's safer if he remains as he is."

"But I read somewhere that if he stays like this too long--"

"Nyx!" Fotini gave her a warning glare.

Nyx sighed as she followed her mother out the front door and down the steps of their daikut house. Outside, there were many people hurrying along the road, anxious and excited. The evening seemed electric. Despite herself, the girl gradually came out of her sullenness. At the main square, there was much jubilation. Flag bearers bore the symbol of the nation high over their heads, a full moon and three tear drops falling from it. She could smell barbecued pork and roasted nuts and felt hungry.

"A-ma, can we get a snack, please?" Nyx asked, tugging on her mother's sleeve.

"Not now, child. The procession comes!" Fotini craned her head, trying to see over the crowd. The woman gave up, looking frustrated. "Oooh...I can't see a thing from here! But maybe you and Atalo can get up closer. Just don't go wandering too far! I'll be right here." She gave the girl a small push forward at the back.

Nyx slouched, glaring through the forest of bodies down the road leading into the central square. Sure enough, she could see a large body of people marching toward them in the distance. The sulk on her face faded as Nyx moved to the front of the crowd. There, many of her peers from school stood waiting. They turned and regarded her with varying expressions--most negative.

"What's Nyx the Nitwit doing up here?"

Nyx turned and glared at the boy nearest her. He had dark hair flecked with brown and narrowed hazelnut eyes. Kilen, Leander's nephew. He smelled like fresh cotton and dirt. The two children stared each other down. Meanwhile, the adults around them remained oblivious of the blossoming exchange. People cheered as the marchers drew closer.

"Kilen, you're an ass," Nyx said, rolling her eyes.

The boy mimicked her voice. Then he pointed at her and jeered, "Go stick your head in dung! This is for *true* Ailurans only!"

Nyx smiled at him coolly. "Then I'll be sure to let your dollies know you're coming home early!"

Kilen's face turned pink as the children around them giggled. He stomped his foot. "Stop it! If you laugh with her, then you aren't coming to my birthday party!" The laughter stopped. The boy flashed his eyes at her victoriously. "Your father was a freak

and so are you! No Ailuran girl is supposed to have a *mane!*" He turned to those around them. "Come on, let's get away from the Nitwit. Her evil might rub off on us!"

The children migrated, following the boy as he left to stand near his uncle Leander, who was speaking with Orestes, the village leader. Nyx sighed and watched them go with a growing sense of defeat, not even caring that Atalo had pulled the top button off her smock.

"Kilen's got fleas in his brain."

Nyx blinked and turned. An older girl with two dark pigtails and amethyst eyes grinned at her. Behind her stood a slouching boy with flushed cheeks, warm-honey eyes, and curly umber hair. "Don't listen to him, 'kay? Not everybody hates you. And not everybody's a'scared of that *cajeck*." She held out her hand. "My name's Taila."

Nyx hesitated. She'd seen Taila before around the village. She was a very tomboyish girl and very strong headed. She was nine? Maybe ten? No...twelve. Rumor had it that she had a crush on Nyx's older brother, but the girl didn't trust such talk. There was also a rumor that Taila had once tamed a wild unicorn, after all. Nyx had read enough to know that unicorns had gone extinct more than 200 years ago. But the girl didn't like the idea of being impolite, so she moved to greet Taila in similar fashion. Just then her brother took to wiggling. She couldn't get a hand free to shake with. Her face burned as she struggled to get Atalo under control.

"Ah, um...just...just one second!" she stammered.

Taila giggled and reached over to pet Atalo instead. Nyx inhaled softly. She picked up the scent of honey. "This is your brother Atalo, right? He takes the same lessons with my little cousin." The girl pointed over her shoulder. "And this is Ampelos. He's shy."

"Hi," Ampelos muttered, staring down at his shoes. Taila and those around them overpowered his scent, even as the girl tried to catch a whiff of him.

Nyx nodded, smiling nervously. "Um, hi! Nice to meet you. My name's Nyx."

