

# The Silver Sea, Act 1.

## ~ From Places Far Away ~

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*I do not know if I like this place. It has many wonders, but there are many more things here that I could do without. The greatest is that it's cold all the time! At least back home you could escape the cold by lasting until morning when the sun rises, but here the cold just stays all the time. It never leaves! I'm told that it gets even colder in the winter, but I do not know what this winter is, and I hope to never know it!*

*And then half of all Radiah's water seems to fall from the sky! It was such a wonderful spectacle when I first saw the clouds darken, and then watched as the first drops of it fell. And it was not just a little bit falling like spit from the mouth. No, for many hours on end the water fell until the ground at my feet turned to mud and slush. And it just didn't stop, and the earth beneath our feet remained soggy for days, slowing us down no matter how much we hurried.*

*I did not expect to see such things when I left Atina Nah.*

*My guides, the traders that come from the distant lands to the east, have been trying to teach me more of their language. I'll need it when I arrive, so that I can try to speak to them with their words using my voice. I know I can't do it alone; I simply cannot learn so much so soon. I have brought companions with me who have learned much more than I have, and together we hope to put our words into theirs.*

*Their language is soft and strange, and their people may be small and frail, but they have a power that we do not. They call it steel. Harder than rock, but it can be shaped like glass into whatever you desire. And they have so much of it! They eat with it, they cook with it, they make all manner of things with steel! And their weapons and armor are all forged from it!*

*Atina Nah does not have steel, as it is a land of sand and stone. Both we and our enemies use tools and weapons made of stone, bone, and what little wood there is, as those are the paltry gifts Atina Nah has given us to wage war amongst ourselves.*

*If we had steel of our own, then that would settle things.*

*Yvvie thinks I'm mad for taking this journey, but I do not think we can take Anya Sur as things are now. The pillar is too fortified, and our own numbers are growing thinner and weaker with every battle. Some of our allies are beginning to falter with doubt. I believe her when she says that we will win and put things right. I do believe her.*

*But faith alone can only carry you so far in the desert, and Atina Nah cares not about our struggles. Whatever future we have we must create for ourselves, and so here I sit in this wagon of wood, watching as sand turns to dirt, and the picti into trees. Soon, I will have to try and convince the people of Radiah that they must help us. I do not know what they will want in return, as we have so very little to offer them.*

*I won't just be asking for their steel, but for them to teach us how to use it. I will be asking far too much of them as a stranger, and if they in turn demand a terrible price for what I ask, then I may have no choice but to pay it.*

*I hope she does nothing foolish while I am gone, as I am fool enough. Our ambition cannot survive two.*

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Today marked the end of his first journey beyond the borders of his homeland, the Kingdom of Radiah. It was far behind him now, with its warm summers and cold winters, its vast tracks of green forests and fertile farmland. Now, all around him, lay an endless desert. The Kingdom of Atina Nah was dry throughout the year, never seeing a drop of rain, or so he'd been often told. Its days were blisteringly hot, and its nights were as frigid as any Radian winter.

Never before had Waylen Sundile needed to travel with clothing fit for both summer and winter weather. Never had he had to worry so much about staying in the shade while also keeping close to a fire. If it weren't for the constant care he received, he feared he might just catch an illness from the turbulent weather he suffered. Already, some of his party appeared to be beaten down by the journey and were fighting what might have been a light illness from the nightly chill.

They'd all left home nearly a month and half ago. If it weren't for the extensive preparations made for their journey it would have taken as much as two months to travel such a great distance by horse and carriage. There were simply too many people to move and with far too much luggage and supplies.

All along their path to the desert, new horses and supplies had been prepared beforehand. As their horses grew too tired to continue, they were left in the care of handlers who'd ridden ahead of them days before they had, so that their weary animals could be traded for fresh ones. Each day saw them waking at dawn and traveling as far as their horses could be made to tolerate, stopping only to break bread for a noon meal or to let everyone have a chance to take care of any business they needed doing.

Once the grasslands and forests had begun to fade, it was slowly replaced by barren stretches of dry earth and sand. Waylen did not know that the land beneath his feet could change so much in what felt like so little time. The world was as vast as his books and tutors had taught him; he just didn't realize it was closer to him than he'd been led to believe. Once it became necessary to abandon their horses altogether, as they were apparently ill-suited to the sand and climate, they traded their animals away for camels instead, an ugly and smelly version of their equine relations. These animals were better suited to the desert and had been provided for them by a caravan of merchants who were traveling alongside them to their shared destination, both as companions and guides.

A shared destination that had been staring down at them for the last several days as they drew ever closer.

The peak of Anya Sur had broken above the horizon a long while ago. Anya Sur was both a city, the heart of Atina Nah, and it was also a massive pillar of rock. It was a formation of raw earth that stood tall like a mountain, but its sides were sheer like a castle's wall. Waylen was only now seeing it for the first time, the stories having done everything they could to describe it to him but failing at the same time. To wake up every day and see such a monolith was strange. The mountains nearest to Radiah were very far away and were always a pale grey triangle that the clouds often hid.

But Anya Sur was always there towering with a background of a brilliant blue sky that was seldom seen with clouds. It was omnipresent, always looming over the desert. He doubted you could go anywhere in the desert and not see some part of it peaking over the horizon, letting you know that it was watching you.

“Your Highness, we should change your shoes for the saddle.” His elderly companion broke the silence of their cramped carriage.

He was riding alongside two other men. The first was Shane, an older man who had taught Waylen much during his eighteen years of life. He was serving Waylen now as both steward and advisor. Of the many wise men in his household, Shane was the one most well versed in the language of Atina Nah and would be a valuable asset in helping Waylen navigate their language and culture. Along with him was Codi, a young man just barely escaped from boyhood, who was acting as his squire.

“Right.” Waylen replied.

Codi began to retrieve a pair of riding boots from the luggage, and over the course of the next few minutes Waylen was laced up properly for his feet to be stirrups. Over the last week of travel, he’d ridden on multiple camels as a part of his training. They were similar to horses, but the saddles were shaped strangely, and it took getting used to. He wanted to ride into the city, and to look confident while doing so.

As the city ahead of grew closer, so close now that the great wall that protected it was plainly visible, he felt his heart quicken. They’d arrive within a few hours, sometime after noon by the sun’s estimate, and he could feel his anxiousness grow so much that he needed to calm himself with slow breaths.

After a while, he gave the order to Captain Landon to bring the caravan to a stop so that he could mount a camel. Shane accompanied him out of the carriage, Waylen testing his feet on the sand before making his move to a camel that had been brought for him. The Captain helped him mount the animal, who then quickly mounted his own steed so that he could ride alongside him.

The Captain was a middle-aged man of great experience and was in command of the several guards that had been brought with them for his protection. Waylen’s party numbered twenty people, a combination of servant and soldier alike. As per his mother’s instruction, the group covered a wide range of specialties to match whatever needs Waylen might have.

“Your Highness, we will be at the gate within the hour, by my guess.” The Captain told him, and he nodded.

“Your Highness, when we arrive at the southern gate, I would expect us to be greeted by a dragon that speaks our language, but would you like me to ride alongside you should you be met by their native tongue?” Shane asked him from the ground.

Waylen paused. After a moment of consideration, he shook his head.

“No, they know we are coming. They would not send someone to greet us that couldn’t do so in Radian.” He replied.

Shane nodded in agreement, then took his leave with Codi so they could climb back into the carriage. Once everyone was back in their saddles; or in their carriages, Waylen gave the caravan permission to resume course.

Now that Waylen was again in a saddle, he had the freedom to look all around him. The desert of Atina Nah was often flat with the occasional rolling hills of sand, called dunes, that the caravan had to carefully avoid or else their carriages would get stuck in the deep, loose sand that the dunes were made of. They had to travel around them by sticking to the flat regions, which were only covered in a thinner coat of sand with wide patches of dry packed earth between them. All the while, the horizon was dotted with pillars of rock of differing height and width, but none were as impressive as the behemoth that was their destination.

But it was more than just distant rock surrounding them. At a great distance around them, were riders on camel back. Each animal was saddled with a dragon, the strange people that called this land their home. They were easy to spot, as the armor they wore glittered under the sunlight. The riders had first appeared after their first few days in the desert, with only a single rider among them daring to approach. Shane had spoken to this one, the older man reporting to Waylen that the dragon was a soldier of Her Majesty's army and that his caravan was now under their protection as they made their way to Any Sur. They'd been following the caravan ever since, coming and going along the horizon like a predator might stalk its prey.

Waylen looked out at them, and then up at the sun that was now cooking him with its heat.

It was bad enough to sit in the shade. To sit under the sun was to sweat like a cloud would shed rain. He pulled a handkerchief from his tunic and drew it across his forehead. He'd only been in the sun for a few minutes and his face was already breaking out with dew, but one look at Captain Landon informed him that it would only get worse. The man next to him rode in a saddle for most of their journey, and his skin was already a shade darker from what it had been in Radiah.

As Waylen rode alongside the Captain, the city ahead of loomed all the larger. All he could see was the wall, massive in size and appearing as if they'd been cast from a solid piece of stone. It was far taller than the walls he'd often seen dotting the landscape of Radiah, which were often made of brick or cobblestone.

He had no idea of what awaited him on the other side of the wall. His home city of Illian, the capital of Radiah, was far larger than Anya Sur, but Illian was not so tightly contained within a single ringed wall. It was a place that sprawled out in all directions with many gaps in between making room for ponds, farmland, and streams. The city of Anya Sur must be either very small by comparison, or very dense. He did not know which, but he soon would.

It had been more than twenty years since someone of Radian royalty, or even nobility, had personally visited Anya Sur. Most people from Radiah came to the desert as merchants or tradesmen. The peasantry likely had more hands-on knowledge of this distant city than Waylen did, or even Shane behind him in the carriage.

Shane understood their language and understood enough of the inner workings of the city to act as a translator and guide, but twenty years was still a long time. He hoped Shane's knowledge would prove as useful as he'd been promised.

When they finally reached the southern gate, they were met with a wall of dragons guarding it. The riders stalking them were now far behind them, dotting the horizon like a line of glittering fence posts. He did not get the best view of the dragon Shane had spoken to after they'd entered Atina Nah, but now he had a good view of a large group of them standing at attention.

They each had the shape of a man. They had his arms and legs, their trunks with a head sitting atop a pair of familiar looking shoulders. What made them foreign was their faces, their skulls long like a lizard's with dangerous looking eyes. Their whip-like tails stretched out behind them on the sand. Dragons seldom came to Radiah, as he'd been told they do not take well to the weather of his homeland, so Waylen had seen very few of them in his life and what ones he did were always from a great distance. He had been a child the last time a dragon had come, and he had been too young at the time to be allowed to join in any matters of state.

The leader of the caravan had been riding ahead of them at the very front, and he'd given the call for everyone to stop and was audibly beckoning Waylen and the Captain to ride forward to join him. Waylen dug his heels into the sides of the camel and started off at a trot with the Captain in tow. They came to a stop next to the caravan leader, who was flanked by a pair of other men who were a part of the merchant's own party of travelers.

"Your Highness, the gates are normally open." The leader of the caravan, who was an older man that was allegedly Shane's junior in age, but he looked far older from how weathered and textured the desert had left his complexion. The caravan Waylen's party had ridden with lived their lives coming and going through the desert trading goods back and forth between Radiah and Atina Nah.

"Are we expected to request entry?" He asked the man.

The leader looked to him, his face wrinkled and darkened from sun and age, replied first with his eyes. They had the look of apology in them.

"I do not know. The gates are normally open." He repeated himself.

Waylen turned to look to the Captain, who was now frowning. The group of them were at the very front of their procession of more than a dozen carriages, half of which were the merchant's own and visibly laden with goods for sale and trade. One could not sneak up on a city with a group so large.

To their front, the noise of wood grinding could then be heard. There was a loud knock, and then the gates began to swing open. The gate's wooden doors were massive, and very heavy, so they moved slowly as they swung out. The dragons in front of them stood still as the doors opened, and as the crack between the doors widened Waylen began to see the city beyond it.

The narrow view revealed a dense sprawl of stone buildings, each sun-bleached to an almost white appearance. In the middle were row upon row of soldiers in full plate armor. A shiver went up his

spine as his eyes quickly counted the many suits of armor until he began to lose count after fifty. There were ten outside the gates and dozens more inside.

“Your Highness.” Captain Landon asked for his attention.

He turned, carefully looking toward the other man’s direction. Their eyes met, and for a brief moment Waylen thought he could see a similar emotion in the Captain’s eyes as he’d felt himself.

Worry.

“They’re open now!” The man to his other side said aloud.

Waylen glanced towards the leader of the caravan and saw that he did not appear to be worried at all but was actually relieved that the gates were indeed open. His concern had evaporated the moment the doorway to trade had been opened.

The rows of soldiers across the gate’s threshold began to move. Waylen watched as they each drew their right arm over their chest, then clapped their fist against their chest plate. The clap of metal, all in unison, was thunderous even at this distance and he suppressed the temptation to jump with surprise.

“What course of action is appropriate for the occasion, Captain?” He asked aloud, keeping his eyes forward.

“Wait, Your Highness. They are putting on a show.” He replied.

He nodded, and so they waited. The rows of soldiers then broke rank and began to march off to either side, in equal numbers, until all that was left were two figures standing in the middle of the road. The pair, clad as heavily in plate as all the rest, began to walk towards them. Waylen’s camel snorted, and he tugged at the reigns gently to settle the animal. When the pair were within speaking distance he began to stare them down.

Both dragons wore polished steel, and underneath it was fabric and leather dyed a deep red. The two came to a stop at the same time, lifting their arms over their chest and clapping their armor at him in salute.

Waylen then lifted his own hand, balling it into a fist to tap his knuckles against his opposite shoulder. To his right the Captain was doing the same while the men from the caravan all bowed their heads while performing crude imitations of a Radian salute.

Both dragons then lowered their arms, and the one standing to Waylen’s right side took a step forward to separate itself from their companion.

“You stand at the gate of Anya Sur.” The dragon spoke in poor Radian, their voice deep, and with an accent so thick that it was difficult to understand.

Waylen studied the dragon closely. He’d never been so close to a dragon before. Even with the dragons riding in the distance around him, he’d never gotten a chance to see them up close. The one

standing in front of him now had dark skin, gray like a piece of shale stone. He did not know how to read its expression, and even struggled to know with confidence if he was looking at a man or a woman.

The dragon was tall, taller than the one behind him, and both of them had the twin sets of horns he'd been told they all had. Both also had heads full of white hair, which was another thing all dragons were supposed to have. Waylen had to be looking at one of their men. The dragon had spoken with too deep of a voice, and his features appeared too masculine, his shoulder broad and with a lack of breasts. A single scar was on the side of his face, and that was certainly something you'd never see on a woman.

The old man to his left looked very nervous and cast a glance towards Waylen. If the gates were normally open, then clearly it was customary to simply approach the city and enter. A similar practice was done in Illian. No one stopped merchants from coming and going unless they'd been given reason to.

But Waylen was no merchant, and the Captain was right. The dragons were putting on a show.

"I am His Royal Highness, Waylen Sundile. I have come from the Kingdom of Radiah at the request of my father, King Rylan Sundile, to attend the Festival of Founding." Waylen announced himself, speaking with as much authority as he could muster, his heart beginning to pound in his chest.

As he spoke, he could just barely see in his periphery that the Captain was sitting up straighter in his saddle. Waylen did the same, projecting as much confidence as he could while he stared down at the dragon in front of him. The dragon in turn stared back up at him with a gaze white hot. It did not appear that he was scowling, but his eyes were a rich shade of orange that seemed to glitter angrily from the sunlight overhead.

"Anya Sur welcomes you, Your Highness." The dragon finally replied after a long moment.

"Thank you, it has been a long journey to get here, and the walls of your city are a welcome sight for the weary." Waylen continued, hoping to hasten their entry into the city.

With the sun baring down on them he did not want to linger outside any longer than necessary, and seeing buildings just within the walls of the city was making his legs itch to find shelter in something that wasn't a carriage. For six weeks he had to ride in a bumpy carriage or walk across course earth to stretch his legs. Everyone behind him had suffered the same and was in great need of a proper rest.

The dragon snorted in reply, which nearly caused Waylen's expression to break and give way to confusion. He kept his poise and narrowed his gaze in reply as the dragon began to speak again in his thick accent.

