

*R*EIGN OF THE NORTH FOREST

BOOK I

Imperious Realm



Athene Z. Adam

Published in Canada by Athene Z. Adam Publishing Inc.

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Cover Design by VeryMuchSo.Agency

Library and Archives Canada

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN: 978-1-7782955-0-8

ISBN: 978-1-7782955-2-2

ISBN: 978-1-7782955-3-9

ISBN: 978-1-7782955-1-5

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A *Q&A* A

For the *Niobes* in the worlds

A&A

CONTENTS

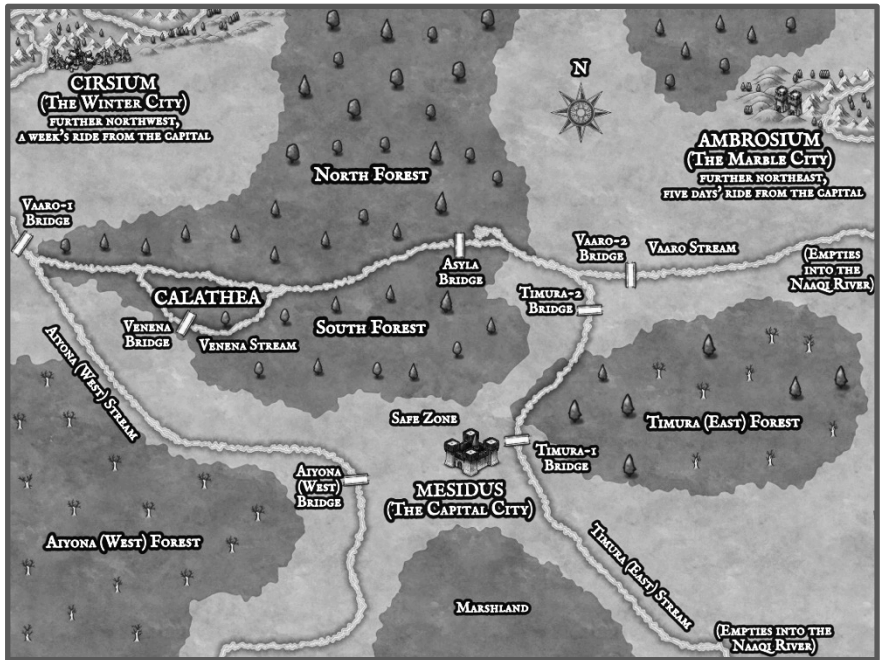
Map of Eiyesan Cities

Prologue

1	The Infirmary	1
2	Allies	11
3	Secrets	26
4	Poisoned Arrow	44
5	Transgressions	48
6	Retirement	52
7	The Lost Love	59
8	New Antisenent Syndrome	76
9	We Will Show You 'Friend'	98
10	Cirsium	120
11	The Rivalry	135
12	Transformation	153
13	Interference	171
14	The Cabin	222
15	Toxic	252
16	Trials	274
17	The Phantom City	297
18	The North Forest	315
<i>Appendix</i>	<i>Glossary, Characters and Pronunciation Guide</i>	317

A&A

☞ Map of Eiyesan Cities ☜



∞ Prologue ∞

Centuries ago, a team of astronomers discovered a planet at the expanding boundaries of the universe.

It was unclear which star this new planet orbited. The astronomers named it Themis, after the ancient Greek goddess of divine law. As time wore on, the team came to realise it was part of a system of thirteen planets with seventeen corresponding moons, all orbiting a new sun. With the discovery of this new system, the solar system in which Earth existed was named the Helium Solar System and the new, smaller one the Nebulon Solar System.

Eiyesa is the second planet from the second sun, Icarus. The moons Chrysus and Argentius orbit Eiyesa.

Meanwhile, Earth depleted its natural resources with catastrophic consequences.

Thousands died from starvation and natural disaster exacerbated by the reckless acts by humankind. Those who remained turned on each other and the governments. Nations crumbled and reformed into new nations. Researchers tried to develop alternate sources of fuel and food. In the Helium Solar System, the planet most like Earth was Mars, but although it had once held water, Mars was no longer a sustainable planet. Consequently, Earth governments expanded their space exploration programs in the hope that a viable planet would be found to draw on its resources.

About five centuries ago, the people of Earth developed technologies to regulate their planet's environment. In this way, humans were able to moderately reverse the damage to their poisoned atmosphere

and toxic oceans. They reduced global temperatures while allowing winters, earthquakes, and volcanic activity to continue in a carefully controlled rhythm. Slowly, the Earth began to repair itself.

These advanced technologies would prove ineffective if humans persisted in their destructive ways, so severe regulations were imposed on resource distribution and wastage. The average man may have been content with his life. He had reasonable food, water, and shelter. But those humans who were accustomed to a more luxurious lifestyle wanted more.

As a result, the space exploration mandate changed from finding additional resources to abandoning Earth and relocating the privileged. The planets in the Nebulon System at first seemed uninhabitable, but further research demonstrated that Eiyesa was a potentially suitable planet for relocation. Eiyesa became accessible to Earth through a manmade wormhole.

Eiyesa was similar to Earth in many ways. Its revolution around Icarus was close to Earth's voyage around its own sun. A warmer planet than Earth, Eiyesa's environment was rich in oxygen and had similar environmental processes such as atmospheric, hydrodynamic, and several geological processes. The new planet had chemical elements previously undiscovered. There was, however, uncertainty about the longevity of human life on Eiyesa. Long-term human experimentation was necessary, but no one was willing to risk the lives of the wealthy. Instead, they looked to a powerless population: Earth's prisoners. The Eiyesans referred to their ancestors, the prisoners, as the Unwanted.

It was seemingly the perfect solution. Prisoners were unnecessary consumers of Earth's diminishing resources, and their absence was beneficial to society. As wards of the government, the Unwanted had limited rights. Removing them from Earth would allow for a better distribution of resources that would help further the Eiyesan cause.

The Unwanted arrived on Eiyesa, in droves and with limited supplies, and were forced to survive in a raw and exotic land. In the first few years, many fell victim to the elements, predators, poisonous vegetation, and one another. Violent though many of them were, they were also resourceful. Eventually, they saw the need to form a functional society.

Eiyesa's natural resources and remedies were discovered to be of great benefit to humans. But its environment was fragile, and even small changes drastically impacted its ecosystem, with some species wiped out as soon as humans arrived. Once the population settled, they began working on technological advances—including weaponry to protect themselves against future human colonists.

As they had on Earth, the human population of Eiyesa pushed the planet's limits without regard to the destruction they left behind. Those who protested those advancements were punished. Eventually, those who

preferred to live close to nature migrated to the forests north of Mesidus and became the forest dwellers. Over time, the planet's population expanded from the capital city of Mesidus to found two more cities: Cirsium and Ambrosium. Located northwest of Mesidus, Cirsium was known as the winter city due to its cooler climate. Ambrosium, northeast of Mesidus, was known as the marble city due to its advanced architecture and marble buildings. The prime minister of Eiyesa ruled over Mesidus, Cirsium, and Ambrosium.