"We know!" Taila took Ampelos' hand and waved with her other. "'Kay! We gotta go find his mother. Talk to you later!"

The sudden departure left Nyx anxious and even more uncertain. "Uh..." The two children were gone, and the girl bowed her head with a sigh. "Yeah...bye..."

She turned and was conscious of how isolated she felt. Even the adults seemed keen on giving her space. Nyx shifted Atalo in her arms and wiped at her eyes. She felt her sleeve come away damp, and this detail seemed enough to send her into all out crying once more, but the people around her began to cheer. She gave a start, damp eyes blinking away the last tears as she looked forward.

There was a great fanfare, and energetic drums. Cymbals crashed and people clapped as the Ailuran soldiers returned from their second tour. In this battalion was--

"Thaddeus!" Nyx whispered, ducking a little.

Her older brother marched at the end of his row. He had medium length hair, dark like all of her family, and it was tied back in a low ponytail. The fourteen-year-old marched proudly with eyes forward.

Nyx turned to find her mother approaching, the woman's hands gently pushing to the front of the crowd. When she was close enough to be heard, Fotini was out of breath.

"I saw him, A-ma!" Nyx said, pointing.

"I think I did too!" the woman said, face flushed. She took Nyx's hand. "Come on, they're going to do a speech and then the men will be released to the families!"

Nyx started to fuss with her hair, brushing it back with sweaty fingers. "He's going to laugh at me, I just know it!"

"Child you are so *odd!* Weren't you just excited to see him? Can't you leave your fears and just be happy that our Thad is home?"

"But--"

"Shh!" Fotini held a finger up to her lips and pulled the girl close by the shoulders. Together, the three ventured into the gathering crowd near the central platform. They didn't need to wait long. Orestes appeared to the cheers of many. He raised a hand and smiled.

"My dear people of Tosmai. Long have we awaited the return of our precious sons...Tonight, they come to us in good health, filled with pride for their service to our nation. I will not keep you long, for the Eye of Aelurus is upon us as Night draws close, but hear me now, my good people. These men have sacrificed much, and for some that price was great. These few have returned to our glorious Mother, shrouded in honor and love. Let us take a moment to pay our thanks to those who gave their lives so that we may stand here whole and happy tonight."

Nyx covered Atalo's head as she bowed her own. Her little brother, though Changed, seemed to understand the situation enough to sit still beneath her hand.

They remained that way for one full minute before Orestes spoke again, bringing everyone out of their silent prayers.

"Thank you, and thank you to the families of those lost braves." He gestured behind him where the soldiers had stood, waiting quietly. "Come forward, my sons. Your families await you!"

There was a cheer as the soldiers moved to find their beloveds. Fotini gripped onto her daughter tightly, and Nyx couldn't help but tighten with fear the way the crowd seemed to smother them in their haste to get by. She turned to look behind her, feet stumbling as her mother dragged her forward. The girl knew she could find a space free of the mad hustle if only her mother would let her go, but as she gazed past the villagers, she saw a woman staring toward the stage, tears streaming openly down her face. She stood alone, and her gaze turned to the sky, her dark hair lifting with the breeze. Nyx blinked and craned her head as more people came, but within the next instant her view of the woman was gone.

"Thaddeus!"

Nyx turned her head forward again. Fotini hugged the girl around the shoulders, and Atalo fought in her arms to raise himself up higher to see. The villagers parted and Thaddeus stepped forward, his broad face smiling fully. He had tawny eyes, like she and Atalo did, but his were muddier. But the dimples in his cheeks, his round-tipped nose, his expressive eyebrows, the messy black hair...all the same.

"Hello everyone!" was all he said.

Fotini laughed as she snatched the teenager up in a bone-crushing hug. Atalo mewed loudly, struggling to push out of Nyx's arms. The girl just stared at her brother, shoulders hunched, her eyes wide with awe.

Thaddeus was *home*.