"Anya Sur did not build walls for the weary. Her Majesty built them to punish all who stood against her." Came the reply, Waylen being forced to pause as the dragon's thick accent dulled his delivery.

As the meaning of the dragon's words rolled over Waylen, a shiver went up his spine as alarm threatened to sound inside him. Next to him both men shifted uneasily.

“A Prince of Radiah comes to her as a friend. To whom am I speaking? What is your name?” Waylen demanded, keeping his back straight and speaking again with authority to whoever this dragon was.

Behind the dragon, the other one began to shift uneasily where they stood, staring at Waylen with red eyes framed by a face of ashy red skin. His instinct was telling him that this one was a woman, and the longer he looked at her the more certain of that he became. The dragons were strange in appearance to him, but the softness of her face, and the shape of her chest and hips left too little room for doubt.

“I am Commander Roc Er Fel’Noy. I serve Her Majesty Yvvie Fah Roh’Sah as Commander Beyond the Wall.” The dragon answered him.

The other dragon then moved at last, taking a step forward. As she took that first step, Waylen watched her raise her hand for another salute, though gently this time with hardly a clack sounding. Her red eyes did not glitter like the others did, but her gaze was just as strong and set firmly on Waylen as he stared back at her. He tried to match them both, challenge against challenge, and prayed he would not fail.

“Her Majesty welcomes you with open arms, Your Highness.” The second dragon spoke up, her Radian as poor as her companion’s, but her accent was not so thick.

The tenor of her voice was deeper than he’d expect from a woman, but it was still clearly feminine, so there was no doubt to what she was.

“And you are?” He asked her.

“I am Commander Nell Fah Sol’Nu, Her Majesty’s Eye of the Watch. Together, I and Commander Roc serve Her Majesty as two of her three Commanders. We lead her armies under the direction of Her Royal Highness Princess Vienna Fah Ro’Un.” She replied, revealing her name, as well as her and her companion’s place within Her Majesty’s court.

She also spoke much better Radian than Commander Fel’Noy, now that she’d spoken so much more of it for him to judge, but her accent was still thick, and it made difficult to catch her every word well. Despite it, he still understood her well enough to understand.

“Very well. If we are welcome, then let us enter your city so that we may finally rest. Our journey has been long and arduous.” Waylen commanded, or so he thought.

He was being greeted by two members of the Queen’s army, and high ranked ones at that. He knew only bits of pieces of how the army of Atina Nah was arranged. There was a pitifully small amount known of it in Radiah despite the many decades of kinship the kingdoms had shared. Their kingdoms were not so close together, and it was rare that they fought alongside one another.

Commander Sol’Nu did not speak, but she clapped her arm over her chest again, and that was quickly followed in kind by Commander Fel’Noy.

Waylen watched as the two dragons spoke to each other in their native tongue in low voices until Commander Fel’Noy made an ugly expression with his face. The dragon turned to Waylen, clapped his



arm over his chest in salute once more, then pivoted in the sand to march himself back the way he'd come.

"Your Highness, I will lead you and your companions into the city. With your permission, I will then have you leave your camel behind. We have better carriages in the city." She told him.

He looked to Captain Landon, who nodded, then turned back to look at the Commander.

"Lead the way, Commander Sol'Nu." He told her and gestured with his hand towards the city.

The dragon nodded once, then pivoted on her heel and began to march towards the now open gate, and Waylen took up the reins and dug his heels. The camel snorted and began to obey, marching him forward with the Captain soon joining him while the leader of the caravan began to shout backwards towards the carriages and camels behind them.

At last, they'd finally reach the city of Anya Sur.

Soon after passing through the gates, Commander Sol'Nu encouraged him to give up his camel, which he was eager to do. Horses were leagues above these animals, and Waylen was grateful to be out of its uncomfortable saddle.

Now that he was back on his feet and standing on solid ground, he was amazed at the number of buildings he saw. Only in the densest parts of the Illian were buildings so close together, and that was quite rare. The stonework of Anya Sur was simple but refined. Nothing appeared to be crooked or lopsided, the sun-bleached stone was cut cleanly and sanded smooth. Had they been built from wood Waylen would have expected to see them shine with a well sanded polish.

They were still surrounded by dragons in heavy armor, the Commander giving orders in her native tongue as a new carriage was brought to them from down the long road that led to the giant rock that was the true Anya Sur. The massive pillar was intimidating in its size, almost as intimidating as the dragons were. It strained his neck to look at its highest point.

The dragons were also very tall, now that Waylen was no longer saddled on a large animal. Even the woman Commander was taller than him, and Waylen was not short of stature!

Captain Landon was taller still than him, but with quick glances Waylen could see that many of the dragons around them bested them both in height. He'd been told that dragons were very tall, but no one had put enough care into their descriptions to make it clear just how tall they truly were.

"Your Highness, your carriage. You will be taken to the Keep. Someone will be waiting to take you into their care." The Commander told him, and then clapped a salute over her chest before gesturing with a hand for him to approach the newly arrived carriage.

"The rest of my group will follow?" He asked.

"Yes, Your Highness." She replied, bowing her head.

He nodded to her, then thanked the Commander before stepping up into the carriage at last. It had clearly been built for dragons, as the first step was very high, and then the gap between the ceiling and his head was much wider than he was prepared for.

Captain Landon joined him, and they sat alone as a dragon shut the door for them.

“Your Highness, I feel that you performed your duty better than they did.” The Captain broke the silence.

“Why is that?” He asked.

“The one that sounded like a man needs to be cuffed for how he spoke to you, Commander or not. The woman at least understood her place.” The Captain replied.

“She was more polite.” Waylen agreed.

The carriage then began to move, and quickly. The road they traveled on was coated in thin layers of sand but was quite smooth otherwise. The ride to the Keep was not so turbulent as the one they’d enjoyed on their way here, which was a blessing.

“I wager that Shane is quite flustered with his decision not to press himself to your side.” The Captain added a few minutes into the ride.

“I’d imagine so.” Waylen smiled as he lifted a hand to the door to touch his fingers to the narrow slats in the small windowpane.

It had no glass, but the slats spun on a dowel. He pushed and opened the slats while he leaned forward to peek outside. His eyes scanned the road, seeing what looked like a large marketplace packed dense with stone buildings. There were countless booths and tables covered with brightly colored fabric awnings. Even the busiest of Illian marketplaces paled in comparison to the vast arrangement of storefronts that Anya Sur seemed to possess. The tables and booths were stocked full of goods, both edible and otherwise. Every manner of thing seemed to be sold here, just like the vibrant marketplaces of Illian but on a larger scale.

Except something was amiss.

“The city is empty.” He pointed out to the Captain.

Soon as he’d said it, the Captain was pushing open the slats on his side of the carriage. Everything was in its proper place for a marketplace, except for its people. There should have been hundreds of people milling about such a place. There should have been the noise of countless merchants and traders trying to sell you everything, including your own trousers.

“I only see soldiers, guards. Nothing else, Your Highness.” He replied.

That was true. The market was empty of people, but there were indeed dragons in full armor. He started scanning the buildings for windows, seeing that many of them were shut with wooden covers or

fabric curtains. It was eerie seeing no peasantry or hearing the noise of a busy road full of people hawking their wares.

He'd traveled the roads of Illian many times and the noise of life was hard to miss.

"Would you say this is them putting on a show?" Waylen asked.

"I would not know what kind of show this is, Your Highness." He replied.

Waylen pushed the slats back into place and put his back to the seat. He tried to think if his father had ever emptied out a road before. He came up with nothing, but he he'd only come into his own manhood within the last few years, so he knew little of what his father did and didn't do when he had still been a boy.

"Has my father ever cleared the roads of Illian before?" He asked.

"Not that I know of. Perhaps your grandfather before him did. Shane would know such things." The Captain replied.

Waylen nodded in agreement. He didn't know if it was something to worry himself with, but the empty market was an off-putting thing to see. They continued their ride in silence until finally the carriage came to a stop. There were voices outside speaking in that same foreign tongue. He knew that there were men in Radiah that could speak it, but apart from Shane, he'd scarcely heard it himself. It was rough sounding, strange. The sound of it left the speaker sounding angry as they spoke.

A knock arrived at both sides of the carriage, and then the doors were opened for them. A dragon in armor stood to greet Waylen on his side, silently offering a salute while stepping aside to hold the door open for his exit. Waylen carefully stepped down to the ground, blinking the sunlight away. The rest of his group had been following them close behind, and the caravan of merchants were missing, probably back where they'd come from and hoping to do the business they'd come here for.

Captain Landon quickly arrived at his side while Waylen looked around them to see where they were. Back down the way they'd come; the rest of their party were being drawn to a stop. Ahead of them was Anya Sur, taller now than before, and down at its feet was another wall, though much smaller than the first.

And in front of that wall was another of the dragon's shows. Several dozen dragons in polished armor all stood silently at attention. They formed two even rows that funneled the eye to the wooden doors that would give entry to whatever lied beyond them. These doors were open, unlike the ones at the southern gate, and walking towards them now were two figures.

One was a soldier, and the other was a slender figure wearing a white robe that fluttered about their feet as they walked. The outfit was remarkably plain, broken in color only by a wide belt around their waist and a red cloth draped around their neck.

Everyone behind him was being instructed by Shane to exit their carriages, and it sounded like he was trying to speak to the dragons in their foreign tongue.

Waylen continued to wait with the Captain at his side until the two figures arrived. The one in armor was Commander Sol’Nu. The slender one was new, any very clearly a man despite what he was wearing. The slender dragon wore his hair long, letting it drape down his back as a woman might her own, and his skin was a shade of light gray like you’d find in the pale ash of a stove.

“Your Highness, Prince Waylen, I am Ser Lyrren Er Yot’Ah.” The new face told him in near perfect Radian. He had the same accent as the others, but the dragon appeared to have a better control over it so it did not cause conflict with his Radian.

The dragon gently drew his arm over his chest before bowing with much more respect than he’d been given by any of the soldiers. Waylen drew his own arm up in salute, uncertain of this dragon’s place with Her Majesty’s court. He couldn’t be in her military given his attire.

“Commander Sol’Nu told me we would be delivered into someone’s care. Are you this someone?” Waylen asked.

The dragon first smiled in reply, and on his narrow features it was both a subtle gesture and almost predatory. Though he wore the face of a reptile, Waylen was reminded of a hawk’s gaze.

“I am. I have already given instructions to your party. We will assist them in bringing everything inside to your quarters. If you would follow me, Your Highness, there is much to tell you now that you have finally arrived at the Her Majesty’s doorstep.” The dragon smiled more broadly this time, rising again to his full height.

“Of course, Ser Yot’Ah.” Waylen agreed and waited for his cue to follow.

The dragon then hummed in reply, smiling still, then bowed his head to him almost apologetically.

“My apologies, Your Highness. It would lead to embarrassment if you were to continue to address us by the wrong name. You should say Ser Lyrren or Commander Nell instead. It is how we speak each other’s names.” The dragon replied with another of his smiles.

Waylen nodded, taking note that they did not seem to like their surnames being used.

“Very well, thank you. Please, lead the way, Ser Lyrren.” Waylen replied, gesturing with a hand to the open gates further down the way.

The dragon smiled again, bowed, and then spun on his heel to walk back the way he’d come. Commander Nell clapped her arm over her chest in salute and bowed her head before taking a step back and silently excusing herself from his presence.

He looked at the Captain, nodding to him, and together they began to follow along behind the slender, smiling dragon.

*It's essential to do things as closely as they do, for their comfort. We can build our own homes as we see fit, but when they come to visit, we must cater to them. They build very differently than we do. Everything they make for themselves is always comfortable, even if that means it must be fragile. That's why they love building with wood, I think. It can burn so quickly and be broken with tools far more easily than stone, but it is very comfortable.*

*When the carving is finished for their guest rooms, I will have wood brought in from Radiah, and as much of it as is necessary. It is very fortunate that Edgard sent so many of his craftsmen from Radiah to help us rebuild Anya Sur. Our own craftsmen are talented, but not in the ways of Radian construction. They are very good at working on a large scale, and not just with big buildings but across many acres of land. With Radiah's help we will learn how to build all sorts of new things! When we finish the guest rooms, they will look exactly like the ones I saw in Illian while I was there. They will be fragile, and we will need to devote time and care to keep them well, but they will be very comfortable.*

*We owe them a great deal, and we will welcome them always with open arms whenever they visit, and if that means I must build a second home for them in Anya Sur then that is what I will do. Bathe them in comfort like the rain bathes their kingdom. Yvvie thinks it's a waste since she doesn't think they will visit us often, but I think she will come to agree with me as she watches Radian steel gather in her coffers.*

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They kept pace with the dragon ahead of them, threading the needle through the rows of soldiers. Once they stepped through the gate, Waylen could see that they were in a large courtyard, pounded flat and decorated by numerous palm trees, a rarity in the desert as they only seemed to grow wherever there was an abundance of water. Further ahead of them was the base of Anya Sur, and at the pillar's feet lay a monumental fortress carved right into the rock. At its highest point the fortress looked to be taller than Castle Illian, but much less warm and inviting.

Much like the buildings they'd seen while entering the city, the fortress' walls were sheer, sanded smooth, and bleached nearly white from the sun. There were many long narrow slats carved into the stone, presumably windows. Across the many visible walls of the fortress were parapets. It looked like it would be a difficult place to conquer if war were to ever come here.

The dragon was leading them to the fortress' only visible entrance, a staircase wider than any other he'd seen, which led up nearly a full story before it stopped at a large doorway.

"This is Her Majesty's Keep, Your Highness. This will be your new home for the duration of your stay in Anya Sur. We have taken great care to ensure your time with us is pleasant with only the finest we can afford." The dragon told them from over his shoulder.

The slender dragon kept his hands clasped behind his back as he walked. His posture and grace spoke to the great lengths he must have been trained to maintain such poise. When they reached the steps, Waylen and the Captain had already walked a considerable distance and he was beginning to feel himself flag under the heat. He had to retrieve his handkerchief again to wipe the sweat off his brow.

He worried that if he sweated for any longer, he'd start growing feint. That was not something he ever needed to fear in Radiah, but it would be commonplace in a place like Atina Nah, as he'd been

repeatedly warned. The air was so dry that it felt like he was in an oven being cooked. He could not imagine Captain Landon faring any better than he was.

“I am certain that this is the case, Ser Lyrren.” Waylen replied out of politeness and was equally certain to disguise the weariness in his voice.

“Your journey has been very long, but it is soon near its end.” The dragon added, taking the first step onto the stairs.

Waylen dreaded the steps, as he knew he would ache by the time he reached the top. He had to wonder why he was being made to walk up the stairs in the heat, and then he recalled the Captain saying that they were putting on a show. He wondered if there was someone hiding in the narrow windows above them watching as Waylen and the Captain both sweated to death while walking up a long flight of stairs.

By the time they reached the top, the dragon seemed unphased by the effort, while the two men caught in his wake were aching. Waylen hid his weakness as well as he could, but Captain Landon was a much older man, and his disguise was not so sharp. No matter the man’s skill and experience as a soldier, a long flight of stairs in this heat for someone his age left him grunting with irritation with the final step.

There were a pair of guards posted at the doorway ahead of them, and at Ser Lyrren’s direction the pair opened the way for them. Waylen and the Captain were led inside, and the sudden absence of sunlight and heat was a blessing.

The doorway led into a large hall where they found themselves feeling significantly cooler. The light was dim, but as Waylen blinked, his eyes began to adjust to no longer being in the bright sunlight of a cloudless sky.

The doors behind them were now being shut.

“Are my companions not following us?” Waylen asked as the sunlight vanished with the shutting of the doors.

“Yes, Your Highness, but not through the front entry. With the great amount of supplies and luggage you have brought with you, another route was chosen for them. Now, please, let us continue as we have little time to waste.” The dragon replied with another smile and began to lead them through the room.

They followed, and Waylen noticed that when the dragon raised his hand and gestured at the nearby soldiers standing in the room, they all left their posts and began to fall into position at the four corners around the trio.

Apart from the small handful of servants, all Waylen had seen so far of the dragons were soldiers, and as they were led further down the hallways of the Keep that’s all he continued to see. Dragons in plate armor and sturdy leather stood at silent attention and at even intervals down every passageway Ser Lyrren took them, and each was equipped with either a sword or a spear.