Eiyesa's human history has been marred by human conflict and government mistrust. Sixty-six years ago, Mesidisian rebels accused the government of allowing the forest dwellers to live in a state of natural anarchy, rather than contribute to the city's economy. There has also been a constant struggle over the advancement of Eiyesa and the Eiyesan lifestyle at the expense of the planet's health.

Over the centuries, the people of Earth have arrived twice with hostile intentions. Both times the Eiyesans defeated them, the most recent conflict occurring three decades ago.

The forest dwellers, who reside in the South Forest, remained ostracized to this day.

AGSA

A&A

1 ∞ The Infirmary ∞

450 Years After Arrival

Kale was on his hands and knees. The fabric of his khaki trousers was coated in a fine layer of dirt, the grime adhering stubbornly in the crevices of his fingernails. He knew his mother would scold him and he would need to scrub twice to be clean enough for dinner, but that thought was distant from his mind. He crouched in the dirt and swept the soil away from the triangular object.

"Dri!" he yelled. "Dri! Come here!"

A voice called from several metres away. "Where are you? I can't see you!"

Kale's head and shoulders peeked up from the rustling, blue grass. He waved emphatically to the other figure, a child with the same deep brown eyes, matching hair, and stocky build as his own. Drimys shaded his eyes with one hand, the other on his hip, and Kale ducked once he had gotten Drimys's attention. Drimys ran through the field and halted behind him.

"Look!" Kale exclaimed, and his twin dropped to the ground. "It's an arrowhead!"

"There are arrows everywhere. The riders use them all the time. We can't be adventurers with the same arrows everyone else uses."

"This one is different." Kale's fingertips dug deftly around it, ignoring a tawny, slithering insect that emerged from the dirt. "It's wider, not like the ones they use now."

Drimys's forehead creased in concentration, beads of sweat at his

hairline. The twins examined the artifact more closely. Kale wasn't sure whether the arrowhead was tarnished because it had been buried or because it had belonged to the thieves from his books who had fought to protect their gold. He plucked it out of the ground and touched the point with his finger, jabbing but not breaking the skin. He pulled away quickly.

"It's still sharp," Kale said. "Maybe Rufus can tell when it was made."

"We might need it when we search for the treasure. The world's greatest adventurers!" Drimys grabbed the artifact from Kale's hands. "It's mine."

"I found it. A second ago, you didn't care."

"Your side of the room is too messy to keep it safe. It's too important to lose."

"But—"

"I'm keeping it." Drimys pocketed the arrowhead. "Let's go show Rufus. He might still be in the Centre."

Kale was too excited about their discovery to be annoyed at Drimys's claim. Brushing the dirt from his pants, he broke into a run after his brother, pushing the grass aside as he emerged from the field. Drimys was just ahead, veering from the path to the open stable doors. In the day's dimming light, a small figure scampered on all fours through the entrance. Kale followed Drimys, who ran after the animal.

The stable smelled of grain, raw meat, and the underlying musty stench of veelox droppings. Half the veeloxes had been penned for the evening. Slender necks rose above the gates, and slimmer beaks snapped lazily at the surrounding flies.

"Dri?"

Apart from the penned veeloxes, the barn was empty. Some of the riders had left the city of Mesidus to gather medicine, and the others were still out in the fields, busy with their last duties of the day.

A veelox extended its neck out from the fence, startling Kale. The reptile tucked its narrow beak inward, then bumped his head in a friendly manner. Kale petted it with one hand, wondering where his brother had gone. He was too big to hide in the piles of hay in the wheelbarrows. Drimys could have slipped into one of the pens, but Kale was almost sure a veelox would repel the intrusion.

He peered around the barn, but the pen doors were solid wood, and he couldn't properly see through the narrow spaces between the planks. Maybe Drimys meant to jump out and scare him. Kale turned suddenly, but no one was behind him. Ahead was a closet door, hooks on the wall, and a familiar ladder that led up to a loft and balcony along the perimeter of the stable.

A scuffling sounded to the left, and Kale's gaze darted to the darkened corner beyond the pens. Drimys was hunched on the floor with

his back to him.

“Dri—”

A flash of fur dashed away, and Drimys howled. He turned to face Kale. Blood oozed into the collar of his linen shirt and he touched it, smearing the blood around his neck and over the palm of his hand. Kale sucked in a breath.

“It tried to take it!” Drimys pressed his fingers against the wound. “Kale, it tried to take it.”

Cries of pain stirred Kale from his shock, and his mind stuttered. *Riders, Father, infirmary*—Drimys would never go to the infirmary himself, nor let Kale take him—*Mother*. “You have to go to Mother.”

Drimys flew past him and out of the stable. Before he followed suit, Kale checked the corner, wondering where the terquin had gone.

The terquin emerged from the darkness, hissing at him and baring its fangs. Kale jumped.

The creature’s claws were out, ready to attack. Frightened, Kale took a step back. He noticed one of its eyes was bloodshot. The terquin darted for a hole in the fence.

Kale eyed the hole in the pen, but the terquin hadn’t emerged and he needed to follow his brother to the Healing Centre. He hurried out of the stables and across the open field. Kale bumped into passersby as he took the road leading to the familiar stone and brick building. He ran past the bike racks and up the front steps. *Nothing*. Unsure if Drimys had heeded his instruction, he clattered through the Centre and down the hallway to their family’s apartment. The door was already standing open. And then, through the silence, he heard their mother shriek his brother’s name.



Several rooms over, Iberis closed the door to the nursery. Most of the babies were idle or asleep, but he recognized the one that was crying. He scanned the incubators as he walked to a smaller, inner room painted in soothing tones and decorated with murals of baby animals. Vica was evidently flustered, trying to rock the swaddled infant to sleep.

“He’s going to wake the others if he doesn’t quiet,” she said as Iberis approached.

“He’s nursed already?”

“Yes, and she left a supply. He’s always like this after she leaves. We’re not who he’s looking for.” Vica noticed the lilac shawl folded neatly over his shoulder and his tan, short-sleeved shirt and pants, the healer’s uniform. “That colour doesn’t suit you.”

Iberis smirked. “It’ll help with who he’s looking for. I had her leave it behind.”

Sergen's face was flushed and streaked with tears. Iberis was now mostly accustomed to the sound of children crying, but Sergen's high-pitched wails of desperate need affected him. Careful to support the infant's head, Iberis took Sergen from Vica and pressed him to his chest. The child thrashed and whined, kicking against the lilac shawl.

Then another infant cried out in the nursery. Some of the children were ill and others were newer than Sergen, but most would be home soon. It would take several minutes before Sergen's panic dissolved and his shaking lessened.

"Sometimes, I wonder what gets into the heads of these mothers." Vica was bitter. "Why have children if they can't take care of them? The Healing Centre—"

"Will do its best to give him what he needs." Iberis had little tolerance for any negativity on this topic, even when Vica was stressed, and his disapproving look was enough to silence her. Vica loved healing, she treasured the children, and had a sixth sense for their care. She was also strongly principled.

Iberis nodded at the door and eased himself into a rocking chair. "Go look after the others. I'll take over."

He rocked the child back and forth until Sergen slipped into a calm but tentative state, his breathing more regular. Iberis liked to think it was his own ministrations that helped, but he knew the clothing with the mother's smell had done most of the work. Kissing Sergen's dark hair, he leaned back, cuddling the infant.

"That's better."

The warm bundle wriggled. Iberis spent every spare moment he had with Sergen, between surgeries and appointments, during lunch, and after work late into the night. He had always been dedicated to his field, but now he was lying to his wife about the time he spent tending to Sergen. If he was called to perform any emergency surgeries, then his stay in the infirmary could extend to a couple of days.

Iberis sighed, frustrated. Both he and Selene were young, but out of necessity and circumstance he had grown more mature while she remained carefree. He knew that eventually her youthful enthusiasm, independence, and social circle would diminish and she would begin to resent his absence. Conflict would follow, but he needn't worry about that tonight. Tonight was about him, and Sergen, and the mother's shawl.

Something changed in the room, and Iberis opened his eyes. A child stood in the doorway, his wavy hair unruly, a cheeky smile on his face that might easily flip to mischief. A dirty smudge traced down his neck. Despite his roguish looks the child didn't interfere, but merely watched.

"Good evening." Iberis spoke in a soft voice, mindful of Sergen's little ears. By now Vica would have tended to the children, then retired to

her office around the corner. Once in the room, Kale would have slipped by unnoticed. "How did you get in here?"

"Healer locked the door but I was too fast."

"You wanted to see the babies?"

The boy made a face. "No. I didn't know where I was until I got in."

"Where were you trying to go?"

Kale shrugged and looked sheepishly away. "Nowhere."

Young boys were always getting into trouble. *The morgue*, Iberis decided. "You can't get to the morgue. It's locked."

Kale's shock at Iberis's accuracy was replaced by quick defiance. "I got in *here*."

"It doesn't matter. You can't wander around the infirmary, Kale. It's not safe for you or the patients."

"I'm not *wandering*," Kale protested. "I'm *supposed* to be here. A terquin slashed Drimys, and a healer is helping him." His small mouth twisted into a frown. "How did you know I'm Kale?"

"Healers can tell the difference."

"Not all healers, only you. Father can't. Mother does, even when Drimys tries to blame me for things he did."

"What types of things?"

"I don't know. Things. But some people can tell us apart now. Drimys lost a tooth." He bared his teeth and pointed at one of his canines. "This one. He lost it a month ago."

"You haven't lost yours yet?"

That was perplexing. Iberis hadn't been Kale and Drimys's healer for long, but their biological milestones tended to occur in relative unison. It was one of the mysteries surrounding identical twins that they still didn't fully understand, even after years of research.

Iberis felt a restless arm wriggle against his chest, and he glanced at the infant. Sergen's eyelashes were fluttering. A tiny fist pushed out through the tight layers of fabric.

"Babies cry a lot," Kale continued confidently. "That's all they do all the time. They eat, poop, sleep, and cry. Erod's sister is like that. Every time she wants something, she cries."

"That's the only way they know how to communicate. Do you want to come closer? His eyes can't focus very far."

Kale shuffled a few steps closer, then reluctantly reached for Sergen's hand. Sensing his touch, the baby clamped down hard on Kale's index finger. Surprised and delighted, Kale looked to Iberis.

"That's a reflex babies have. When you touch their palm, their fingers grasp yours in a fist."

"He's so small." Kale bent closer to the infant.

"You used to be small like this, too," Iberis said. "All of us were."

His name is Sergen."

Kale's smile disappeared. "Is he sick?"

"No."

"Then why is he here?"

Iberis had difficulty explaining this to the other healers, let alone a nine-year-old child. Unlike his adult interactions, he couldn't be defensive with Kale, nor could he couch his motives in medical language. "Sometimes people can't care for their babies, even though they want to."

"Like if they're sick, too?"

"Like that, yes."

"Oh...so he's all alone here?"

"His mother visits daily. And he has me." Iberis's answer didn't satisfy, and Kale still seemed perplexed. "If you want, you can visit him, but only if I'm here. We can tend to him together. Otherwise, the healers won't let you in."

"Okay. I think he's falling asleep. He's blinking slowly."

Iberis could feel the little hand fall as the infant drowsed. "Hmm, you're right. We should get you back. Your parents are probably wondering where you are."

The healer kept Sergen clasped to his chest as Kale followed them through the nursery. Vica had returned and was startled at Kale's presence. Iberis scanned his retina at the door, then led Kale through the maze of the infirmary's shortcuts. He prompted Kale to tell him about the things he was learning in school as they walked, and the boy was still talking when a screech rang out in the tiled hall.

"Kale!" His mother stood before him as Drimys cringed, guilty, at her side. "How many times have I told you not to wander off?" Marie's strong brow creased with concern. Her manicured nails were glossy, and her embroidered tunic and pants hugged her curves. "Iberis, I'm so sorry."

The twins shared a look of collusion. Drimys was naked from the waist up and his stained shirt was bundled in his mother's hand. A bandage was secured to his neck and below that his collarbone was covered with a dry, flesh coloured bump. With a confident scan, Iberis deemed the injury had missed major blood vessels, but it was serious enough to warrant something stronger than rapid-seal gel. Iberis's family had owned terquins when he was younger. Despite their claws, the animals were mild by nature. A wound so severe was bizarre; whatever Drimys had been doing with the terquin, the creature had reacted.

"It's all right." Iberis forced his eyes from Drimys. "Kale was with me. He couldn't find his way back."

"These boys, I need two of me to look after them." Marie brushed her hand against Sergen's blankets, admiring the sleeping infant. "What I would give to have them this young again."

"Children are curious. It's partly why the security is so high,

especially with residents living in the Centre.”

“With these two, you might want to tighten it even more.” She urged the boys forward with a wave of her hand. “Come on, back home now. We haven’t had dinner yet.”

Kale stood on his toes and kissed Sergen’s hair, to his mother’s confusion. “Can I see him tomorrow?”

“Sure. Remember, you have to come see me first, so I can take you in.”

“I will.”

Marie and Iberis chatted for a few more minutes, but Iberis’s gaze kept drifting toward Drimys. Kale rejoined his twin.

Drimys muttered in a low voice, so the adults wouldn’t hear. “You’re using the baby to find the morgue? Why didn’t I think of that? We should have done that before.”

“No, I’m going to visit him tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“He’s so alone. He doesn’t have anyone.”

Drimys rolled his eyes. “I’ve been waiting here for you forever. You already have a brother. The only people who care about dumb babies are babies.”

“I’m not a—”

“You’re not coming tomorrow.”

“—baby. But Drimys—”

“Don’t be a debillus.”

“Language!” Marie reprimanded, shooting the startled twins a sharp glance before returning to her conversation.

“I thought she was talking,” Drimys complained, frowning. “I said you’re not coming.” He pulled out the arrowhead from his pocket and handed it to Kale. “Here. No one wants your dumb arrowhead anymore.”



Hands on his hips, Iberis paced the length of his supervisor’s office. Julian picked his glasses from the clutter on his desk and perched them low on his nose as he examined the files Iberis had loaded on his computer. Images of Kale and Drimys’s blood chemistry, dental records, and x-rays reflected off his rectangular lenses.