The insides of the Keep were dimly lit with most of the light coming from lanterns, which were tucked within small niches carved into every wall. The entry hall they'd started in at least had natural light pouring in, but beyond that the stone construction of the Keep prevented sunlight from reaching its inner rooms. Even with the large number of lanterns, Waylen felt like he was being led through a cave.

"You said we have little time to waste. Should I be expected to see Her Majesty soon?" Waylen asked, breaking the momentary silence that had captured them apart from the sound of their footsteps clapping across stone.

"Yes! Her Majesty expects to see you soon, but she is well aware of the arduous journey you have just made. You are being granted a brief time of rest to prepare yourself for her audience. Once you are brought to your new rooms your companions can see to it that they are amended to your tastes." The dragon told him.

Much like the exterior of the fortress, and the buildings outside, the interior of the Keep had been carved perfectly straight and sanded smooth. Waylen didn't know anything about masonry, but he did not imagine that it would be easy to carve a fortress so cleanly.

"I will have to extend to her my thanks. It took us a very long time to get here." He replied.

"The great Kingdom of Radiah is very far away! I have never stepped foot outside of Atina Nah, but I have had good fortune to hear much of your homeland, Your Highness. When you see your rooms, I do hope that they are to your liking. Much effort was made to ensure that any guest from Radiah would feel most welcome!" The dragon said, his foreign accent betraying him as he continued to heap praise upon Waylen's future accommodations.

By the dragon's tone of voice and manner, he seemed very prideful. This one, as strange as he was to Waylen, also felt very familiar. He sounded and behaved like a kind of nobility, and perhaps he was. There were many men that came to Castle Illian to see his father that spoke in similar manner.

"I do so, as well, Ser Lyrren." He replied.

"And my companions will all have adequate accommodation?" Waylen added.

"Oh, yes, Your Highness! It was always expected that guests would come with many in their wake. Your own rooms will have space for some, and then there is a separate room for the remainder. You may divide them as you see fit, but by the count I made upon your arrival there should be as many beds as there are heads in your party." The dragon replied.

As they continued to walk, the ache in his legs only grew. He'd walked plenty before, but never after such a long journey. His body did not agree with so much movement after such a long time, trapped in a carriage for hours at a time. He hoped it would quickly pass.

"And here we arrive, Your Highness!" The dragon replied loudly, drawing his hands out from behind his back to clap them together.

They'd reached the end of a hallway, which then forked to both left and right sides. Ser Lyrren pivoted on his heel to face Waylen and Captain Landon, then gestured with a hand for him to progress down the path to his right.

"Your rooms are here, Your Highness." He said with a bow of the head.

Waylen nodded and continued to walk, rounding the corner and finding a group of six dragons standing at attention along either side of the walls, with a seventh standing next to a doorway. It was intimidating being surrounded by so many tall and heavily armed dragons, but he wore as neutral of an expression as he could so as to hide it.

The dragon by the door, a woman by the look of her, clapped her arm across her chest in salute, and in turn the six others joined her with a salute of their own. She then reached for the door handle and opened it.

"Your Highness, the doorway to your left leads to your chambers, and the doorway opposite it will serve the remainder of your party. Please, do enter!" Ser Lyrren urged him forward.

Waylen complied, walking down the hall with the Captain in tow behind him. He passed a glance at the dragon holding the door. Her face was still and disciplined, as was the rest of her body. Her eyes betrayed her when he noticed her glancing at him briefly before averting them again to stare down the hallway from which they'd all come. She had gray eyes, something he'd never seen on someone before.

He passed her by, then walked through the open doorway to find a fully furnished room flooded bright with natural sunlight.

"I do hope it is to your liking!" Ser Lyrren said cheerfully from behind as Waylen stood in shock.

From the moment they'd stepped inside the fortress, the Keep had been an austere stone building, warmly lit with lanterns, and decorated so coldly that the desert could scarcely compete with it.

But Waylen's new chambers had hardwood floors! There were wood paneled walls, even a painted ceiling! There were rugs on the floors that looked like they'd been bought at a Radian market, and there was furniture! And a writing desk, all carved from proper wood and polished with lacquer! Each piece of furniture he counted was distinctly Radian!

"Is this all from Radiah?" He immediately asked, turning to look at the dragon behind him.

Captain Landon had followed him inside by now, and by the expression on his face he was as surprised as Waylen was. Ser Lyrren stepped into the room, smiling broadly, an expression unmistakably smug but also intimidating with the rows of sharp teeth that filled the dragon's mouth.

"Yes! His Majesty, King Myunn, made sure that these rooms were crafted with the greatest of care so that any guest from Radiah would feel as welcome here as they would be in their own home. Every piece of wood, every item of furniture, and all of the decorations, were brought from Radiah long ago. It has been a very long time since these rooms have been used, but rest assured, Your Highness, that every effort was made to ensure your stay here will be a pleasant one." The dragon replied proudly.



“This is very impressive! I am grateful that His Majesty was so thoughtful.” Waylen replied, knowing that the King of Atina Nah was a man long since dead. He had died within a year or two of Waylen being born.

“He was a very thoughtful, Your Highness, and is missed greatly every day. Please, do let me introduce you to your rooms!” The dragon replied, quickly changing the subject away from the late King.

Ser Lyrren began to give Waylen a tour of his new rooms, showing him that the room they’d first stepped into was a drawing room for guests and meals, and attached on the left was a bedroom for his own use which included a fine bath. Opposite the bedroom was a large storage closet and a full kitchen for his servant’s use. The kitchen even had a living space attached to it that had enough bunks to sleep four people.

From Ser Lyrren’s description, the room across the hall was a single large room with furniture and shelving for storage, as well as numerous bunks for sleeping. There was another bath attached for servant’s use, but the dragon didn’t dwell on speaking of the other room for any longer than necessary, as he was very animated about showing off the Radian style rooms that Waylen would be using during his stay.

Outside in the hallway a brewing commotion could be heard. It sounded like a large number of people were soon to arrive, and Waylen suspected it was going to be Shane and the others coming along at last with all of their luggage.

“Please, the last thing I must show you!” The dragon smiled, leaving the kitchen behind him to draw Waylen down a set of narrow double doors that sat on the opposite wall from the front door. It was this same wall that was letting in all the natural sunlight through its curtained windows.

The dragon opened the doors and even more light, and heat, flooded the room. He stepped outside and beckoned Waylen to join him. They now stood on a balcony. It was not furnished in the manner of a Radian home, but instead more like the stonework found everywhere else in the keep.

For the first time in what felt like weeks he saw proper greenery. There were several flowering plants in large stone pots decorating the balcony. If it weren’t so oppressively hot, he could see himself enjoying a leisurely sit out here on one of the stone benches that sat near the wall.

“From the balcony you will have a fine view of the city, Your Highness. These rooms were chosen for their view of Anya Valas and the fields to other side of it.” Ser Lyrren told him, extending both his arms out wide to illustrate the view.

And it was a fine view! To his left was the sheer rock of Anya Sur, and to his right was another pillar of rock that was much smaller than Anya Sur but still so massive it was a castle in its own right. But dead ahead of him, framed at the sides by stone, was a view of a large lake glittering in the sunlight.

He didn’t think a desert could hold so much water in one place! And beyond it were actual fields! Large patches of land were clearly being used as farmland. He knew the dragons had to eat, but he just

could not have imagined they had farms like they did in Radiah. Such a barren place had things like this hiding here!

“I did not know Anya Sur had so much farmland, or even a lake.” He remarked.

“Anya Sur has many things, Your Highness, and many of which Atina Nah has Radiah to thank for. Rest assured, your presence here in our city is most welcome.” Ser Lyrren replied with a deep nod of his head.

Waylen was not sure what to say to that, but then someone else spoke for him.

“Your Highness, everyone is getting your rooms ready for you.” Shane’s voice said from behind.

He turned, seeing the older man in the balcony doorway, looking like he’d walked too far and too quickly, his face red and beading up with sweat.

“Thank you, Shane.” He replied.

Ser Lyrren turned to look at Shane and paused for a moment, studying the older man. He then pivoted back to Waylen.

“Your Highness, if now would be a good time, I’d like to explain what Her Majesty expects of you for the remainder of the day.” The dragon then said, turning back to Waylen.

“Of course, what does Her Majesty need?” He asked.

“Now that your luggage is arriving you are free to settle yourself into your rooms. It would be wise to rest as much as you are able, and to prepare yourself for her audience. After I take leave of you, I will ensure that proper arrangements are made, and then return to bring you to Her Majesty’s throne room for an audience.” He explained.

“I see, of course. I will certainly be ready, Ser Lyrren. When should I expect you to return?” He asked.

The dragon shut his eyes and appeared thoughtful for a moment.

“If I left now, expect my return within an hour. We have little time to waste, so I shall take my leave.” The dragon smiled, then carefully drew his hand over his chest and bowed his head.

“Of course, thank you for taking me to my rooms, Ser Lyrren. I await your return.” He replied, now surprised at how little time he was being given.

He’d expect a little more time than this, but apparently, he was expected to rest very quickly!

Ser Lyrren smiled, then took a step backwards before doing a pivot on the heel to step back inside. Waylen watched the dragon glide through the drawing room and out the door. His chambers were

now filled with all of the servants that had traveled with him, as well as a few of his guards who were helping to move the heavier items of luggage to where they needed to be.

“I will tell everyone to hurry, we will need to get you clean and changed! I have not even examined your rooms, Your Highness!” Shane replied, wiping his weary face of sweat.

Waylen ushered the older man back inside and explained that he had his own bath in the bedroom and that every room was already furnished. Shane then began making sure that everyone was working as quickly as they could to settle his rooms to whatever state he deemed them to be in.

It would take the rest of the day for the work of it to be completed, but they had little time to spare before the dragons would return to fetch him. While Shane kept the men and women of Waylen’s entourage organized in their labor, his other half took care of ensuring that the bath was ready for him, and that his clothing had been selected.

That other half was Marissa, a woman of similar age to Shane. If they were still in Radiah, it would have been Marissa who would have been in charge of his bedchamber and attached rooms. Shane was always more of a tutor to him when he wasn’t acting as advisor for his father on foreign matters.

“Waylen, I’ve set out your best green tunic! Hurry to the bath, when you are finished, we will make sure you are fit for a crown!” She told him, encouraging him to take care of himself as quickly as he could.

In their haste the water that had been drawn for his bath was not a comfortable temperature but considering that they were in a fortress stranded in the middle of a desert he was grateful that water for bathing was even possible. He’d long wondered what life here would be like, since no one seemed to know for sure whenever he asked. At least now he knew that some basic facets of civilization existed even in the barren wasteland of Atina Nah.

After he finished bathing the women had already fled his bedchamber, and all that remained was Codi who helped him dress. Once finished, Waylen sent Codi to fetch both Marissa and Shane and the two of them returned to quickly assess the quality of Waylen’s appearance. Marissa preened over his face and hair while Shane carefully checked every button, every thread, and every last stitch.

“Very soon you will take your first true step as a Prince of Radiah, Your Highness.” Marissa told him warmly as she adjusted the sleeve of his tunic.

“Indeed! Now, when you see her, you must stand straight, and never flinch! Her Majesty is very tall and is known to be of ill temperament, so do not let her intimidate you.” Shane advised him, and Waylen nodded as he listened.

“She should be quite pleased! It’s been so long since a Sundile has come to visit her!” Marissa said almost as if scolding.

“I’ve never heard of anyone saying they found her in a good mood, and from all I have been told the absence of His Majesty has done her court no favors.” Shane added, and Waylen drew in a quiet

breath to calm himself down before his nerves could have the chance to get the better of him. His heart was quickening again as he began to think of who he was soon to face.

“Waylen was but a baby still, broken hearts do heal, Shane.” She replied.

“Is there anything I should tell her that we haven’t already discussed?” Waylen interrupted them both.

“No, we’ve done all we could to prepare you, Your Highness.” Shane replied, then dusted off Waylen’s right side to knock away some lint from their luggage.

Shane took a step back and looked Waylen over from head to toe once more while Marissa walked around behind him to touch up his backside of any missed detail. By the time they were done Waylen was sick of the attention, having stood stock still while they toiled away at his perfection.

“You look resplendent, Your Highness.” Shane said at last.

Marissa stepped away to do as Shane had done, studying him from afar. She was quiet for a moment while she eyed him, then licked her thumb and stepped close. She pressed it to his forehead and with a quick wipe she adjusted a lock of his wavy hair into place. She then took another step back and nodded.

“I would hope so after all your work.” He told them.

And it was just in time, too, as a knock came at the other door. Everyone left his bedroom and Shane quickly told Christa, the one person nearest the door, to answer it. She did, and quickly staggered backwards as soon as she found herself face to face with a dragon. Ser Lyrren had returned, and acted as if he did not notice the teenaged girl backing away from him. The dragon was so tall, and Christa so short, that they looked almost like parent and child.

“Your Highness, it is time.” He smiled, staring right at Waylen.

“Of course, I am ready.” Waylen replied, beginning to approach. “Does Her Majesty expect any of my entourage to be in attendance?”

The dragon eyed Waylen, then cast his eyes about the room.

“You may take a single guard with you, Your Highness. It would be wise to bring whoever is responsible for your safety.” He answered.

“Of course, can someone bring Captain Landon?” Waylen replied, and Shane was already giving the order for Christa to go and find the Captain. Ser Lyrren took a large step inside the room, and then moved to the side so that the girl could quickly pass him by.

The dragon was not impatient at first, but the longer Christa took to return with the Captain, it was clear that he was becoming irritated. When she finally returned with the Captain in tow, the dragon immediately requested that they follow him, and to do so quickly as they would be late. Waylen told the

Captain to follow him, and together they once again fell into the wake left behind by the slender dragon. They started off going back the way they'd originally come, but then took a different turn.

Now that they were walking and struggling to keep up with the dragon's much longer gait, Waylen was beginning to fear that he wasn't ready to come face to face with Her. He'd never met the Queen of Atina Nah, but he'd heard stories about her. From how both his mother and father described her, and that of his eldest brother and numerous others within the royal house, Her Majesty was a powerful woman, and not just from her status as crowned Queen of Atina Nah. She was a powerful warrior who'd lived for more than a century.

It was alleged that she had been *young* during his great great grandfather's time. He was going to have to speak with someone who'd met not just his father, but many of his ancestors!

He'd also been told that even her own people found her frightening, and capable of such savagery in war that men were said to break rank to flee from her in battle. She allegedly spoke little and was commonly found in foul moods. The only positive thing Waylen had heard of her was that she'd selected a husband who was better suited to a crown than she was, but of course that man was now dead. Waylen would be left to confront the crown that remained, and the closer he felt himself come to his destination the more anxious he felt.

They rounded a corner, continuing to follow the dragon's lead as his legs began to ache again from a lack of proper rest. Ser Lyrren then raised his hand as he walked snapped his fingers, shouting something in his native tongue at a line of soldiers further down the hall. The soldiers all snapped to attention, clapping their steel-clad arms over their chests like thunder. At the end of the hall were a pair of wooden doors, and his sense of unease began to rapidly grow. He knew it was coming.

"We have arrived at the throne room, Your Highness." Ser Lyrren said, still walking with great haste.

The dragon finally stopped when they were several feet away from the door, with two soldiers posted in the corners on either side of the doorway. The dragon pivoted to face him, staring him down intently.

"When the doors open, I shall lead you inside. There is a green painted circle in the middle of the throne room. You will ignore what I am doing and walk straight into the circle. You are to stand in the center of the circle when you do, there is a carving on the floor where you are to stand! Your companion will enter the throne room behind us, and he is to follow me and stand at my side. Is this understood?" The dragon asked firmly, darting his gaze away from Waylen and towards Captain Landon to make sure both men understood their direction.

Waylen stared the dragon down in return, repeating what he'd been told to himself in his head until he turned his head to look at the Captain. The Captain looked back with uncertainty, but the older man still nodded his head in agreement.

"Yes, Ser Lyrren. It will be done." He replied with a nod.

The intensity of the dragon's instructions did nothing to ease his anxiety.