Coming up behind him, Iberis pointed at the screen, at test results for Gonadotropin-Releasing Hormone and Human Growth Hormone. “Kale is the sixth kid in the last two months. This is a problem—”

A clattering of footsteps passed Julian’s closed door. The commotion was moving toward the emergency rooms of the infirmary and Iberis stood back, expecting Julian to rise and attend to whichever

patient had just been rushed in.

Julian waved dismissively, his gaze on the screen. "Amaranth's got it."

"This is a problem," Iberis repeated. "Their results are—"

"Not enough for me to declare a public health emergency."

"I have someone else to compare him to. His growth hormone level is lower than his brother's."

"Twins are never exactly twins, you know that."

Iberis regarded his colleague with disappointment. "Your assessment leaves something to be desired."

The senior healer shot him a sharp look. "I'm going to attribute your insolence to your youthful passion for your field."

Iberis fiddled with the fine-linked chain that hung from around his neck. His mind was racing, reviewing the files he had studied, trying to form links and shape diagnoses.

"You know I'm excellent at my job," Iberis finally said. "These kids aren't growing. We've seen this before. I think Kale has Pediatric Arrested Sensory Development Syndrome—which *means* the virus is spreading."

Julian leaned back in his chair and rested his foot on a small stool. The middle-aged man was due for surgery in a couple weeks, and his ankle pained him. "We already have enough panic in the streets. I have adults infected with ASDS—Prosenents—coming into the infirmary only to end up dying months later. Some Prosenents experience lung failure before they can rapidly age. Now to say that kids aren't growing when we don't even know why the virus is causing GnRH to drop their growth hormone level? That we don't know why the impacts are so severe and why our hormone replacement therapy for both adults and children isn't working? That we're not even sure about this next batch of cases? The infirmary would look incompetent."

"That's what you're afraid of?" Iberis asked. "A public relations nightmare? I'm worried about these kids."

"So am I. But a two-month assessment on six children isn't enough. Have you isolated Kale?"

"Yes, of course."

"You can administer him treatment like the other children, but we need more evidence before we announce anything or take formal precautions. It's important for the public to have confidence in the Healing Centre. That includes *not* prematurely announcing that Pediatric ASDS is in population again."

Iberis resumed his pacing. "You sound like a politician."

"I sort of *am* one," Julian said.

"We need to go to dweller territory."

"Ha! You think I'll be able to get you permission to go? The only

way I can get you there is if you use the forest dwellers as test subjects.”

Iberis’s face darkened. “You really are a politician. Whatever the cause, this started among the forest dwellers.”

“If they started it, we’d be putting Mesidisian lives at risk.”

“They’re as desperate as we are, but they could already be making progress on treatment. We can’t see the dwellers as our enemies here. We need to work with them. Either we go there or they come here. We need to figure out what’s going—”

Screams erupted from outside. Iberis rushed out of the office and down the hall without saying a word. Julian grabbed his cane and hobbled behind, scanning the healing rooms as he went. Up ahead, Iberis turned and burst into a room on the right.

The guards at the city gates prohibited dwellers from entering the city, but they must have allowed him entry. This one lay splayed on a cot, one arm hanging limply over the edge. Iberis hardly noticed the unkempt appearance that came with trekking barefoot through the forest, rather his eyes were drawn to the mess of the man’s torso. The patient had a respiratory mask on his face and his eyes were open, but his pupils had rolled back in his head.

A guard from the Security Division stood over him, breathing heavily and holding a bloodied knife. Red spattered his uniform. A woman healer cowered against the far wall, her arms thrown up to protect herself.

Iberis automatically raised his hands up and behind his head. Seconds later, two more members of the Security Division burst in from a doorway behind the assailant, tackling him to the ground.

The danger neutralised, Julian now entered the room and bent over the patient. The woman lowered her hands and Iberis recognised his colleague Amaranth, shaking and fighting back tears.

He went to her, clasping her by the arms. “Are you hurt? What happened?”

“He tried to kill me!” the rogue guard shouted, his arms now bound behind his back. The two men from the Security Division jerked him roughly to his feet.

“He was defenseless!” Amaranth screamed. “He was unarmed!”

Julian jerked his head at the guards. “Get him the hell out!” The assailant launched into a nonsensical defense, but no one was listening. The Security Division muscled him from the room.

“Iberis.” Julian now gestured for his colleague to approach.

The healer in Iberis took over. He pushed his shock aside as he moved to stand by the bed. They initiated chest compressions and attempted to resuscitate the dweller’s breathing as they attempted to save his life. Bracing herself against the wall, Amaranth watched on in horror. Eventually, Julian called the time of death. Iberis held the edge of the bed,

adrenalin still coursing through his body.

Julian swore out loud. "You want to work with the dwellers? This is what happens when populations mix."



2 ∞ Allies ∞

456 Years After Arrival

Sergen was lying on his stomach on the floor of his room. He repositioned his clay panther near its kin, rested his chin on his hands, and scrutinized the beasts. He knew panthers worked better as a pair, and he had pitted the foes in a fair fight, but he couldn't decide on the fox. While it was venomous, the vulpira lacked the agility and speed to elude the panthers' strong jaws.

Sergen was distracted by a flickering of shadows on the floorboards and he leapt to his feet, careful not to knock over the animals. The clouds had dispersed, rays of sunshine signaling clearer skies to come.

He lived close to the edge of town and while they had neighbours on either side, there was a considerable distance between the back of their house and the next row. He hadn't used their backyard much, the grass long and tangled near the fence, but now he welcomed the sun, hoping for just an hour or two outside.

As if deliberately teasing him, the sun just as quickly disappeared. Sergen sighed, feeling alone. He hadn't seen the woman across the street in weeks and the only other neighbour, a man who was much older than his father, wouldn't be home for a few hours. A few children ran about in the middle distance. He only rarely caught glimpses of their play, but he was sure he could race and maybe even win against one of them. He tried to visualize how tall the boys would be up close. Sergen's mother said he was tall for his age, but he had never been able to compare himself to anyone to see how true it was.

The time was nearing, so he went to the hall window, pressing his

face against the rain-streaked glass. Over to the left, he saw the man riding a bike along the road toward their house. Plainly dressed and with a messenger bag slung across his chest, the man was a familiar sight in the area, visiting at the same time twice a week, but still the children stopped their play and stared. Undeterred, the man waved amenably as he passed. Four knocks in succession sounded on their front door, with a slight pause after the first knock, and immediately afterward he heard his mother's distant voice.

"Sergen, can you get the door, please?"

He ran the length of the hall, down the stairs to the front door, and unhinged the three locks, the top one requiring him to stand on his toes to reach it.

"Sergen, it's a pleasure to see you."

The man took off his shoes and entered. Sergen grinned happily, shutting and locking the door behind him.

"How are you doing today?" The man used sign language as he voiced his question.

Sergen shrugged, leading their guest into the living room. The man glanced toward the kitchen, where Sergen's mother could be seen preparing dinner.

"I'm a little early," he called to her. "I hope that's all right."

"It's fine, Iberis."

"Come on, kid. Let's measure you first."

Once Iberis had noted Sergen's height and weight, he sat across from the boy and extracted a few drops of blood from his finger with an electronic syringe, setting the device to the side as it analysed the sample. Sergen submitted to the exam, but fidgeted in his seat. Iberis examined his eyes, ears, and mouth, which the child obediently opened wide.

"Still not talking, are we?" He placed a small, metallic square on Sergen's arm and set the gauge. "I wish I could say that for some of my other patients. All they do is complain. I think it's your turn now."

Iberis chatted as he worked, accompanying his conversation with hand gestures. At the end of the examination, he read the syringe's findings.

"You're as healthy as a veelox, young man." He raised one eyebrow. "Except you need more vitamin D. I'm going to leave some drops with your mother. Wait—" He put a hand on the child, stopping him from leaving. "You can't sit still, can you? Just wait, I have something for you."

Rummaging in his bag, he took out a clay model of an Akpi, a large arachnid with six legs, a tail, and a stinger at the base of its head. Sergen's eyes grew large.

"This will make the battle more interesting, don't you think?"

Sergen reached forward but turned to look at his mother.

"It's a gift. You can take it."

"Will you say 'thank you'?" Iberis asked when Sergen took the toy in awe. He brushed his hand against the child's hair, causing him to flinch. "It's okay. Next time."

Sergen went upstairs but didn't return to his room, sitting on the top step and out of sight of the grownups. While he didn't necessarily understand what they were saying, he liked their gentle voices. The way Iberis talked to them and brought them gifts was nice. Usually, after his examination, Iberis played with him then taught him and his mother new sign language before his mother sent Sergen upstairs for the rest of the visit. Sergen had sensed that Iberis wanted to speak with his mother in private, so he had gone upstairs quickly. Even though he knew it was wrong to think about, he sometimes wished Iberis were his father instead.

He admired his new toy, content with the tones floating up to his ears and not listening to the conversation below.



After Sergen left the living room, Iberis moved toward the kitchen and regarded Niobe with concern. "How long did you think it would be before I noticed you keeping your head to the side?"

Niobe set down her knife and faced him, revealing fresh bruises on her eye and an open cut across her cheekbone.

"Oh, Ni." Iberis stepped toward her and examined the wound. "What did he do to you?"

"I did something stupid. At least it wasn't Sergen this time."

"It shouldn't be—" Iberis stopped himself. "You're cut. I'm going to treat you with stenovis and yamnaberry extract."

He used a green scanner to analyse her injury, closing the wound with gel before spraying it with a petal mist. Like Sergen, she fidgeted as he worked, rubbing her fingers and tucking her hair behind her ears. The resemblance between Niobe and her son was uncanny; they shared the same dark eyes and hair and the same oval face. It was also probably one of the reasons why her husband targeted their son as much as he did his wife.

"How's Selene?" she asked.

"She's fine." He added, "She wants children. We argued about it again this morning. But it's difficult bringing a child into this world, knowing that in a few years they'll stop aging, or rapidly age over several months then die."

Niobe frowned. "You don't know that."

"Look around you." Catching her displeasure, Iberis tried to correct himself. "I mean, if you went outside, you'd see the streets filled with children. There are barely any adults left. Thank goodness kids are

quick learners. They wouldn't survive otherwise."

"Speaking of which, how's Sarah?"

He afforded her the brief opportunity to change the topic. "She's brilliant and ten times smarter than me. She's doing operations on her own now. She's a fantastic healer, but she needs to improve her bedside manner."

"She's not like you."

"I'm working with her. It's getting better." Iberis withdrew his hands, revealing the neat seal of her wound. He retrieved an ice pack from the freezer, which she held to her face. He leaned back against the counter. "I could bring him with me to the Healing Centre, declare a requirement for constant medical monitoring. He's still only a child, so he automatically meets the criteria."

Niobe's jaw grew tight. "What if he's infected?"

"The virus is a medical mystery. Twice a week I'm sampling Sergen's blood, but I'm just waiting for the inevitable. It's only a matter of time before it affects him."

"Don't say that," Niobe said.

"But it's true. And then what? Sergen won't age—he'll become an Antisenent—and for as long as Ereka lives, he'll be his punching bag."

"No, he—he wouldn't."

"He's doing it now. He doesn't love either of you, he can't. A person who loves you doesn't hurt you. You have options. I can help."

"Where would we go? The forest? Join the dwellers?"

"The dwellers are facing enough adversity as it is," Iberis said. "Every day, they face a new challenge from the prime minister. I could take him, though. I could bring Sergen back."

"No, you can't. You tried already. Ereka went over your head to break him out of quarantine. He'll do it again."

She set the ice pack on the counter. Niobe had never been domestic and it showed in the uneven cuts of her knife. Her tone expressed a familiar finality, but he was committed to advancing his case, however slowly.

"He shouldn't be locked up all day, unable to leave the house without his father's permission. He needs to be around people. It's what he thrives on. He's dying like this."

"Don't talk to me as if you know what's better for my son."

"I know half of Eiyesa's children better than their own parents," Iberis persisted. "Sergen's gifted. Even at a young age, his intelligence was obvious. They have camps in the Healing Centre—mostly the Mesidians fought against the dwellers—and Sergen protected the dwellers, even against the older boys. His words are like magic. I could tell that much even though I barely understood anything the kids were saying. They hung on his every word, and he never once abused his power. It's sad to

see him like this.”

“He gives his toys equal playing time, you know.” Niobe smiled. “He doesn’t want any of them feeling left out.”

“Does he?” Iberis tilted his head, trying to catch her eye. “He has so much potential. I wouldn’t mind if he tried his hand at healing, but he could be an engineer, or a counselor, or a politician...”

She became serious again. “I think we have enough politicians.”

“Maybe, but the people of Eiyesa will need a proper leader. They need a reasonable and kind voice, someone who can build bridges with the forest dwellers, not oppress them, and one who understands the risk of Earth’s people returning without being paranoid about it. He can be that leader if he wants to be.”

She faced him then, her injured eye nearly swollen shut. “You’re a dreamer. You always were. You care too much for him, Iberis.”

“I’m a pragmatist. I care about you, too. I can talk to Selene. I can explain to her that you’re not Mesidus’s crazy old bat like everyone thinks you are, or else maybe you could go to one of the other cities. But I think she’ll agree for you both to come live with us.”

“No woman would agree to that.”

“Then I’ll get you your own place.”

She shook her head decisively. “You’re not listening. EreK is a powerful person. It doesn’t matter where I am. He’ll find me and still take Sergen away from me. You should go now. The debate will start soon, and he’ll be home after that.”

But Iberis didn’t go right away. They talked in circles, and he had difficulty arguing with her when he knew she was right. EreK *would* take Sergen from her, that was if he didn’t kill her first. Using his political power to his advantage, EreK had already convinced the community he was married to a mentally ill housewife. That sweet-talking charmer could do no wrong in the eyes of the public, who had a sympathetic ear for the prime minister’s political opponent coping patiently with his dysfunctional family.

EreK wasn’t due home for a few more hours. He knew of Iberis’s daytime visits, and the healer made sure not to linger at the house. Iberis might plot against EreK, and he took every opportunity he had to help Niobe gain the strength to leave him, but Iberis tried to remain casual anytime the political leader came up in conversation. He was, after all, Niobe and Sergen’s only access to medical care and to the outside world.