*Yvvie is obsessed with turning Anya Sur in a great castle like the one she saw in Illian. She wants big walls and the power of stone to surround the entire city. I understand what she's saying when she tells me all of her ideas, but I feel it is excessive. I won't try to stop her, as there is no sense in trying to stop the sun from rising. Her mind works in the short term, focused on the years ahead of her, and she is very good at dealing with the present. While she does that, I will focus on the decades that are to come.*

*The Radians don't even call this place a castle, as that is the wrong word for it in their tongue. A castle is a different thing, a building of walls that stands on its own. What we are carving into the rock of Anya Sur is what they would instead call a keep. It may take time to get her to use the correct word. I think she likes saying castle. She keeps finding new words in Radian that she likes, and she will use them often, even if they are the wrong words to use.*

*But if she must have this keep of hers, then I can at least help guide her in making it something proper. It must be a keep that is strong and impregnable, and I trust Yvvie to plan that herself. I have no worries there. What I must do is make sure that her keep has everything that a castle would have. Anya Sur must be both! I've already started the masons on the throne room. Carving and shaping stone is very difficult and takes a lot of time, so I will not have them carve ours to be as large as King Edgard's, but when it is finished, we can still make it worthy of our crowns.*

*I am glad that Yvvie is letting us wait before we carve our names into the floor. This should have been done a long time ago, but I really want it to be in the throne room. No other room will do! Everyone that visits us will see that the keep of Anya Sur was built by the mothers of Ro and the fathers of Un.*

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The dragon smiled broadly, clasping his hands in front of his chest with a curt bow of the head.

“Good, once we are where we need to be I shall introduce you to Her Majesty, and the Queen will begin Her audience.” The dragon told them both, then broke apart his hands to return them to the small of his back.

With another heel pivot the dragon was again facing away and towards the door, hands clasped tightly behind his back. Waylen inhaled deeply as the dragon snapped an order in his foreign tongue. The two guards stepped forward to take the door handles, and as they pulled them open Waylen exhaled.

Once the doors were open, Ser Lyrren began to walk, and so did Waylen. Behind him he could hear Captain Landon follow, but he dared not look anywhere but forward as they all stepped inside Her Majesty's throne room.

The size of it surprised him. He'd expected something larger, but what he found was a room half the size of the fine and ornate hall where his father's throne sat next to his mother's. Her Majesty's throne sat at the opposite end of a long stone room, rectangular in shape with a high ceiling. The walls were adorned only with two things, flowing red banners with foreign script stitched into their faces, and then dozens of glittering lanterns burning bright with fire.

Her throne room was better lit than the corridors, and very warm from the many fires keeping it that way. Waylen saw the green painted ring that Ser Lyrren had mentioned. The floor was made of polished stone with a rich green circle painted in its center that reached several feet out from the middle of the room.

Waylen did as he'd been told and approached the circle, stepping into it and towards a carved circle in its center. Only two feet across, the circle was not painted green like the stone around it, but instead was a deep crimson red like the banners on the wall. Etched into its face was foreign script he couldn't read, but it looked like Atinan from what little he knew of it. He stepped onto it and came to a stop in the middle to face the opposite side of the room.

Though the room was smaller than he had expected, it was still filled to the brim with dragons of many different colors and regalia. At least a dozen guards stood with their backs to either wall, one between each of the red banners, and in front of Waylen at the other end of the room were a pair of thrones, one empty and one occupied. He quickly counted the many foreign faces that were staring at him.

There were no less than fourteen dragons staring at him, including the one that was seated. They all came in many different shades of color, but each were earthen in tone from warm reds and oranges to differing shades of gray. Half wore the armor of a soldier, a third wore robes or dresses, and only three wore what Waylen couldn't believe. Loincloths to cover their lower halves and a shawl wrapped around their uppers, more skin on display than he ever imagined seeing in Castle Illian, especially for an important audience like this!

“His Royal Highness, Prince Waylen Sundile has come to Atina Nah from the Kingdom of Radian, to seek an audience with Her Majesty Queen Yvvie Fah Ro'Sah!” Ser Lyrren shouted in Radian, nearly causing Waylen to jump out of his skin from the volume of it.

The dragon then spoke further, and just as loudly, but in his native tongue. The words hit the air like violence, the volume adding to their power until he heard his own name spoken again, followed shortly by the word Radian. He was saying the same thing twice for the benefit of everyone in the room, but he wondered who in front of him needed the translation and who didn't. He knew that Her Majesty was supposed to be fluent in Radian.

“It is granted.” Replied the dragon sitting on Her throne.

Carefully, Waylen drew in a quiet breath then let it back out slowly. The dragon in front of him looked as tall as he'd been told, even though she was seated. Most of the dragons in the room had earth tone skin, and Her Majesty was no different. Her flavor of earth was a warm orange shade. She was clad head to toe in steel armor, crimson red fabric flowing out from beneath it. Her Majesty did not look like she was dressed to welcome a friend, but rather to march off to fight a war.

She also looked irritated. Even with her strange reptilian face he could tell she was wearing the temperament he'd heard so much about, which did not ease his anxiety at all.

The Queen sat slouched to one side of her throne, propping her head onto a hand as she rested her elbow on the arm of the chair. Draped across the floor behind her was her tail, and its tip was tapping the stone like a cat's if you bothered it with too much unwanted affection.

Somewhere behind him the sound of footsteps drew further away, as if Ser Lyrren and the Captain were being drawn away from the circle. He wanted to turn his head to see where and why he was being abandoned in the middle of the room, but then he started to feel foolish. He was being given an audience so of course he'd be left here to fend for himself! He squared his shoulders and waited.

Her Majesty then lifted her head from her hand and straightened her posture, throwing up one leg to cross it over the other as both hands came to rest on the arms of throne.

“Welcome, Prince Waylen. It pleases me to see you survived the journey. Atina Nah is not kind to the men of Radiah.” She told him, her voice carrying easily across the room. Like the voice of Commander Nell before her, it was deep but still feminine. There was warmth to her tone, but her expression and body language betrayed her and revealed that her warmth was an illusion. Well, perhaps it was not an illusion, but rather a mask. Something warm hiding something even hotter beneath its surface.

He didn't know if he should say something, Ser Lyrren had not given him any instruction as to when he was allowed to speak to the Queen! Had he been in his father's castle he knew the rules, but he was very far from home and doubted that the dragons carried any sort of similar decorum.

“You are not mute, Prince Waylen. You may speak.” Her Majesty then added, her head tilting to the side with irritation.

He drew in another breath and began to quickly recall the several different things he'd been told to make an effort to say to Her Majesty when he finally met her. There was too much to say in one breath, and far too much to squeeze into a single audience. He nearly lost his composure as he struggled to piece together his words, but he finally found the start of a thread, and began to pull at it until his breath gently escaped his lips so that he could be calm enough to speak.

“I am grateful to have arrived, Your Majesty! I, and on behalf of my father King Rylan, wish to thank you for allowing me to attend the Festival of Founding. It has been a very long time since someone from my royal line has seen it, and my father laments that we have failed to visit you sooner, and more often. We hope that this year marks a change for the better, with the Festival being-“

“Stop.” Her Majesty cut him off gruffly, raising her right hand before snapping her fingers sharply.

He froze, his skin bristling with goosebumps like the snap of her fingers had been the crack of lightning.

“You are here for the Festival, which is a near to a month away. I am still deciding what to do with you until then.” She continued; the hand she'd used to snap was still uplifted.

Waylen was silent, watching the upraised hand and noticed she gestured with two fingers towards a dragon standing next to her. When this one began to step forward Her Majesty lowered her hand back to the arm of her throne.



“Your Highness.” The new dragon replied with a gentle nod of the head, her voice and figure feminine. She was a much darker flavor of earth, like a shade of warm brown.

She was dressed much as the Queen was, so much so that they came very near to matching piece for piece, both dragons clad within polished steel with red fabric resting underneath.

“This is my eldest daughter, Princess Vienna Fah Ro’Un. She will be Queen of Atina Nah in due time.” Her Majesty introduced her eldest.

Waylen already knew several names of important people he would be meeting, Princess Vienna being one of the more important ones. She was the firstborn and heir to the throne of Atina Nah. He scanned the other dragons standing behind Her Majesty and wondered which one was her other daughter, Princess Iolla. There were... He thought there were six other women standing on the other side of the room, but he was hesitant to say for certain since some of them were in armor. Only two were obviously as female as Her Majesty and Princess Vienna, as they both wore dresses. One stood out for her ivory skin, and the other was another shade of earth like the rest.

Princess Vienna lifted her hand and crossed it over her chest, drawing his attention back to her.

“While my mother decides how she will make use of your time in Atina Nah, it will be my responsibility to ensure you are comfortable while you are in our care. I have already made several arrangements for your stay with us, as you have already discovered. We hope that you found your living arrangements to be satisfactory.” Princess Vienna took over from her mother.

Both her and her mother’s grasp of Radian was impeccable. It was clear that neither of them were born to the language, and yet they still spoke it like it was a well-practiced skill. It was a relief that his inability to speak their tongue would not be a hinderance, if both their royalty and even their servants, like Ser Lyrren behind him, could all speak Radian with ease.

“I am very grateful for the rooms I have been provided! I was not prepared to see a Radian bedroom so far away from home.” He replied graciously.

The Princess seemed to smile at that, but Her Majesty continued to wear the same expression she’d been using since the start of their audience. As if to prove that her mood had not changed in the slightest her hand snapped a finger, the noise just as loud the second time as it had been the first. She didn’t even waste the effort of lifting her hand for it.

The Princess turned to look at her mother. They shared a silent look, eyes communicating until Her Majesty said something in her native tongue. Waylen had no idea what was being said when the Princess replied with something of her own.

“Your Highness, we are glad that you found your rooms welcoming. However, you will have to forgive us for leaving our audience brief. There is much to do in Anya Sur and very little time to do it.” The Princess replied, taking another step forward to place herself further ahead of her mother.

Waylen was taken by surprise, especially so as the Princess began to tighten her arm over her chest in salute. It was already over? So soon? The answer came quickly as all the other dragons began to salute, as well. All except for Her Majesty.

Princess Vienna turned her head to look at her mother, who was now rising to her feet. Soon as her back straightened it was clear she was the tallest dragon in the room. When she began to walk past her daughter, Waylen felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

Her Majesty approached him, her height becoming more and more obvious with every step until Waylen began to feel the strain on his neck as he lifted his chin to keep his gaze locked onto her own. When she stopped in front of him, he felt a cloak of fear settle over his shoulders, even though he did not know why. He tried to remind himself he was in the care of a friend of Radiah. Atina Nah had been their ally for well over a century!

“You are the youngest of your father’s sire.” She told him, her teeth on display as her lips brought shape to her every word. His own words were eluding him for the moment, so he just nodded. She made a new expression, but he could not pin down what it meant.

“Would it not have been better for Rylan to send Nyle? He is your eldest kin.” She asked with a subtle tilt of her head, her eyes studying him intently from above.

“Prince Nyle has too many duties to Radiah that he could not abandon, Your Majesty. I came in his stead.” Waylen told a half-truth, his mouth suddenly dry.

There had never been any intention of sending Nyle, as Waylen was the perfect candidate to send. He was the youngest of four children and the least important. He would not be missed if he were to go on holiday for a few weeks or even months of the year. His mother would be upset, but she was always upset so that wouldn’t have struck anyone as odd.

Her face did not shift its expression, but her eyes bored down onto him like the light of a harsh sun. He tried to match her gaze, but her eyes were the most brilliant crimson red he’d ever seen, and he failed. He did not know that eyes could be such a powerful hue, let alone glitter like a ruby reflecting firelight.

“I’m sure you will be adequate to the task.” She replied with another tilt of the head to the opposite side, like she was a cat stalking him as prey.

“I aim to be so, Your Majesty.” He replied, his voice suddenly a whisper, embarrassing himself.

“You will attend dinner with us this evening. After you are returned to your rooms someone will fetch you when it is time.” She replied, her demeanor suddenly shifting as her body relaxed and she began to turn away from him.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” He replied to her, feeling grateful to be free of her gaze as she began to walk back towards her throne.

Now that he was free, he was able to look back at the dragons that had been watching them from afar, and he first noticed that Princess Vienna appeared to look concerned, though he did not know why. There were so many things he did not know, and the weight of his ignorance was making it hard to breathe.

When Her Majesty returned to her seat there was a flash of white to his left. He jumped, further embarrassment washing over him as he turned to see that it was Ser Lyrren now at his side.

“We may leave now, Your Highness.” The dragon told him, and he was grateful to be led back towards the doors. His audience with the Queen did not go as he’d imagined it would.

*Having Thalla Fah Kah'Seh with us is proving to be a blessing. Though not an eldest, she has the wisdom of one. She's always calm even when everyone else is shouting with anger. She's been invaluable to me in any discussion she's included in, because with her voice joined with mine, we're able to speak reason to those who might not want to hear it. No longer do I have to fight alone to cool down someone's head.*

*Yvvie still does not trust her, and I understand why, but I keep trying to tell her to let it go. She's still upset that Thalla did not send more of her tribe's warriors to help us take Anya Sur. Yvvie is upset at everyone for that. Thalla's tribe sent us all that they could afford, and more than half of those that came to our aid did not return home. Many loved ones were sacrificed to put a stop the shadow cast by Anya Sur. I need to talk to her again to try and convince her to let it go.*

*But now that most of the tribes have laid down their weapons, Thalla is free to wield her voice alongside mine and together we try to keep the anger from starting another war. Atina Nah has seen enough spilled blood and I would like to solve our problems with words from now on. I'm planning on inviting Thalla to move her family to Anya Sur, same as I am planning to do with many others.*

*We need to fill the basket that is our new home with all the power and influence we can. Anya Sur will be rebuilt into something greater than a tribe that clubs its neighbors with greed and cruelty. I want it to be like the cities of Radiah and their great capital of Illian. I want members of every tribe in Atina Nah to feel welcome in Anya Sur, to walk its streets without fear, and to break bread with tribes they've never met.*

*We will be a great kingdom like Radiah is. We've all suffered enough.*

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When Ser Lyrren finished leading Waylen and Captain Landon out of the throne room the doors were shut behind them. The hallways outside felt noticeably cooler, but he didn't know if it was because there were fewer lanterns or because he was still reeling from his audience with the Queen.

“Her Majesty, along with Princesses Vienna and Iolla, will be expecting you at dinner tonight. Final preparations are still being made by the kitchen, so you have time to rest further from your journey before I come to fetch you again, Your Highness.” The dragon immediately began to explain as he led them back the way they came.

“Thank you, Ser Lyrren.” He replied.

As they walked back towards Waylen's new rooms he couldn't focus his thoughts. He needed a moment to rest, a chance to actually think about what had happened today, but he feared that the time he had before dinner would be far too short to allow for anything meaningful.

The dragon ahead of him didn't talk any further, and simply kept his hands clasped behind his back as he led them through the Keep. The design of the Keep was very predictable as they walked, something easy to remember, or at least it was for him. Waylen had loved exploring Castle Illian as a child, and it was a very confusing place with many narrow passageways and doors that let servants sneak through the castle unseen to perform their duties.

What created a challenge for Waylen in Anya Sur was how alike everything looked. Castle Illian was a quilt of labor, crafted over many generations with rooms and hallways bearing the fingerprints of many kings, queens, and their chosen staff. Waylen could wake up in any room of the castle and know exactly where he was from the décor. But in the Keep, there was nothing to identify a place as unique when every surface was carved from the same pale stone and adorned with the same decoration.

Perhaps that's why it was made to be so predictable and straightforward, as to avoid confusion for the dragons that lived and worked here.

They reached the end of another hall, and now he felt like he was somewhere familiar. They followed Ser Lyrren around the bend and were greeted by the sight of several armored dragons, likely the very same ones he'd seen from before. He recognized one of them more strongly than the others, as she was standing by the doorway like she had when he'd first seen her. Her skin was a much richer shade of red than many of the other dragons he'd seen so far.

And just like before, she opened the door for them with Ser Lyrren stepping aside without a word. Since these were his own rooms, he did not need an invitation to enter his own quarters and did so on his own. Captain Landon followed him inside, and what was waiting for them was another surprise.

Shane and Marissa were standing anxiously near the small breakfast table in the drawing room, except now there was a very large dragon sitting at it patiently. No one else but Codi was anywhere to be seen, and he was standing beside the bedroom door like he'd been glued there, looking uncomfortable.

Ser Lyrren followed them inside, tucking himself near to the doorway to be out of the way while Waylen studied his visitor. He'd hoped for a chance to rest, but perhaps that would have to wait.

The dragon was unlike any he'd seen so far. She was female, of that there was no doubt. Her ivory dress was long with intricate embroidery around the collar, the fabric hugging her figure snugly enough to dismiss any doubts about her sex. She was as feminine as any man could wish for a woman to be, but the most remarkable thing about her was her skin. After seeing so many dozens of dragons today, Waylen had grown accustomed to their earth toned and gray skin, but this new face was a pretty shade of blue, like the color a painter might choose when painting the sky.

She was watching Waylen with what he felt was a polite smile, her legs crossed neatly under her dress while she let her hands rest in her lap.

"Your Highness, this is Eldest Thalla Fah Kah'Seh. She's come to speak with you about your stay in Atina Nah." Shane spoke up, introducing the dragon with a formal bow and a gesture of the hand.

Waylen stepped further into the room to approach his seated guest. He stopped and gave a very polite nod of his head to her, drawing a hand up to his shoulder for a salute. He did not know the significance of what 'Eldest' meant, though he assumed it must have meant she was older than her peers, even though nothing about her looked old to his understanding.

It seemed like a strange word to use as an honorific in a royal court so similar to his own, and the dragon, though physically larger than many of the other dragons he'd seen today, she just did not look old to him. Her skin was too smooth and youthful in appearance. In fact, he did not think he'd seen any

dragon that looked truly old to him, apart from perhaps Commander Roc from earlier in the day. Though he may have only judged him as old because of his facial scar. This Eldest Thalla Fah Kah 'Seh had white hair, but so did all the other dragons, so he couldn't use that to guess her age either.

"Welcome, Eldest Thalla. What brings you to me today?" He asked, lowering his arm back down to his side before sliding both hands behind his back. He put on a warm smile even though his emotions were still in a twist, and he desperately just wanted to sit and digest the day. Since he was unsure of what Eldest meant in their culture, and he already had learned to not use a dragon's surname, he felt Eldest Thalla was probably the appropriate thing to say.

The dragon decided to reply first by standing, and Waylen's many years of being tutored in good etiquette required that he step ahead, drawing him deeper into the dragon's reach as his hand extended to help her rise from her chair. The Eldest had only just begun to lean forward and looked at his hand with an odd expression that she quickly replaced with a smile before extending her own hand. Her manner seemed awkward as he gently took her hand in his. He discovered then that her skin was very warm to the touch, and surprisingly so!

He helped her from her chair, but she did not rise through any effort of his own, as the dragon's weight was far greater than any woman he'd ever met. Eldest Thalla rose under her own power and her hand within his proved to be purely symbolic as he'd have not had the strength to pull her upright on his own.

And upright she went, Waylen carefully drawing in a silent breath as yet another dragon proved herself far taller than any other he'd seen. Once she was standing straight before him, the strain on his neck taught him she was taller than even Her Majesty. Why were they all so tall!

She tugged her hand away, and the way she'd done it left him feeling that his gesture had been unwanted. He took a careful step backwards to put more space between them, his hand still feeling the lingering warmth of the dragon's touch. Holding her by the hand was no different than holding a cup of tea whose warmth had yet to fade.

Eldest Thalla drew her arm gently over her chest to salute him as was their tradition, her head bowing to him silently before she finally lowered her arm back down and lifted her head again. As he watched her, he saw her eyes glittered much the same as Her Majesty's, but this one's were a brilliant blue like sapphires.

"Your Highness, you have had a very busy day, and it is not yet done. I will be brief." She finally spoke, surprising him with how gentle her voice was despite coming from a person so large. It had the same depth and tone as he was coming to expect from female dragons, but Eldest Thalla was much softer than the other three he'd heard speak.

She lifted a hand to gesture to Waylen's side, and with a turn of his head he saw that it was Ser Lyrren who was the target. Waylen listened as Ser Lyrren then said something quietly out the doorway in their native tongue. The dragon outside, the one that had opened the door for them twice so far, then stepped inside with Captain Landon stepping away to give the newcomer room.

“Since you will be staying in our care for many weeks, Her Majesty has gifted you the service of her finest.” Eldest Thalla continued, drawing Waylen’s attention back to her.

“Sol Norra, Ser Lyrren.” She continued, gesturing again with her hand pointing a finger at an empty spot of room to Waylen’s left side.

Both dragons quickly obeyed, rushing to where she’d pointed and both dragons took up posts side by side, Ser Lyrren being the taller of the two.

“Your Highness, I am a member of Her Majesty’s Council, and one of Anya Sur’s Eldest. Princess Vienna has given me the responsibility of managing your schedule while you are in Anya Sur, and I have authority to speak on her behalf, as well as Her Majesty’s.” She then gestured to Ser Lyrren who stiffened up at the attention.

“Ser Lyrren Er Yot’Ah will be with you daily, and he is responsible for making sure that all of your needs are met. If a member of your service,” She then gestured to Shane and Marissa, “needs assistance or supply, then please do seek out Ser Lyrren and he will see to it that it is answered.”

Her hand then drifted to Sol Norra who also stiffened from the attention. The way the two dragons grew still from just a wave of the hand told him what he needed to know about Eldest Thalla. He did not know what being an Eldest meant, but being a Council member for Her Majesty was surely an extremely important position to hold. She was very likely standing on par with that of a member of a noble house, someone of great status both inside and out of the Keep.

“Sol Norra Fah Tah’Yah is the Captain of the soldiers you’ve seen outside. Princess Vienna has entrusted her with your protection. She has proven her skill to Her Majesty, and I assure you she will serve you well. The soldiers under her command were handpicked by Princess Vienna and are adequate to any task given them. I understand you came with your own personal guard. I hope that they will work well together, but that is a task I will leave to Sol Norra to manage.” She finished, then with a gentle sweep of her hand she gestured for the two to leave.

Both dragons quickly clapped their arms over their chests, then pivoted and made a quick exit from the room.

“And I promised to be brief, Your Highness.” She told him with a nod.

“Dinner, as I am told, will be a feast. I do hope that you are of strong appetite. When preparations are complete, Ser Lyrren will escort you to dinner. Only your presence is needed at the table, your servants and guards will be presented with meals from our kitchens as a gift to welcome you all to our city.” Eldest Thalla told him, then bowed her head again with an arm rising to cross over her chest.

He replied quickly in kind with a salute of his own.

“That sounds wonderful, Eldest Thalla. I, and everyone that has traveled alongside me, appreciate the warmth and hospitality offered to us.” He replied, and the dragon lifted her head up and smiled.

“You are welcome, Your Highness, now please allow me to depart so that you may rest until dinner.” She told him, then began to make her own exit.

Waylen stepped to the side and bid her farewell. She was so tall as he watched her walk by. Ser Lyrren was waiting for her by the door, and when she was gone, he bowed his head to him and shut the door. The dragons were now gone, and everyone seemed to let go of their held breaths.



*They do a lot of sitting and talking, and it can be exhausting trying to follow their conversations. I've learned a good many of their words, and they some of mine, but I still find myself lost. Even when I understand all of the things they say, the subjects they speak of elude me. Their conversations drift to strange things, concepts I do not understand. I have to stop them, ask what a new word means, and then I have to ask them for the meaning of the meaning.*

*I did not know what snow was until recently. I still don't know what it is, because I've yet to see it. Yvvie has seen it, when she marched an army off to Radiah to help Edgard as he had helped us. Snow is something very cold and it fell from the sky, like tiny specks of white sugar. She told me she hated the snow, that it was more painful than the chill air of an Atinan night. I think I would hate it, too. It is already cold enough in Radiah, far too cold for my liking. I think I understand now why Edgard is reluctant to visit us, as the heat of Atina Nah hurts them as much as their cold does us.*

*Yvvie struggles the most when we visit them, or when they visit us. Not with the cold, as she is strong enough to endure that. It's their talking. She likes to sit and talk like any other, but there are only a few things that interest her enough to keep her attention. She likes hunting, or at least she used to. She doesn't get to do that anymore. Now that she and I are rulers, we spend so much of our time devoted to leadership. Why, I haven't woven anything in what feels like years! The only time I touch fabric now is when I dress myself. I do not even have the time to make my own clothing like I used to.*

*At least when they start talking about war, or of fighting, Yvvie becomes more pleasant and actually talks to them. I don't have much to say at those times, since that is not anything I understand. I leave those conversations to her and allow myself to enjoy the sound of her voice. She's getting better at speaking their tongue, sometimes surprising me with a word I don't know myself, only to discover that it's something related to conflict.*

*Fortress, for example. I think it means the same thing as keep but you aren't supposed to use them in place of each other. They have many words like that, so many ways to say the same thing but you have to be careful or else you mislead them. I once had to defend Yvvie after Edgard questioned her foul mood at the dinner table. Thinking that I was being polite, I explained to him that she was merely angry at the pace of the night's conversation. That was the wrong word to use! That led to a very uncomfortable conversation, but at least I learned a new word for what I should have said instead.*

*Impatient is a very good word for Yvvie, and I've decided that it will become one of my favorite words.*

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Marissa was the first to move, stepping around the breakfast table to the chair Eldest Thalla had been using, and beckoned Waylen to come and take a seat. He gladly took the offer and sat down, relieving his legs of their burden. The seat was even warmer than the dragon's hand had been, but he thought little of it. The comfort of being able to rest his legs was more important.

He thought of Captain Landon, who'd spent just as much time on his feet as Waylen had and told him to sit as well. While the Captain took the other seat at the table Shane waited expectantly for any news.

“Well, how did it go, Your Highness?” He finally asked.

“I don’t know. She did not seem pleased at all. She looked irritable. Princess Vienna spoke briefly and seemed to be much more cordial.” Waylen replied, following it up with a very concise retelling of what had happened in the throne room.

“She was rude more than anything!” Captain Landon added. “A Queen should know to have more tact than that!”

“Not so loud, Landon!” Shane urged him, pointing his finger at the not so distance door leading to the hallway. “Mind that we are in Her house!”

The Captain rolled his eyes but shut his mouth.

“What exactly was spoken, Your Highness? What were you able to tell her?” Shane asked.

As Waylen relived his moment in the throne room, explaining in more detail what all he’d been able to say, Marissa excused herself to the kitchen. There was precious little to tell Shane, since the audience had been cut far shorter than anything he’d been expecting.

“I thanked her for welcoming me as a guest, and for the quality of our accommodations. I offered an apology for no one coming to visit in such a long time, and I tried to express a promise that Radiah would do more from now on, but then she cut me off. I could tell she seemed impatient the entire time, but I don’t know the cause of it.” He replied.

Marissa returned with a cup of tea and offered it to him, and when he took it he was reminded him of the dragon’s hands. How could a people be so warm in a place so hot?

“I have never heard anything less of her. If His Majesty were still alive, I am certain that your audience would have gone much better. King Myunn was said to be very much her opposite.” Shane told him.

He remembered that, yes. Now that he’d actually gotten a taste of Her Majesty, he felt he was beginning to understand how significant His Majesty’s absence must have been felt after his passing. If he was said to be Her Majesty’s opposite...

“Princess Vienna was her opposite, too. Well spoken, she spoke Radian well. Polite.” He explained.

At least one of their daughters had seemed to take after their father in temperament.

“Well, that is good! She will be the next to wear the crown.” Shane said to which Waylen nodded.

“Her Majesty told me that I was almost a month early for the Festival, and that she did not know what to do with me until then. She gave Princess Vienna instruction to tend to my affairs in the meantime.” He replied.

“Perhaps this is for the best!” Marissa spoke up from Waylen’s side, touching a hand to his shoulder.

“Who then appears to have quickly handed my affairs off to Eldest Thalla, who then handed them to those two outside. From Her Majesty, to Princess Vienna, to Eldest Thalla, and then to them.” Waylen replied with a wry smile, casually gesturing towards the door. “I’m being shuffled around from one dragon to another.”

The Captain snorted with offense.

“This has been an ugly first impression.” He told them all, and Marissa quickly agreed.

“Much time has passed since anyone of import has come from Radiah. It may be that the warmth between us has cooled during this time.” Shane said then, and Waylen nodded.

That may very well be the case, and it wouldn’t be good if it was true.

“Well, today isn’t finished. I still have to attend dinner with them.” He replied.

“You should rest as much as you can since we do not know when they will return for you.” Shane told him, and Waylen nodded. That would be nice.

“Let me grab Codi and I’ll plan your outfit for dinner.” Marissa told him then, giving his shoulder a comforting squeeze before stepping away.

He watched her leave, pulling Codi away from his spot near the door, and then off to his bedroom they went.

“Are things settled in?” The Captain asked, looking to Shane.

The older man lifted his shoulders and shrugged them.

“Not fully. The kitchen is not as well stocked as Marissa wants, and I had to try and translate what she needed to one of the dragons outside. Most of them do not speak Radian at all. The one that was introduced to us before, the woman dragon with red skin. Sol Norra. She spoke broken Radian.” Shane said, Waylen seeing that it looked like he longed for a seat.

“You can take the chair from the desk.” He told him, gesturing to the writing desk sitting in the corner.

The older man shrugged again and began to make his way towards the desk while he continued to talk.

“All the men are to be housed in the other room across the hall, and I think they are as well settled as they are going to be. It’s not as well furnished as your own rooms, Your Highness. I do not envy the dragons at all if that room is indicative of their preference in dwellings.

“It’s just a room carved out of rock, same as the rest of this place. It’s not meant to be warm and cozy here. It’s a fortress.” Landon replied, Shane shuffling the chair across the room before sitting it back down next to the small table.

“That may very well be, but it certainly is a dreary place! Everything is dim without any windows. At least we will not have to sleep in a carriage or on the ground anymore.” Shane added.

“Aye.” Landon replied.

“We will have to endure it for almost a month before the Festival. We set out too early.” Waylen added, but Shane shook his head.

“This is what your father wanted for you. You haven’t seen very much of the Keep so far today, but with luck you will see much more in the next few weeks. We all have plenty of time to see what Her Majesty has been up to in the last seventeen or so years.” Shane replied.

Waylen nodded. It had been a long time with little information making its way to Illian of the affairs of Anya Sur. Trade continued, as the merchants from both kingdoms were always busy, but the politics were like a stream near to running dry.

With no one important coming and going from Anya Sur for official matters, Radiah simply lost track of what Queen Yvvie was doing here in the desert. She was obviously gobbling up monthly shipments of wood, steel, various luxuries common to Radiah but rare to the desert, and lots of wine. His father was curious what all the steel she requested was going to. What Radiah got in return was often very profitable once it was traded away to other kingdoms that bordered their own, but none of it was of military importance. Just trade goods like dragon glass, fine sand for local glass making, and spices common to Atina Nah.

It was important that someone from Radiah’s royal court finally came to Anya Sur, if only to show face and remind everyone that the two kingdoms were allies, but more importantly it was critical to his father that he understood the state of Atina Nah. The Kingdom of Radiah had far too many fair-weather friends to the east of their borders, and most importantly, they had an enemy directly north of them.

Radiah had been at odds with the Kingdom of Darfell for longer than they’d been allies with Atina Nah. They’d been taking land from each other for centuries, for as long as their histories could be recounted. When Waylen’s great great grandfather King Edgard Sundile had forged the Treaty of Five Kings with Atina Nah it was for the sole purpose of defeating Darfell.

And they did. Darfell had been defeated so soundly that not only had Radiah taken back much of the land they’d lost in years past but took land from them that had never been theirs to begin with. Darfell had been viciously kneecapped, and it happened so openly that every other kingdom saw it and learned a valuable lesson. They all learned that Radiah had dragons leashed like dogs, and they could be let loose at any time.

Waylen drew in a deep breath and took a sip of his now cooling tea. His attendance at this year’s Festival of Founding was just a ruse. What his father really wanted was for Waylen and his entire

entourage to sniff around and spy so that when they returned home, they'd be able to tell him how strong Her Majesty's army was. Darfell was growing stronger with every passing season, and they were trying to forge alliances with many of Radiah's neighbors. His father needed to know how much strength the dragon's possessed, because he wanted to use the Treaty's power to summon them to strike a blow against Darfell before they could grow any stronger, and to remind everyone else why they were better off being on friendly terms with Radiah.