Niobe was not a stupid woman. She had mostly accepted that her husband didn’t love her, but leaving was another matter entirely. Iberis considered pressing the matter further but by the note of finality in her voice and the brusque way she went about her business in the kitchen, he knew he would be unsuccessful today.

Eventually, he collected his items, placed them neatly back into

his messenger bag, and placed a bottle of vitamin D drops on the table. He was slipping his shoes on when Sergen clambered down the stairs and stood before him, his new toy clutched tightly in both hands.

“Do you have super hearing? How do you always know when I’m about to leave?” Iberis bent, meeting the boy at eye level. Sergen set the toy in the crook of his elbow and motioned with his hands as the healer had taught him. His hopeful look at Iberis’s small gestures reminded the healer of the great injustices of the world. For the millionth time, he was tempted to take the child with him.

“That’s right, I’ll play with you next time. I’m sorry I couldn’t play more today. Your mother and I had to talk about some things.” Sergen nodded and raised the toy higher. Iberis signed as he said, “You’re welcome.”



Perched on the front steps of the Healing Centre, Kale tried to decipher the mood of the crowd before him. The air was damper than usual, but Kale was too absorbed in his task to notice, reading the people while masking his grave concern. He had been in the spotlight since his youth—in years that is, as his body was frozen in the form of a child—and over time, he had learned to display calm and control in the face of the worst calamities.

The world was in peril. The plague had decimated the adult population of the city of Mesidus. They were scattered across the crowd, mostly toward the back. Citizens were frozen as children and those who were still growing would succumb, like the others, to an early death. Unable to reproduce, their society was condemned to stagnation. They were succeeding in their collective endeavours of preserving Eiyesan knowledge, infrastructure, and food sources, but this didn’t alleviate the terrible pressure on their leaders to find a cure.

Amid all this hardship, tensions between the Mesidisians and the dwellers of the South Forest, couldn’t have been higher. Kale had to admit his father was skilled in misdirection, acknowledging the planet’s woes while deftly shifting blame to the forest folk, as was the case today.

The debaters were on the landing, a couple of steps up and across from Kale, and their microphones would easily amplify their voices. On the left was his father, and his political advisors were near him. A man with dark eyes and a brooding presence, Raynor was the prime minister of Mesidus and the two other cities of Eiyesa. He was unafraid to speak his mind, even when touching on his less popular ideas. It was when he sounded bigoted that Kale most began to worry, as Raynor’s prejudice against the dwellers was most obvious when they stood in the way of his objectives.

On the right was Erek, an activist who fought against—well, Kale’s father. He seemed fundamentally opposed to every one of the prime minister’s ideas. He had gained popularity among the citizens due to his kind, well-spoken manner and despite his personal struggles with his family. At his father’s request, Kale had investigated Erek and learned of his strained home life. His wife was ill and rarely left the house, Erek having had pulled his son from quarantine to help her cope with whatever mental disorder she was suffering. Their only visitor was the healer, and the only time the mother and son ventured outside was to hang wet laundry in a backyard that was enclosed by a seemingly impenetrable fence. Kale had watched them from a nearby rooftop. She seemed patient and tender with her son though he was never still for more than a second, running and exploring the yard with the frantic pace of a beelia pup. For whatever reason, their relationship affected him and he withheld this information, lying to his father that the two never went outside at all.

Next to him, Drimys was as grim-faced as Kale. A few stragglers, including the healer, joined the crowd as the debate got underway.

“Your proposal is going to get more innocent citizens killed,” Erek retorted. “A venture into the South Forest is dangerous in the best of circumstances.”

Raynor was undeterred. “Our people are competent and trained in dealing with the Akpi.”

“In theory only. Ten years ago, it might have been a different story. Few Mesidisians have broached the South Forest recently. You haven’t even clearly established how you think this move will help the situation. It’s an unnecessary risk when the payout is so little.”

‘Payout’, Kale thought. What an interesting word.

“Little?” Raynor asked. Boos followed. “Unlike you, I value the Eiyesan future. I believe we can help our people.”

“What can be extracted from the South Forest that you think will help? I demand you show us what you’ve learned about the plague.” Erek’s supporters cheered. “Then maybe we’ll see this connection you’re talking about.”

Raynor began, “I’ve already explained—”

“You’ve explained nothing. You’re putting lives at risk, not to mention the harm you could do to the environment.”

“What risk, Erek? Our people know how to deal with the Akpi. The only risk left is the dwellers themselves.”

“They won’t let you take over the forest.”

“Do you hear that?” Raynor addressed his people directly. “Erek himself believes the dwellers will stand in our way. So much for a peaceful people.”

“Kill the dwellers before they kill us!” someone shouted.

“You talk a lot about peace when not two days ago, members of

your security burned a dweller alive," EreK prodded. "You're using the South Forest as yet another excuse to try to exterminate them. They won't stand by while you destroy the forest and set the Akpi loose in their territory. And what's more, *we* won't stand for it."

The debate raged on for an hour, taunts and cheers amplifying the discussion, and Kale continued scrutinising the surrounding people. While at first there was no clear victor between the debaters, eventually EreK influenced the discussion to his side.

"Once again, my friend, you failed to show us what is actually required from the South Forest." EreK gestured dismissively at Raynor and his political advisors. "The government is obligated to produce that research, to demonstrate how this venture will cure the Eiyesans. Only then will I even begin to consider the possibility of invading."

A crimson flush spread from Raynor's neck up into his face. Kale sighed inwardly. They would hear it now.

The debate concluded, Raynor and EreK met with their respective supporters. Kale was more interested in hearing EreK's private conversations than being near his father, but public perception was important. He stayed at the edge of the landing and replayed Raynor's rhetorical mistakes in his head. No one visited Kale, but one or two people approached Drimys and spoke with him quietly.

As the crowd dispersed, Kale and Drimys re-entered the Healing Centre, where Raynor now maintained some political offices. The plague and consequent quarantines continued to afflict the population. But the Eiyesan population had dwindled in recent years, and the Centre needed far less space for healing.

Kale's displeasure was obvious to his twin, though no one else had noticed. Drimys said, "He's right, you know."

"This is madness." Kale scanned the halls as he walked, his footsteps echoing softly along high, beamed ceilings. "The world has gone insane and so have you."

"Don't blame me. The dwellers live northwest. They don't own that land. They can travel elsewhere."

"The dwellers have been—" Kale raised then quickly lowered his voice. "Did you see the corpse of that dweller? I did. I had to have the body delivered back to his family."

Drimys's eyes narrowed. "He didn't deserve it?"

"He was persecuted, he was targeted. They all are, every day. They live in the forest. We live behind our walls and venture out to gather and trade. That was the agreement."

"Agreements can be broken." Drimys was nonchalant. "This is one of those times. We need to enter the South Forest."

"Were you listening at all today? Talk to the healers. We don't know what's causing this condition. Besides, the dwellers are in the same

predicament we are. We can negotiate with them.”

“It’s not their land, Kale.”

“Nor is it ours to invade, Drimys. Destroying the South Forest is tantamount to destroying their home. We’ll drive the Akpi right into their territory and damage their ecosystem, all because Father wants to profit from expanding Mesidus’s borders even though our population is declining. We don’t have the right to harm the dwellers.”