"I don't know how easy they will make it for any of us to move around." Waylen said to both men. Shane straightened himself up in his chair.

"You are a Prince of Radiah. If you ask for something, I do not think they will give you much resistance." The older man replied.

Landon scoffed at that.

"Optimism." He replied.

"We start with optimism and then find alternatives should it fail." Shane told him in return. "Even if things are fragile at present, I do not believe they will keep us to our rooms like prisoners!"

The Captain hummed a chuckle at that, matching Shane's optimistic outlook with pessimism of his own.

"When you were coming up the road behind us, did you notice that the streets were empty?" Waylen interrupted them, asking Shane now about what he'd seen earlier. The Captain twisted a bit in his chair to look to Shane as well, awaiting his reply.

"Yes, we all noticed it. That was very strange. Nothing along the road looked to me like it would normally be empty, especially at such an hour of the day. It was a market." The old man replied.

"Has father ever cleared the streets of Illian before? Or grandfather?" Waylen asked.

Shane looked thoughtful for several long moments until he finally shook his head.

"Everyone in your family has had to send someone ahead of their carriage to make sure a road was clear for them, but they never sent everyone away to hide in their homes. I can't recall there ever being a time when anyone has gone as far as what we saw today." Shane said.

Waylen nodded.

"Should we ask about why they thought to do that?" He asked.

"I don't know. It may mean nothing, since it's been such a long time since anyone has visited. This may be one of their customs." Shane replied.

“They were putting on a show, from the moment we entered the desert they had their riders prowling around us. The soldiers at their front gate. Every step we took they were trying to intimidate us.” Landon added.

Shane drew in a deep breath before letting it out.

“Maybe so. It could still be a custom of theirs, and nothing more.” He replied.

“Optimism.” Landon chuckled again.

“It’s what we have for now.” Waylen agreed, it was all they had for the moment. If that failed then they could find alternatives, like Shane had said.

There was a knock on his door, and he sighed. It hadn’t even been... They were going to run him ragged all the way until nightfall, weren’t they? Shane got up to answer the door, and Ser Lyrren was standing there with a big toothy smile apologizing for returning so soon.

*As much as I don't like how they eat their meals, I will do the same. Yvvie has told me many flavorful things about what she thinks of Radian table manners. I have to argue with her in private that we must eat the way that they eat when we are sitting at their table, and that we must try to do the same when they eat at ours!*

*We are not breaking bread with the common folk when the Radians come to us, or us to them. We are meeting with royalty. Royalty! So many of their words are soft, and yet this one sounds more at home alongside something Atinan. Radian royalty are not merely leaders of a tribe. They are the rulers of all tribes! And we are now like them, for we conquered Atina Nah with their help and came to wear crowns forged from Radian steel! We are our own royalty now, Yvvie and I!*

*We must be like them. We must learn from them! Edgard's family has ruled Radiah for generations and there is much wisdom in how they do things. I do not yet know how to rule a kingdom, and Yvvie does not either! Neither of us were born to lead a tribe let alone all the tribes of Atina Nah. I just wanted to help mother and father weave cloth, and Yvvie was a skilled hunter who only ever wanted to bring home food to her family.*

*I have been living a simple life until now. It has taught me many things, but most of it did not prepare me for what life demands of me now. I can only do my best to use what little wisdom I have well. Yvvie, too, is like me. At least hunting prepared her better for battle than weaving cloth was for me. Together, despite our many weaknesses, we might be able to forge a kingdom that will last as long or far longer than the Kingdom of Radiah. We just need to learn as much as we can from those who have walked this road before us.*

*And we've come so far! All of Atina Nah now gathers at our doorstep, the gateway to trade has been flung wide open! Riches and bounty flow through our streets, and in the hands of each of our soldiers is hard Radian steel, which we will wield with all the strength we can muster to protect this hard-earned peace from those that would seek its ruin! I know the path forward will be difficult, and even now I have my moments of doubt, but in the mornings, I often wake up and see what we've created, and I feel joy. I believe that the Kingdom of Atina Nah will stand for a long time.*

*And if that means I have to learn which fork to use and why, then I will do it. I will make Yvvie do it, too, even if she threatens to steal the horns off my head.*

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“Shane, go tell Marissa that I won't be needing a change of clothing for dinner.” He said with a sigh, standing up despite the protests from his legs.

The Captain stood to join him, but Waylen reminded him that he was to dine alone with Her Majesty. The older man reluctantly agreed and resigned himself to walk Waylen to do door where the dragon waited.

“My apologies for greeting you again so soon, Your Highness.” Ser Lyrren told him at the door.

“All is well, Ser Lyrren. Please, do lead the way.” Waylen replied, gesturing for the dragon to take the lead.

The dragon nodded in reply, then took a few steps back to beckon Waylen through the doorway and into his wake. The dragon then began to lead the way while he followed. Soon after they'd begun a pair of dragons formed up behind them to follow them, Waylen turning his head to see that it was Sol Norra and one other he did not have a name for yet.

He looked back ahead and found that the dragon was now looking back at him while he walked.

“Your Highness, I am told that dinner had been planned to be later in the evening, but then Her Majesty decided she wanted to eat earlier than normal.” The dragon began to explain before looking forward again to see where he was going.

He had to wonder if this was because she was simply impatient, or if this was just her way of putting on a show to see how well he conducted himself under stress? His day had started early and was growing long in the tooth with him becoming more exhausted by the hour.

“Also, Eldest Thalla requested that I bring you to the dining room even earlier so that I might provide some... Instruction.” The dragon told him, moving his hand in the air like he was searching for the correct word to use. It was nice seeing a familiar gesture in a place so far away.

“Of course. What is the instruction?” He asked.

“Etiquette!” Came an excited reply, one of his hands pointing to the ceiling like he'd finally found the word he wanted.

Waylen nodded as he walked, wondering what sort of etiquette would be passed his way. So far, he'd experienced a lot of familiar formalities, but after his audience with the Queen he did not know what to expect from dinner. He'd attended so many formal dinners in Radiah that he was not worried at all about his behavior if Atina Nah shared similar beliefs about how to manage oneself at the dinner table.

If things were different here, then he would just have to politely smile and hope he could remember everything he was about to be told and to eat his dinner without causing any distress. He'd done that before when he was a little boy, afraid of being scolded by his mother for acting poorly at the table when the truth was that he just didn't know any better. It was good that his mother wasn't here, and not just to spare himself a scolding over some imperfection at the table. Every single thing he did would have been scrutinized until he felt nothing but pain at the sound of her voice.

Of everyone that had come with him to Anya Sur, there were only three people who had any sort of power to speak criticism to him, and all three of them knew how to deliver it without inspiring daydreams of open windows and sharp drops.

Ser Lyrren led him through familiar halls, and then a fresh turn that he felt was leading them deeper into the belly of Anya Sur. As hot as it was outside in the sun, the Keep was very cool now that they were so deep into the fortress. Even the lanterns and sconces giving them light were insufficient at keeping the coolness at bay.

They reached a flight of stairs, each step carved right into the rock, and he silently winced as he began to walk up them. Ser Lyrren was rising the stairs two steps at a time, his height giving him enough



of a gait to move quickly up the steps. By the time they reached the top of the staircase the dragon was waiting for him, having moved far faster than Waylen's weary legs could carry him.

The two dragons behind him had to slow their pace to match his own. He hoped that dinner was not far away. Those stairs felt like they were long enough to have brought them up to a third or even a fourth floor.

"My apologies, Your Highness. I can move quite quickly when I'm not careful." The dragon apologized to him, and Waylen simply nodded his forgiveness in reply, gesturing for the dragon to continue leading the way. The faster they reached their destination the better, even if his calves hated him for it.

"Where are we in the Keep?" He asked, breaking the silence that was now commonplace as Ser Lyrren continued on.

"I've taken you to the royal chambers. This is where Her Majesty and her daughters live and work. You will be having dinner with them tonight in their private dining room. Very few guests get to visit this part of the Keep, Your Highness." He replied, glancing back at Waylen with a smile.

"Do you get to visit this part of the Keep?" Waylen asked in reply, then quickly regretted it.

Had they been in Castle Illian his comment could have been taken as a slight against the servant, implying that they were neither important enough nor trustworthy enough to be allowed this far into the castle. Waylen was tired, his legs burned, and he was now hungry with the thought of food. He wanted to rest! He drew in a quiet breath to calm himself; it would not do him any good to let his frustration or discomfort cause him problems.

"I do, Your Highness. My duties take me to every room in the Keep." He replied haughtily.

Waylen couldn't tell by the dragon's voice if he took the question as an offense or not. Perhaps it was for the better.

After one more corner Waylen was taken to a shut doorway, guarded by three soldiers. Two stood to the door's either side while a third soldier stood with their back to the opposite wall so as to watch the doorway. Ser Lyrren made a gesture with his hand as he approached, and the dragon facing the door stepped forward to open it while Ser Lyrren stepped to the side and beckoned Waylen to enter ahead of him.

He walked through the doorway, finding a somewhat small dining room. It was very austere in décor, but he no longer found that surprising. In the center of the room was a large wooden table, though it did not appear to be of Radian construction. Whoever had made it either did not have a knack for elegance, or a care for it, because the table had simply been cut and sanded into a perfect rectangle of wood which was then set upon four sturdy legs of equal perfection. It was not decorative, but it was clean and functional.

There was room enough around it to seat as many as ten people, but at the moment only four chairs were present, and all were clustered at one end. He knew which one was expected to be his because

it was of wooden Radian construction whereas the other three appeared to be cushioned stools, which took him by surprise. Who keeps stools at the dinner table?

Ser Lyrren entered and shut the door behind him, then quickly stepped around Waylen's side and began to approach the chair Waylen expected to be his. He was proven correct when the dragon slid it out from the table.

"Your Highness, this will be your seat, but please remain standing until Her Majesty and Princesses Vienna and Iolla arrive." The dragon told him.

"Of course. What instruction do I need, Ser Lyrren?" Waylen asked.

The dragon stood up and clasped his hands behind his back, as appeared to be the custom though Waylen did not know if it was exclusive to Ser Lyrren or if all servants would be conducting themselves in a similar manner. So far, Ser Lyrren was the only servant he'd actually interacted with.

"When Eldest Thalla greeted you earlier today you extended your hand to her as she rose from her chair. That was... Impolite." He replied with a tight smile. "It prompted concern that you may be too unfamiliar with our customs."

That took him aback to hear, but he did remember that the Eldest had behaved slightly off when he'd taken her hand before.

"I did not mean to offend her if I had. Helping a lady rise from her seat is customary in Radiah. I will make sure to apologize to her when I next see her." Waylen replied, making sure his voice sounded earnest as he spoke.

The dragon pulled his hands out from behind him and clasped them over his stomach, almost as a submissive gesture.

"Eldest Thalla is not offended, Your Highness. She is old and wise and understands that you are her opposite. I assure you that you do not need to extend an apology to her, as there was no offense taken. Her only concern is that as a Prince of Radiah, it would not do you well to make mistakes if they can be avoided." Ser Lyrren replied very gently.

Waylen had to control his smile. So, he had offended the dragon by suggesting that he might not visit the royal chambers. He did not think that someone as high in status as Eldest Thalla would openly make the claim that he was young and foolish, or at least in a manner that she knew would work its way to his ear. If Ser Lyrren wanted to trade a barb for a barb, one way to do it would be to make it seem like Eldest Thalla had, and Waylen would look even more foolish for accusing her of such a thing.

"I am certainly willing to learn, so please educate me." He replied.

"We do not... Touch one another so casually as they might do in Radiah. Please, avoid touching others while you are here, but you may trust that if someone such as Her Majesty were to extend a gesture to you, then you may reciprocate it without worry. We are very particular about such things, Your Highness." The dragon told him.

He was to avoid touching others? He hadn't been of the mind to be touching any dragons unless it was required, but now he doubted he'd ever know what that even meant! If something as polite and commonplace as helping a woman stand could cause offense, then he'd have to watch himself very closely. He supposed that even a congratulatory pat on the back would cause problems.

"Of course, I understand." He agreed, nodding, even though he was now worrying over what he was supposed to do if he couldn't do what he was accustomed to doing! This was not anything Shane, or anyone else for that matter, had warned him about.

The dragon took a step forward and lifted his hands.

"Radians are known for doing things with their hands that we do not do here. If someone approaches you with both hands extended." He began, offering both his hands, but with his palms facing up. "Do as I do, Your Highness."

Waylen lifted his hands and turned his palms up. The dragon then reached over his until he was able to grasp him by the wrists. "As I do, Your Highness."

He grabbed Ser Lyrren by his wrists. Just like there had been with Eldest Thalla, he felt an unusual warmth emanating from the dragon like warm tea. Then the dragon gently tugged his hands down and lifted them. He did this twice, like a kind of handshake, and then he broke his grip and began to pull his hands away, and Waylen did the same.

"That is likely the only manner in which you will use your hands with us, Your Highness. It is how we seal oaths or settle agreements. It is unlikely that you will be asked for either such thing during your time here, but if the moment comes, I assure you the gesture will be clear to you." The dragon told him, gesturing with his hands to make it obvious that it would indeed be clear.

"I see, thank you. I'm happy to have learned this." He replied, still feeling the lingering warmth around his hands and wrists where the dragon had touched him.

"Also, what I just showed you, we do not do with a single hand like you would in Radiah. If we did that would be considered an insult, please never permit yourself to do that unless it is intentional." He then added.

He was feeling so embarrassed now, like his earlier faux pas had caused all the important dragons here to think he was a savage that didn't know he wasn't supposed to give handshakes. He felt so grossly unprepared that he would have to have a long talk with Shane to discuss what to do and what not to do if he didn't want to offend anyone here! All of this should have been pounded into his head before they ever left Illian!

"Of course, I think I understand now why Eldest Thalla would have become so concerned by my gesture." He replied.

“She is not offended, Your Highness.” The dragon repeated himself, before lifting both his hands to point at the top of Waylen’s head, then twisted his hands to point at the top of his own, reaching higher until it was obvious that it was his horns he was bringing attention to.

“You will never touch our horns.” He continued. “We do not have reason to believe that you would, but I am making it understood since I have been told that in Radiah your people sometimes pet or touch one another’s heads. If you ever see an Atinan take another by the horn it would only be for combat or a parent scolding a whelp severely.”

Petting on the head? What did he mean by that? Was it someone brushing aside a lock of hair? What all had the dragons been told of Radiah? Were they all worrying themselves into fits thinking that he was going to start touching everyone inappropriately? He wore the tightest of smiles as he agreed that he would be sure to never touch anyone’s horns.

And what was a whelp?

Then there was a sudden clap from below them, the dragon lowering his hands to point at the source of the noise, which had been his tail. Waylen looked down, and the dragon lifted and dropped his tail to the floor to clap it again.

“Also, our tails. Do not touch them, same as horns. Mistakes can be forgiven if you touch us with your foot, but never touch it with purpose, Your Highness.” He explained.

“Of course.” Waylen nodded, feeling even more embarrassment and frustration.

He wasn’t a child! If he knew better than to tug at a dog’s tail, he certainly had no intention of grabbing a dragon by theirs! His smile only grew tighter.

“And remember to not use our surnames as you did at the southern gate. We only use our surnames for formal greetings, which have already come and gone this day. Formal greetings are only customary upon the first meeting of a day.” Ser Lyrren explained the rule a little more clearly than he had earlier in the day.

Waylen nodded again, grateful that at least this part of the etiquette didn’t make him feel like shrinking in size.

“Is that all, then?” He asked, hoping it was over.

The dragon smiled broadly and seemed to draw in a breath.

“There are many things in Anya Sur that you do not know, but I cannot teach them all to you before dinner. With each passing day your ignorance will fade and when you return to your homeland you will be much wiser than when you had left.” The dragon smiled again, clasping his hands behind his back.

There was a knock at the door behind them, and Waylen turned to look but nearly jumped out of his skin when Ser Lyrren whistled loudly. It had been a single sharp burst, taking him by surprise, but

then the door opened, and a handful of gray robed dragons entered. Each carried with them metal plates covered in utensils, cups, and other table settings.

Ser Lyrren gestured with his hands for Waylen to step aside from the table, and the two of them gave the new group of dragons a wide berth so that they could set the table.