“‘Ecosystem’ is right because the debilluses are animals.” Kale turned to his brother, his expression hard. Drimys said, “Whether any of us like it, we’re stuck the way we are. If there’s a chance for a cure, I’ll take it—regardless of who it harms.”

“If you think that, then you need to talk to the healers,” Kale repeated as his father came down the hall. “It’s clear all of us are going to spend the rest of our lives like this. If anything, the dwellers might cure us. Many of our medical advances are because of them. Good relations with the dwellers are needed now more than ever.”



Dinner was a crucial time of day, as most of Ereկ’s rages were in the evening, depending on how his day had gone. There was usually no way to predict the storms, as he made vague statements hinting one way or the other, and Niobe only got a clearer picture later, when she spoke to Iberis. Now, Ereկ was sitting with his family for the evening meal, though he was pointedly ignoring them.

Only Sergen’s toes touched the floor, but he didn’t swing his feet. When Niobe set their plates in front of them the first sign had been positive: Ereկ hadn’t commented on the food, not its appearance or taste. Niobe took the seat across from him and diagonally from Sergen, able to breathe a bit easier.

“Raynor is a moron.” Ereկ caught the attention of his family. “I can’t believe he has so many followers.”

Niobe adjusted the napkin in her lap. “Yes, he is.”

“They don’t even know what they’re agreeing to. Those who do have the same warped mind as he does.”

“How can they not know? It’s clear as day.”

Niobe agreed with Ereկ’s riddles, and Sergen shifted the cubes of meat from right to left to right again until his father banged his fist on the table. Their dishes rattled. Sergen dropped his fork, which tumbled off the table onto the floor with a clatter, and hid his hands on his lap. Niobe stiffened.

“How many times have I told you to not play with your food?” Ereկ bellowed. “Do you even want dinner tonight?”

Sergen nodded, as Ereկ glared.

Niobe half-requested Ereĳ'ſ permission. "I'll get you a new fork, Serĳen."

She picked up the fallen utensil and placed a gentle hand on Serĳen's elbow, out of Ereĳ'ſ sight. Serĳen was trembling. She went to the kitchen and took her seat again as Serĳen reluctantly picked up the new fork.

"Hold it properly, or I'll break your damned fingers again."

Niobe reached over the table and helped position the fork in the child's hand, even though it was too big for him to hold properly. Sometimes, elements of his father's personality came out and Serĳen's expression of hatred was akin to Ereĳ'ſ when his anger surged. Niobe squeezed his hand, willing her son to return from the dark side, and for the moment, it seemed to work. Serĳen's demeanour changed in time for Ereĳ'ſ next glance.

"Of all the kids in the world, I had to have the dumb mute. Eat!"



It was important for Ereĳ to maintain communication with the public after the debate, so he left the house after dinner without a word to his family. Further down, high walls surrounded his home and Mesidus and were necessary for peace of mind from the outside environment. Ereĳ had visited the dwellers and explored some of Eiyesa's remoter terrain, but one needed to stay on guard from predators at every turn. While there were certain people, riders mostly, who were skilled in safely travelling the planet, even they didn't spend all their time outside the walls. The dwellers, on the other hand, lived in nature and could face threats most Mesidians could only fear.

He greeted his next-door neighbour Acamar, who was sweeping his front porch. The gaunt man gripped the broom and didn't return his wave. He hadn't been the same since losing his wife to ASDS several weeks ago.

Gradually, the muddy dirt road turned into a stone path that led to the middle of town. Winding his way through the crowds, Ereĳ approached the Cackling Veelox. The inn was bustling with people at this hour, the fragrance of barbecued spices and merriment providing reprieve from the stickiness of the air outside. Over the years, Ereĳ had gotten used to the presence of Antisenents, but their youth was still unnerving. Thankfully, the *real* children, the truly irritating ones, would be at home with their caregivers. The fully-grown Mesidians greeted him first, as if only they deserved his time, but adult drunkards weren't the key to Ereĳ'ſ success. He needed the new generation of Antisenents behind him.

The adult innkeeper waved him over, only to offer disappointment.

"Sarah found out we were brewing nectar and put a stop to it." Milo placed a glass of clear liquid in front of him, a few minced leaves floating on the surface. He had a receding hairline and a cleft chin, and his apron was stretched over his round belly. "The rest of these gentlemen are in the hard stage of withdrawal. She told the inspector something about nectar being just for medicine. Technically, it is—but it's also half my revenue."

"You're just giving her rough competition." Ereik sniffed his drink. He had been looking forward to the adrenalin rush from the nectar, and this bitter drink wasn't what he had in mind when he had arrived.

"If only we had more adult riders. But the more kids, the less unnecessary trips. That healer is a pain for business owners and she's going to be a pain for the rest of them. I'm not sure these kids want to start their new lives on the wrong foot."

Ereik chuckled. "Where am I working first?"

Milo gestured his head toward a corner where a group of Antisenents were laughing rowdily, near one of Ereik's adult associates who was dining with his wife. Wiping the granite countertop with a bar rag and nodding to someone from across the room, Milo took out clean glasses to fill. "You might be interested to know that Raynor's kid is here. I can't tell them apart from here but Claudius says it's the weirder one." He jerked his head. "My two o'clock."

Ereik snuck a peek. The Antisenent was sitting in a corner booth, but the seat across from him was empty, a dead giveaway. "No, it's Kale."

"He likes his steak well done." The waiter, Claudius, came around the bar to refill Kale's carafe as Milo chuckled. The lanky adult had a clean-shaven face, and his hair was smoothed back into a low ponytail. "Why he would ruin a good cut of meat like that is beyond me."

Ereik was only half listening. "I wonder what he's doing here."

"Not sure." Milo looked to the waiter, who shrugged. "He might be wanting to disown his family."

Ereik didn't know Kale well. Raynor had dangerous ideas, and Drimys was vocal in supporting him, shadowing and learning from his father with eerie accuracy. Kale wasn't so outspoken. In fact, Ereik had barely heard Kale speak more than a few words. He knew Kale was involved in his father's affairs, but Ereik could never read him.

Milo pointed toward the corner of the ceiling and said in a low voice to Claudius, "I thought we just cleaned the kitchen."

"We did."

"I see two flies up there. When you're done, go back and check the kitchen. Customers won't like this."

Foregoing the raucous group in the corner for the time being, Ereik approached Kale's booth as Claudius cleared his plate away. Kale resumed scribbling equations in a book; he was studying to become an

engineer.

"Good evening. Is this seat taken?" Kale nodded his consent, and EreK sat opposite him on the leather seat. "I don't usually see you around here."

"The steak is particularly good. I don't come in as often as I would like. Congratulations on today's victory."

"It's not a victory until the dwellers' suffering ends."

A hint of a smile crossed Kale's face. "What do you want?"

The boy was clearly uninterested in chitchat. EreK relinquished all niceties and moved to the point. "I want to know why you're here."

"As I said, I enjoy the steak."

"You must. By your empty booth, you certainly aren't here for the company. Everyone knows I come here regularly. Are you here to scope out the enemy?"

"Are you that insecure?" Kale bookmarked his page with a pen. "Tell me, does it seem strange to you that we have ten-metre high walls? That the dwellers have all the land they could want and yet we're the oppressors?"