And they were setting the table all wrong. Waylen watched as forks, knives, and spoons were all set to either side of plates. Not one item was going where it belonged, but at least they were all incorrect the same way, so it at least matched. They were also missing a few utensils, but what was on the table would still serve well enough for a meal.

Ser Lyrren then stepped close and dipped his head low. Waylen was almost taken aback by having a dragon so near to him, but the body language of someone wishing to whisper into one's ear was unmistakable.

“When you are in Her Majesty’s presence do not mention His Majesty Myunn.” The dragon whispered, then rose back to his full height before drawing his hands back behind his back.

Waylen didn’t reply but nodded in agreement. He’d already made at least one mention of His Majesty today, but not to Her Majesty directly. There were other dragons that had mentioned him. The Queen must still be sore over his loss. It didn’t matter, as this was just another rule for him to follow, even if it was more a courtesy than a proper custom of the desert.

The servants finished arranging the table, then began to depart. Ser Lyrren invited him to sit in the provided chair until Her Majesty arrived, and Waylen took a seat. The dragon then began to walk a slow circle around the table to check that every plate, cup, and utensil was in its proper, but also incorrect, place. Waylen watched as tiny adjustments were made to the utensils resting on the table, and it appeared that there was nothing left to do but to wait.

“Ser Lyrren.” He asked for the dragon’s attention, and once he had it, he asked what a whelp was.

The dragon tilted his head slightly to the side.

“A child, Your Highness. A little one.” He was told.

Ah.

Their wait lasted for several long minutes until another knock arrived. The room had two doors, the one they’d entered from, and then a second located on the opposite side of the room in the corner. The knock came from that door and Ser Lyrren quickly went to answer it, the dragon’s speed was impressive as it was silly. Every servant he’d seen in the keep thus far all wore the same robe or dress ensemble, and like any woman trying to run in a dress, Ser Lyrren had to grab front of his robe to lift it above his ankles. He did not know why the male servants could not wear trousers like the soldiers and guards all did. At least with the soldiers it made sense for the women to dress as the men did considering their profession.

The dragon opened the door, spoke in his foreign tongue to another dragon across the threshold, then shut the door again after a brief moment.

“Her Majesty and her daughters are on their way, Your Highness.” He told Waylen as he seemed to almost flee from the door to step around to Waylen’s side of the table.

He was urged to stand, so he did. Waylen watched as the dragon slid his chair back into place, so it was identical to the others, and then he was instructed to step back and to stand further away from the table. Ser Lyrren then stood next to him, faced the door and had Waylen do the same, before taking one single step backwards so that Waylen was in front.

Waylen understood and clasped his hands behind his back to wait patiently until Her Majesty arrived, at which point he would have to greet her again. If her behavior in the throne room was the worst she could do, then perhaps dinner would not be so terrible. Full bellies also had a habit of calming people down.

“Is there a proper way to greet Her Majesty when she arrives?” He asked.

“When they arrive, they will come to stand behind their chairs, do as they do, as they do it. As you are our guest, Her Majesty will greet you first, followed by her daughters. Address her as Her Majesty, and her daughters as Her Highness. This is a formal dinner. Rules will change with future meetings, and you will be instructed beforehand.” The dragon replied from behind him, and Waylen nodded. Simple.

There came another knock on the same door, but this time it was opened from the other side and two soldiers entered and positioned themselves to its either side while one held the door.

Her Majesty entered first, no longer clad in armor like she had been in the throne room but instead a finely tailored tunic and trousers. The Queen’s eyes locking onto his for a moment before darting to his left side where Ser Lyrren stood. Behind her were two other women, Princess Vienna who was then followed by the same pale ivory dragon he’d seen in the throne room. So that must have been the other daughter, Iolla, then. All three approached the table, and Waylen did as he’d been told and approached it himself with all four of them stopping behind their respective chairs. It felt strange doing things this way.

“Welcome, Prince Waylen.” The Queen was curt in her language, her gaze once again locked onto his.

“Yes, welcome, Your Highness.” Princess Vienna followed after her mother, drawing her fist up to offer him a salute. Like her mother, she was dressed in a tunic and trousers.

“It is good to meet you, as well, Your Highness.” Princess Iolla then added with a nod, her hand lifting in a gentler salute than the one given by her sister. It looked like she was dressed the same as she had been in the throne room, wearing only a white and grey dress that flowed loosely down her body, giving her a graceful appearance.

The contrast between the two siblings was very stark.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. And thank you both, as well, I am glad to share a seat at your table tonight.” He replied.

Her Majesty then gestured abruptly with her hand to the table before taking a step back and dragging the stool backwards with her foot in a boorish manner. Her daughters were both reaching down to grab their stools to draw them back. At his age, Waylen had only recently been gifted the respect of having a servant remove his chair for him, so the act of pulling out his own chair wasn't anything foreign to him.

He pulled his chair back gently, then as the dragons all took their seats, he did the same.

Waylen couldn't rely on Ser Lyrren anymore to advise him on how to proceed. Tradition told him to sit patiently at the table with his hands in his lap while they waited for dinner to arrive. Normally, there would be light conversation to idle the time away, but he didn't know what was right or wrong anymore now that he knew the dragons were afraid of him inappropriately touching someone.

“Your father did not tell me he was sending you so early. Was he not aware the Festival is not until a month from now?” Her Majesty broke the silence, staring at him now.

Waylen took a moment to consider his reply. His father knew perfectly well when the Festival was being held, as it was always the same every year. It was just that Waylen was to spend as much time as he was able to examine Atina Nah's military, and there was a concern that if he arrived too close to the Festival that he might be required to leave shortly after it was concluded. The only way to make sure that he had all the time he needed was to arrive early.

“As I understand it, Your Majesty, there was a fear that I would not arrive in time for the Festival. Since it has been so long since someone from my family has visited Anya Sur, my father's advisors urged him to send me early, so that I would arrive with time to spare. I do not think we would need to leave so early in the future now that we know how many weeks of travel it will take for a group as large as mine to make the trip.” Waylen replied and was relieved that she did not cut him off this time like she had in the throne room.

Her Majesty did not so much as reply, but rather made a quiet grunt in her throat while she sat with her arms crossed.

“How many weeks did it take for you to arrive?” Princess Iolla asked him.

Her voice reminded him of Eldest Thalla's. It was deep, as appeared to be normal for female dragons, but like the Eldest's it was quite soft. More so than her sister's or mother's, at least. Waylen had to wonder if this was intentional, since it seemed every woman that was a soldier appeared to be putting more strength into their voices than the dragons that were not.

Both Princesses were sitting across from him with Her Majesty seated at the head of the table to his left. All three women had their hands above the table. Princess Vienna was doing as her mother was, arms crossed over her chest, while Princess Iolla had hands clasped and resting on the edge of the table. He moved his hands to the edge of the table, just in case.

“Near to six weeks, Your Highness.” He told her.

The dragon’s eyes widened, thankfully an expression that was not lost on him with their strange reptilian faces. Her sister then began to speak.

“Was this due to the number of guards and servants you brought? You would need considerable supplies to make a journey with so many people.” She asked.

“I believe so, yes. We could have traveled more lightly but Her Majesty Edlyn Sundile, my mother, did not want me to travel with too few members of our royal service. There would have been even more members to my group if were not for my father’s word to stop it.” He replied honestly.

His mother had not been happy that her only son was being sent to Anya Sur and had demanded initially that either Nyle or Parr be sent instead. His father silenced her quickly on that, refusing to budge as both his elder brothers had many reasons to stay in the Kingdom. They each had great responsibilities placed upon them and served their father daily.

Waylen was the only son that had less value to the Kingdom, and his sister Lynn had not been considered even once for the journey. Not even his mother suggested that. So, it came to Waylen to travel the six weeks by carriage while his mother stressed and fretted over every detail. She would have sent as many as thirty or more people with them, but his father had long learned when to listen to her and when to not.

Had they traveled more lightly than twenty people then perhaps they could have shaved a week off their trip, though he didn’t know if that would have made it any more or less pleasant. After you cross the line of a month of travel, the only thing that could make it better is for it to end.

“We barely have the room for the ones you brought with you. Your service numbers at twenty. We would have needed to house some of them in other parts of the Keep.” Princess Vienna replied.

Waylen had not yet seen the room that the male servants and guards were to use, so he took the dragon at her word. With the Keep being so large there were surely other rooms to accommodate guests, but they were likely just as austere as all the rest. The only rooms that were nice were probably the ones Waylen would be staying in.

“When is it being served?” Her Majesty interrupted them, her head turning to the side, and presumably to look at Ser Lyrren.

There was a rapid shuffling of feet and when Waylen turned his head to follow the noise, and then he watched as the dragon hurried towards the door they both entered from. The dragon then made a hasty exit.

“I was not told what we would be eating tonight.” Waylen decided to turn the conversation towards their upcoming meal.



Her Majesty turned her gaze back to him, then began to curtly answer, listing out a handful of dishes, all of which were foreign to him. It did not sound like she was speaking Radian with how many of the names seemed to be from her native language.

“I do not think I have ever heard of these dishes before.” He replied.

“Valli would be a kind of stew, Your Highness, and ton is a type of bread.” Princess Iolla replied, explaining two of the items Her Majesty had listed.

“What would he call meelish?” She asked of her sister, who turned to look at her with a thoughtful look.

“Balls of meat.” Her Majesty answered her instead.

“We would just say meatballs in Radian.” He volunteered.

“Which is what I said.” She replied curtly, and Waylen drew in a quiet breath.

Her Majesty’s attitude gave him a growing fear. Conversations were going to be difficult to navigate with her, considering how short she was with her words. Princess Iolla shifted in her seat. By Waylen best guess, both sisters looked uncomfortable as he tried translating their body language into something he understood. Princess Iolla then carried on with her explanation of dinner.

“Picti nef is alcohol. We did not know what alcohol you would prefer to drink so we had asked that different selections be brought for you to taste. Picti nef is one, and the other is unni nef. The first is brewed from a plant we call picti, and the other is made from what I think you call honey in Radian.” Princess Iolla explained.

“There will be wine.” Her Majesty interrupted her daughter again.

“I would be happy to try picti and unni.” He replied, hoping he pronounced the words correctly.

He didn’t know what to expect of the picti drink, but if the other was made from honey, then perhaps it was like a kind of mead. That would be pleasant, though he was wondering what sort of wine they would have here. He was more accustomed to drinking different kinds of wine since there were many vineyards in Radiah that produced an assortment of grapes.

A knock came from the door again, and every head swiveled to watch as Ser Lyrren returned through the doorway. The dragon then gestured violently with his hand and one of the guards took the door from him and opened the door even wider.

A small troupe of servants began to file inside, each pushing a serving cart under Ser Lyrren’s silent direction. As Waylen watched he began to piece together something he thought was true about Her Majesty’s servants. So far, he’d only seen two of them wear pure white, and those were Eldest Thalla Fah Kah’Seh and then Ser Lyrren Er Yot’Ah. All the rest appeared to be wearing gray. Perhaps this was their way of showing status if you were not a soldier? Just the color of their attire?

Ser Lyrren was the only one to wear red though. Eldest Thalla didn't even have that so he was not sure what significance the red cloth wrap might have held.

He could smell the food once the carts came to a stop beside the empty side of the table. Metal lids were removed from over their dishes and the scent began to hit him even harder. Suddenly, he was very hungry despite not knowing anything about what he was about to be served.

A large metal trough, almost like a miniature tub for bathing, was carefully placed in the middle of the table between them all, and within it was a dark gravy-like substance. It was almost black with lumps of chopped mystery floating within it.

Then a wide and shallow bowl was produced, filled to the brim with a steaming pile of what were clearly meatballs, fully covered with a thick layer of white gravy. Everyone waited as the rest of their meal was carefully produced from the carts. Two whicker-like baskets of small puffy dinner rolls were brought and placed at either side of the table next to the trough of stew and the bowl of meatballs. The final dish presented was a handful of narrow serving trays laden with strange, long strips of some kind of vegetable. They looked too large to be stalks of celery, but much too pale. They appeared to be steamed.

Once the food had been served all the carts were taken away except for one, and then the servants each took their exit except for Ser Lyrren who remained. The guards shut the door once everyone else had left. Ser Lyrren approached the last serving cart, and then began to remove from it several jugs and bottles.

Waylen patiently waited for the drinks to be served. Both Princesses asked for the 'unni' which was served from a large brown jug that looked similar to a gourd that had been made into a container. The liquid that flowed from the spout was almost gold in color.

Without asking him, Ser Lyrren filled an extra glass halfway with unni, and then once the jug was put away a second glass was removed from the cart along with a polished clay bottle. The dragon filled the second glass halfway and what came from it must have been the picti, as it was obviously not the color of any wine Waylen had seen. It was a cloudy pale color like watered down milk.

Ser Lyrren then took up both glasses and walked around to serve them, setting each down next to his empty glass.

"This is unni nef, Your Highness, and this is picti nef." The dragon quietly explained before stepping away to return to the serving cart.

Waylen was eager to try both, and then to sample the food in front of him. He'd been told that there would be a feast, but the offering of food on the table seemed much less impressive than his imagination had led to him expect. Back home in Radiah feasts were always decadent displays of waste. The kitchens would be told to serve so much food that no guest could possibly eat it all, and there was always leftover food sent back to the kitchens, which were then eaten by whatever household staff that wanted it.

“This is valli, and that is meelish.” Princess Iolla volunteered, pointing a finger at each dish, first the trough of stew and then to the meatballs slathered in gravy. Both looked familiar as food but also foreign.

As she continued by pointing out the ton, which were the bread rolls, Ser Lyrren produced a bottle of wine from the cart and popped it open. Waylen could see that it was a bottle from Radiah with a wax seal pressed onto the side marking it as a bottle sourced from one of his family’s own wineries. If he didn’t like the local drink, then he could at least enjoy the import.

“The vegetables here we call plekt. They are always served fresh from the fields and are very sweet.” Her Highness finished, pointing to the narrow trays of steamed veg.

Ser Lyrren approached Her Majesty with the bottle and then began to fill her glass. He had to suppress his surprise as the glass continued to be filled until it was so full it threatened to overflow. The dragon stopped just short of creating a mess, then moved around the table with the bottle to fill his.

“That’s enough, thank you.” He had to tell the dragon before his own glass could be overfilled.

Her Majesty had already started drinking hers, downing a full quarter of the wine before anyone else at the table could touch their own.

“We can eat now.” Her Majesty said, then immediately reached across the table to grab a handful of the meatballs with her bare hands.

As Waylen watched Her Majesty, he could not bring himself to do as she did. Whatever etiquette existed at their dinner table was clearly nothing like what he was familiar with. Instead, he selected the appropriate fork in front of him, and then used it to pluck a single meatball from the bowl.

He delivered it to his plate, then sought out a second. Along with the plates that had been brought to the table, there were small bowls, and fortunately a large serving spoon came with the trough of stew. As he began to serve himself with the spoon, delivering stew to the small bowl, both Princesses seemed to notice the difference between his and their mother’s bare-handed advances on the meatballs and dinner rolls.

Waylen couldn’t help but notice their awkward attempts to use their own forks to move food to their plates, mimicking him as he finished filling his bowl with valli.

Her Majesty picked up her empty bowl and handed it to him. Traditionally, a servant would be the one to fill any bowl, but this was apparently not how things were done here in the desert. He’d been a servant himself, in a way, as all children were, so he carefully took the bowl from Her Majesty and filled hers with stew as he’d done with his own, then returned it back to her.

The Queen was curt in everything that she did and spoke very little now that it was time to eat. He reached across the table to offer the serving spoon to Princess Iolla, who took it with a polite nod, and then she and her sister each took turns filling their own bowls.

Her Majesty did not use a spoon to eat her stew, but simply lifted the rim of the bowl to her lips before tipping it back like she was drinking from a glass. Waylen selected the appropriate utensil from the assortment in front of him and did his best not to stare as she ate with little regard to table manners. It was not his place to tell Her Majesty how to eat at her own table, but the shock of how dinner was unfolding was as surprising as everything else he'd encountered today.

He dipped his spoon into the near black gravy and lifted out what looked like a chunk of meat. When he took that first bite his tongue was treated to a battlefield of salty and sweet. The gravy a mix of flavors, and behind the two strongest contenders was a third. As he chewed the meat, from what animal he could not tell, there were notes of some kind of strange tanginess.

After his swallow he took another spoonful, but with a chunk of vegetable this time, and tried again. The same flavors, all of which were very intense, exploded over his tongue in much the same way. Valli was a very rich dish, similar to what he might have expected from some beef stews he'd eaten back home. But beef stew was savory, salty. Valli was thicker with too much sweetness, and then there was the undercurrent of tang he couldn't place. He had no idea what ingredient would create such a flavor, and the meat did not taste like beef, and it was neither light nor dark like fowl.

"What meat was used in the valli?" He asked.

"Camel." Her Majesty replied.

The mental image of those ugly, spitting, things filled his mind and he decided to put his spoon down so he might venture to the other items on his plate.

"It's not often we serve camel, but for special occasions we will slaughter a few for feasts. Valli is normally cooked with rabbit, but out in the city many will also use mice as its cheaper." Princess Iolla told him.

Mice? At least the rabbit would have been acceptable, but rodent! He politely nodded in thanks, hiding his disgust that the people here would eat such a thing. He would have to find a way to politely ask that he nor his entourage be served anything with rodent in it.

"How do you find the valli?" Princess Vienna asked him.

"It is a very strong blend of flavors. I do not think we serve anything like this in Radiah, but I find it to my liking." He lied, the camel being the reason he was reluctant to try any more.

His lie was taken as truth, with the two daughters eating as well as they could manage with their utensils while their mother did as she must have done under any other circumstance. She'd already devoured her meelish and was reaching for more to put onto her plate.

With his fork he cut one of the meatballs in half and stabbed one side, then popped it into his mouth. The meat was salty, but the gravy was very creamy like butter. This dish suited his tastebuds a lot better than the valli, but he suspected that it was likely made with camel meat as there were similar notes between the two dishes that undoubtedly were coming from the meat itself. He wasn't going to ruin his dinner by asking about its source.

“The meelish is very good.” He told them with a smile, making sure they understood that it was to his liking.

“We are very glad. Most of our own meals are quite modest, so it is always nice when we get to enjoy the extravagant.” Princess Vienna spoke up.

This was considered extravagant? And what then would a modest royal meal look like? Perhaps rabbit instead of camel, but what else would change? There was not much variety here on the table! He took up his first ton and popped the bread roll into his mouth. It tasted like bread, with a hint of butter and a tiny bit of salt. Perfectly acceptable!

“Ton is best when eaten with gravy and sauce, Your Highness.” Princess Iolla educated him by lifting one of her own dinner rolls, which she’d drug through her plate to catch a heap of gravy.

He did the same and found that to his liking as well. The creamy gravy from the meelish went well with the bread. It was then that Princess Vienna made a subtle noise in her throat, which caught her sister’s attention. There was a silent back and forth between them with their eyes.

Princess Iolla then turned her attention back to her meal before her sister began to speak in her place.

“Since there is a wealth of time between now and the Festival, I felt it wise to explore ways to keep you occupied during your stay. We seldom plan activities in the Keep, but you are welcome to share meals with any of us.” Princess Vienna told him, which was a good sign!

At least the Princesses were both polite.

“Of course, I would enjoy that very much.” He told her.

“He will be the first to meet Karo.” Princess Iolla said to her sister.

Princess Vienna then seemed to light up, actually smiling.

“Yes! And Hait, too!” She said, looking back over to her sister.

Waylen felt a tiny bit more welcome now that he was watching two dragons become animated over what he presumed were two men? He wasn’t aware that either of them had husbands or children.

“Is it known to you that Iolla has recently taken an et’nol?” Princess Vienna turned back to him to ask.

“He will not know et’nol.” Her Majesty replied with irritation before anyone else could say anything more.

“He does not speak Atinan.” She continued, then glanced at him with an explanation. “Et’nol is future husband or wife. What you call fiancé.”

“No, Your Majesty, I was not aware.” He replied, then turned his attention back to Princess Iolla.

“Congratulations to you!” He said to the Princess, who smiled in reply. Finally, he found something that felt distinctly normal in the desert!

Women did like talking of men and marriage, and if they were excitedly telling him about both then that was a good sign! He turned his attention from her and back to Princess Vienna since he didn't know anything about the other man they talked about.

“May I ask who Karo is?” He asked her.

She tilted her then in a similar manner to how he'd seen Her Majesty do, but her expression wasn't of irritation but confusion.

“Karo is my husband, Your Highness.” She replied, her confusion giving way to offense now that it was clear Waylen had no idea she'd even married.

His heart started to beat faster with panic, as the dinner had only just started to go well! This wasn't good, as a marriage like this wasn't something you could afford to overlook! Why had no one in Radian thought to tell him that the heir to Atina Nah's throne had married? Did no one know in all of Illian? Surely something this important wouldn't have slipped someone's mind considering everything else he'd been told before he'd been sent to the desert!

Princess Vienna then looked to her mother and began to say something in Atinan that he couldn't understand.

“You can speak Radian, Vienna!” Her Majesty interrupted her with a shout, startling him but not her daughters. “Do not sit at the table and speak what he cannot understand.”

He began to hold his breath as he stared at both of them. The table was suddenly thick with tension, tight in the air as both women stared at each other until the Princess nodded once in compliance and turned her eyes back to Waylen. He didn't want anyone's gaze on him right now, and he had no idea how to act.

“My apologies, Your Highness.” She told him, giving him a curt nod.

It did not seem like Her Majesty enjoyed talking any more than necessary, but when she did was it always this uncomfortable? Certainly not just for him, too, it seemed. The only good thing to come of this was that he now knew there was a rule that they were to speak in Radian when they were in his presence, or at least at the dinner table.

“I have been married for seven years. That is not such a long time for someone to forget.” Princess Vienna replied, revealing she was indeed very offended. Waylen started to bite the side of his tongue as it was the only thing he could do that no one could notice. He wanted to kick himself, and then kick everyone that was responsible for preparing him for this trip!

Her Majesty, looking frustrated, picked up her now empty bowl and shoved it in Waylen's direction.

"It's been eight, Vienna. Keep your calendar better." She replied to her daughter, shaking the bowl with irritation until Waylen quickly took it from her. That was when he noticed his hands were shaking.

He almost felt right at home and ten years younger with how he was being told what to do by an ill-tempered mother who had just shouted at the table. At least he wasn't the victim this time. As he began to refill the bowl for Her Majesty her daughter apologized to her mother for her failure to recall the number of years she'd been married. Well, at least Her Majesty was the type of mother to remember it for you.

"I was not told that either of you were married or to be married. I apologize if I've caused any offense. It was not intended." He found his voice, apologizing as he quickly scooped more valli into Her Majesty's bowl before handing it back to her.

"I did not send word to Radiah that either of them was married or soon to be." Her Majesty told him as she reached to take the bowl back from him.

She then lifted her now empty glass of wine and shook it at Ser Lyrren, who began to move quickly to refill her glass.

Both of her daughters were staring at their mother with looks of surprise on their faces, and now so was Waylen. Why would she not tell Radiah her daughter had gotten married? This was only his first day in Anya Sur and yet he was already feeling like his father had been very wise to send someone after so long, although he badly wished it had been one of his brothers instead!

It was not expected that a kingdom would share all of its secrets, or even their day-to-day affairs, but it was a common custom to send a letter if someone was getting married or having a child. Waylen was sure that his father had sent word that his eldest brother had gotten married, and then the same for his sister. Nyle had married nearly a decade ago, and his sister had married maybe three years ago now.

How was he supposed to reply to that, his mind scrambling for something to say. Ser Lyrren stepped around to his right side and offered to add more to his glass. He nodded that he could.

"If I had known, I could have brought gifts for you and your husband, Your Highness, if that is a custom you follow." He replied, not knowing what else to say.

"I did not attend your brother's ceremony, even though I was invited. It would have been rude to invite your family to Vienna's." Her Majesty finally offered an explanation, then tipped her glass back to down half of its contents.

"You could have still told them I had married!" Her daughter replied, now redirecting her anger at her own mother.

“Stop.” Her Majesty glared at her, then took another large gulp from her glass before shaking it for Ser Lyrren to come and refill it again.

Her daughter did stop, visibly drawing in a breath before choosing to say nothing more while her sister stared down at her plate to focus on eating. Ser Lyrren reappeared at her side, refilled Her Majesty’s glass until the bottle had only drops left to give. Waylen watched as he stepped away and returned the now empty bottle to the cart and was then surprised to see the dragon retrieve a fresh bottle. He didn’t open it, but instead cradled it in his arms and returned to standing a polite distance away from the table as if he knew he’d soon be opening that one, too.

Did she always drink so heavily?

Her Majesty resumed her eating, and the air around the table was so uncomfortable. He kept telling himself that he was not to blame, but at the same time he felt like he was. He made himself eat what was left of his meal, including the valli he wasn’t so sure about. He’d had his share of uncomfortable meals before, so it wasn’t too difficult to focus on eating and drinking while everyone else did the same.

Her Majesty drained her glass again, but warded off Ser Lyrren before he could remove the cork from the bottle. She suddenly stood, both her daughters quickly pivoting their heads to their mother. They both made as if to stand, which left Waylen scrambling to join them.

“Sit!” She barked at them all.

Princess Iolla dropped back into her seat quickly, but her sister exhaled a sigh and sat back down in a more measured manner. He did the same.

“Eat. I have too much to do. Lyrren, ensure his return when he is finished.” She told the dragon, gesturing a hand at Ser Lyrren before turning to leave through the same door she’d come from.

“Thank you for inviting me to dinner, Your Majesty.” Waylen tried to offer a parting word to her backside as she approached the door.

All he got in return was a gesture of the hand, which seemed to be something she did often. Was this tradition or something particular to the Queen? He would have to figure that out and hopefully soon, especially if it was going to be an indicator of how foul her mood might be.

One of the guards by the doorway opened it for her, and she said something in their foreign tongue, which prompted both guards to follow her out the door. Princess Vienna reached her hand out and grabbed two meelish from the bowl, bare handed like her mother had done before, then dropped them onto her plate.

“Welcome to Anya Sur, Your Highness.” She told him with a frown, and even on her reptilian face, her expression was one he felt an unfortunate kinship with regarding his own mother.

“Thank you.” He replied, his voice quiet.



No one bothered to refill their plates after that, nor their glasses, and their dinner ended a short while later with Princess Vienna being the first to excuse herself, and then her sister who seemed to do so like it was a hasty retreat.

“I can return you to your rooms whenever you would like, Your Highness.” Ser Lyrren then told him. He was the only other person left in the room with him.

“Thank you, Ser Lyrren.” He replied, then looked over at his untouched glasses of picti and unni.

Ser Lyrren was perceptive enough to know that Waylen didn't have the stomach to drink anything else tonight and volunteered to have bottles of both to be brought to his rooms for him to try later, and then asked if he was ready to leave. He told him that he was.

~ To Places Very Near ~

# Glossary

*Below is a glossary of characters & words, their pronunciations, and their identities & meanings. With this I hope you come to better understand the world within this story.*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Pronunciation</b>	<b>Who are they?</b>
Yvvie Fah Ro'Sah	<i>Yeh-Vee Fah Row-Sah</i>	<i>The first and current reigning monarch of Atina Nah, responsible for its founding.</i>
Myuun Er Su'Un	<i>Me-Yoon Err Soo-Oon</i>	<i>The late King of Atina Nah who was assassinated a year after Waylen's birth.</i>
Vienna Fah Ro'Un	<i>Vee-Inn-Ah Fah Row-Oon</i>	<i>The eldest daughter to Queen Yvvie, and the heir to the Atinan throne.</i>
Iolla Fah Ro'Un	<i>Ee-Oh-Lah Fah Row-Oon</i>	<i>The youngest daughter to Queen Yvvie, and a vital advisor in economic matters of state.</i>
Thalla Fah Kah'Seh	<i>Thah-Lah Fah Kah-Sah</i>	<i>An Atinan Eldest and Close Advisor to Queen Yvvie, assisting her in most matters of state.</i>
Karo Er Ton'Vas	<i>Car-Oh Err Tahn-Vass</i>	<i>Vienna's husband who is a merchant in the steel trade, and the future King of Atina Nah.</i>
Lyrren Er Yot'Ah	<i>Leer-An Err Yote-Ah</i>	<i>A valued and trusted Atinan, who is in charge of every servant assigned to Waylen's care.</i>
Norra Fah Tah'Yah	<i>Nor-Ah Fah Tah-Yah</i>	<i>An accomplished soldier, assigned to the post of Captain, in charge of Waylen's Atinan guards.</i>
Roc Er Fel'Noy	<i>Rock Err Fell-Noy</i>	<i>One of Queen Yvvie's three Commanders. The Commander Beyond the Wall.</i>
Nell Fah Sol'Nu	<i>Nell Fah Soul-New</i>	<i>One of Queen Yvvie's three Commanders. The Eye of the Watch.</i>

<b>Location</b>	<b>Pronunciation</b>	<b>Description</b>
Atina Nah	<i>Ah-Teen-Ah Nah</i>	<i>The Kingdom of Atina Nah, home to the dragons of the Silver Sea. An expansive desert region.</i>
Anya Sur (City)	<i>Ahn-Yah Sir</i>	<i>The Capital City of Atina Nah. A walled city more than a century old, and vital hub of trade, and named after Anya Sur.</i>
The Keep	<i>The Keep</i>	<i>Built into the base of Anya Sur, The Keep is an impregnable fortress, as well as the home to Her Majesty and her royal family.</i>
Anya Sur (Butte)	<i>Ahn-Yah Sir</i>	<i>The largest rock formation in Atina Nah, a massive butte that sits at the heart of the City of Anya Sur. Translates to "The Great Well".</i>
Anya Valas	<i>Ahn-Yah Vah-Lass</i>	<i>Known as "The Great Cistern", Anya Valas is the large lake at the foot Anya Sur, and is fed by an underground spring deep beneath Atina Nah.</i>

<b>Location</b>	<b>Pronunciation</b>	<b>Description</b>
Radiah	<i>Rah-Dee-Ah</i>	<i>The Kingdom of Radiah, found east of the desert, and home to mankind. A cold, forested land.</i>
Ilian	<i>Ill-Ee-An</i>	<i>The Capital City of Radiah, centuries old and always growing. Well known for its riches.</i>
Darfell	<i>Dar-Fell</i>	<i>The Kingdom of Darfell, which is a long-standing rival to Radiah. The two Kingdoms have feuded with one other for as long as they have written history.</i>

<b>Term</b>	<b>Pronunciation</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Atinan	<i>Ah-Teen-An</i>	<i>Being of or from Atina Nah. Can be in reference to people or to things.</i>
Radian	<i>Rah-Dee-An</i>	<i>Being of or from Radiah. Can be in reference to people or to things.</i>
Meelish	<i>Mee-Lish</i>	<i>An Atinan dish consisting of meatballs smothered in a rich gravy. Any meat can be used. Salty, savory. The color of the sauce shares its color and texture with American “white gravy”.</i>
Valli	<i>Vah-Lee</i>	<i>A thick, dark colored stew that is traditionally prepared with either camel or pork. The flavor is similar to that of BBQ, but it is eaten like a stew.</i>
Tan	<i>Tahn</i>	<i>A golf ball sized, round dinner roll. Golden round on top, lightly glazed with butter and garnished with salt. Fluffy white insides.</i>
Nef	<i>Neff</i>	<i>Simply means “alcohol”. Any alcoholic beverage can be called nef, but to be specific you would need to use the alcohol’s proper name.</i>
Unni	<i>Oon-Ee</i>	<i>An alcohol made from honey, which is very similar to mead. Considered a cheap luxury, like a higher quality alcohol for more special occasions.</i>
Picti Nef	<i>Pick-Tee Neff</i>	<i>A type of beer made from the local cacti, Picti. It’s bitter in the way beer is known to be but has a mint flavor from the picti. A cheap, commonly consumed alcohol.</i>
Picti	<i>Pick-Tee</i>	<i>A local type of cacti that grows commonly across Atina Nah. Its leaves can be used for both cooking and for medicinal purposes, and its long needles are sometimes used for sewing.</i>
Et’nol	<i>Et-Nole</i>	<i>Atinan word for “fiancé”.</i>