"It depends on which side of the wall you think you're on. It's human nature to oppress others. It's how our ancestors were abandoned here in the first place. We developed the technology to combat Earth, yet we're planning to use it against our own. The dwellers wished to live peacefully, so naturally they were targeted." Enjoying the minor dent he had made in Kale's composure, EreK raised his glass to his lips. "Yes, I'm aware of Eiyesa's weapons and of the work being done to increase that weaponry. After Earth's last crumbling defeat, one would be naïve to think that Eiyesa wouldn't continue to expand its defenses."

A shadow crossed Kale's face, and EreK continued. "Don't look at me like that. Whether or not you confirm it is irrelevant. Every once in a while, a leader comes along whose paranoia is tenfold, probably as common as the idiot on Earth who thinks it's time to visit us again. I know of the weaponry, and I have my reasons for not sharing that information."

Kale tapped the table surface with his fingers. "Our ancestors were Earth's prisoners. I can only imagine the skill of manipulation carried through to future generations."

"My interest is still the wellbeing of the dwellers."

"As is mine," Kale replied, ignoring EreK's chuckle. "You don't believe me."

"I've spent years opposing your government," EreK retorted. "I've never seen you act on behalf of the forest folk."

"You haven't been watching closely enough. I'm not ignorant of what the future holds. Our adult population is dying, and the rest of us are condemned to living out our lives in our young bodies. If I were ten years older, I might feel differently. As it is, I can't even reach the top shelf

of my closet without using a chair.”

Erek laughed again, showing a line of perfectly straight teeth. “Life is difficult for a Mesidisian.”

“Do not underestimate my empathy for the dwellers,” Kale hissed, his nostrils flaring. “They have suffered more than all Mesidisians combined over our existence on this planet.”

Erek put down his glass and seriously considered Kale for the first time. His reaction seemed genuine. Now, Erek really wanted to know why he was here.

Kale continued, “I can confirm no one knows the underlying cause of the virus and why it’s affecting adults and children in the ways it is. There’s no cure or even hope of a cure—and that includes the South Forest. Do you really think that I want to spend the rest of eternity fighting the dwellers and diminishing a fixed Eiyesan population in the process? If one were to eliminate all those one dislikes, it would be a small and miserable existence.”

Erek shrugged his agreement. “Your family doesn’t think so.”

“My father will be dead soon.” Kale was matter-of-fact. “You’ll be dead soon. It’s only a matter of time before the virus hits you both. Drimys alone, I can handle.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“For you to keep a lookout for the signs. There are ways to foil their plans without exposing my involvement. You’re smart enough to know what to do when you see it. Don’t contact me.”

Erek was wary at this sudden confidence. “We’re friends? Just like that?”

Kale stood, picked up his book, and fished in his pockets. He tossed coins onto the table, enough to also cover Erek’s drink. “I’m not your enemy, Erek, but I’m also not your friend. Enjoy your evening.”



Niobe gratefully accepted Erek’s absence, sitting next to Sergen on his bed and instructing him as he practiced his equations. He was allowed only a few possessions, namely his animals hidden under the bed and the few books on top of the wooden chest in the corner. The drapes were pulled, and the only light source was the lantern next to his bed. Sergen wrote in his notebook on top of the blankets. He showed his mother his answer.

“Good. Spell it out, please.”

Sergen looked at her skeptically.

“How do I know you know what the answer means?” she teased.

“Spell it out.”

Sergen rolled his eyes. He wrote in his notebook again.

“Good boy. You’re so smart.”

He shook his head. At her confused expression, he scrawled *dumb mute*.

“No,” she said, her heart aching. “You’re not dumb at all.”

He tapped the insult with the tip of his pen, nodding. He gestured at his fingers then near his ear where Ereka had last left his mark.

“He just...” Niobe wanted to be careful to not justify his actions, though she had done so in the past. Sergen may not have uttered a word in months, but his gaze spoke volumes. “How he treats you has nothing to do with you. It’s not your fault.”

Sergen shrugged. She knew he was asking the reason.

“Some people are so angry with the world that they feel they have to take it out on others.” Niobe struggled with the answer. “I know it’s hard to see because we don’t go outside a lot, but there’s always good in people.”

He shook his head.

“No?”

Sergen pointed at himself.

“I see goodness in you. I think you’re a wonderful, kind, sweet person.” Sergen countered her disagreement by vehemently shaking his head again. “Then what about me?” she asked, smiling playfully.

Sergen nodded and pointed above her heart. She smiled.

“Thank you. It’s hard to see the good when someone is mean to you, but we all make choices. Your father wasn’t born that way. He chose to become the person he is.”

He shrugged again.

“I don’t know why.” Her tears pooled as she hugged him, careful to protect the injured side of her face. The old feeling of failure resurfaced, her embrace meaning nothing since she was never able to truly protect her son. “I’m so sorry.”

Sergen buried his face in her shoulder and tightened his arms around her. When she pulled away, he gently wiped her tears with his fingers. Niobe sniffled. As terrible as things were, her boy always managed to lift her spirits.

“Do you want me to read to you?”

He signed his excitement and reached to the night table for a large book with a worn cover and tattered edges, *Robin Hood: The Mighty King of Thieves*. He curled easily into her embrace, and Niobe read just six pages before his head drooped and she felt his body relax. She tucked him into his covers and kissed his forehead, then waited for a while at his bedside, watching him sleep.



Sergen awoke with a start. He had been in a deep sleep, so it took him a few moments to understand where he was. Something was wrong.

Cautiously, he crawled out of bed. Rubbing the weariness from his eyes, he listened at his closed bedroom door. His father forbade him from leaving his room at night, so Sergen waited, unsure what to do. He opened the door as quietly as he could.

Noises were coming from downstairs. Sergen had barely reached the stairs when there was a loud crash. Dread filled him. Holding the banister, he ran down, barefoot, and stopped short of the last few steps.

The lantern was broken on the floor, its chemical and glass pieces scattered. His parents were in the living room near the fireplace they used in the winter season, facing away from him. Ereka was forcibly holding Niobe's arm behind her back and hissing in her ear. He was saying the terrible words again, the ones Niobe thought Sergen didn't know.

Ereka threw her to the floor. She missed the edge of a table corner and turned, catching her breath as she glimpsed Sergen on the landing. Following her gaze, Ereka's face contorted in an ugly rage. Sergen whimpered as he took a step backwards, fumbling on the stairs.

"Go upstairs, Sergen!" Niobe yelled. He tripped and fell backward. "Go!"

Changing his focus to the smaller prey, Ereka moved toward the boy. Sergen's gaze was on his father but in his periphery, he saw his mother shoot out her foot to kick Ereka hard in the leg. He swore and turned back to her.

Sergen took advantage of the precious few seconds to clamber up the stairs and into the relative safety of his bedroom. His door had no lock, so he positioned a chair underneath the doorknob like his mother had taught him. Crying, he crawled into his closet and put his back against the wall and his hands over his ears, trying to shut out the battle downstairs. After awhile he shifted his hands, desperately wanting to know if his mother was okay, but there was more thudding, more shouting from below.

Niobe couldn't coax him out of his room until late the following morning.