

The Silver Sea, Act 2.

~ Exploring Boundaries ~

~ 7 ~

The new trade route to Anya Sur from Radian is wonderful! I do not yet know why they are so fascinated by our glasswork, but they trade for it no differently than I've seen them devour food. I've seen the sort of glass they use, and its much lower quality than our own, so perhaps they admire ours for its strength? I know Edgard liked that all of our cups were made of glass, and I do not recall him ever furnishing glassware at his own dinner table. Everything they ate and drank from was made of metal. Yvvie can't stand that they waste so much of their metal on things that could be made from something else.

Their glass may be poor, but what I can credit them for is how colorful they like to make it. They add dyes to the sand when they melt it into glass and use it to turn it all sorts of colors, much like how I would have done with fabric. In some of their largest buildings they even use colored glass like artwork, set within windows for all to see. We normally don't do that with our glass, as leaving it pure and clear is much better. I gave examples of their colored glass to Thalla's husband, and he seemed to think it's all ugly, but I urged him to explore it with the other glassmiths he knows and see if there is a way to make our glass colorful, too, as it would make it more valuable to Radiah. We need more things to give them in exchange for what we want in return!

They might be willing to give away more of their goods if we can start bartering away colorful Atinan glass.

Like more chickens! The few we've gotten keep dying from the heat, as they were not meant to live in a place so hot as Atina Nah. It may be a fool's errand, but we must try to cultivate Radian animals here, as so many of them are useful! Chickens produce meat and eggs, their cattle are good for meat and milk, and then they have pigs. The pigs seem to be only useful for slaughter, but many Radian dishes seem to contain what they kept calling pork, instead of pig. More examples of them having many words for the same thing!

If we can find more things the Radians want, then I think we will be more than capable of unlocking the secrets of turning Anya Sur into our own Illian. The southern road that guides all trade into Anya Sur is mostly barren for now, but one day I swear it will be teeming with life. I want it to look the same as when I rode into Illian that first day, hundreds of Radians all gathered to buy and sell all manner of goods. I want that for us!

Most of Atina Nah has already begun to think of Anya Sur as the beating heart of trade, but there is only so much trade worth doing when everything for sale can be found somewhere else. Anya Sur has few goods that can't be sourced from another tribe. Our strength for now is volume, we simply have more of what everyone wants. My hope is that in time we won't just have more goods, but we will have exclusive ownership of things that can be found nowhere else but here! Our trade with Radiah will be what gives Anya Sur its power.

He missed the sound of birdsong in the morning. Back in Illian, he woke up to it every day, the birds arriving outside his window before a servant could ever touch his door handle. They helped him out of bed every morning and he never realized how nice it was until it was gone. Atina Nah had birds, but none of them seemed to sing the same way the ones in Radiah did. They slept at different hours, flew to different winds.

And so, Waylen woke up on his second day in Anya Sur to silence. Had it not been for how exhausted he was the day before, and how wonderful sleeping in a real bed was, he might not have slept a wink from how anxious he'd been the night before. As soon as he'd returned to his rooms from yesterday's failed dinner, he'd waved off everyone that wanted to know what happened. He just wanted to retreat to his bedroom and collapse.

At least he slept, and his legs felt much better. His body wasn't aching like he'd expected it to, and all he had to worry about was just that. His worries. Looking around his room, he wasn't sure what hour of the morning it was, since no one had come to wake him, and he had no means of discovering it himself without climbing out of bed to see.

Despite how cold it was in the room, the bed was keeping him warm, and he was very reluctant to leave it. It was only when he began to catch the aroma of food that he felt himself begin to stir. It was the scent of salty bacon, and what he was certain had to be eggs. If breakfast was being prepared but no one had come to wake him, then that meant Marissa had decided to let him sleep for as long as he wanted.

He twisted himself under the covers until he stuck one leg out from under the blanket. The cold air made him flinch, and when he threw the covers off himself to stand, he shivered from head to toe. He had to quickly run to the wardrobe, feet clapping across the wooden floor. Most of his clothing had already been hung in the wardrobe so he pulled out a long woolen robe and wrapped himself inside it, drawing the cloth belt tight around his waist to secure it shut. He found his slippers sitting near the wall alongside his other footwear and quickly slid his feet into them. They were cold, but it was a sight better than the bare floor.

When he emerged into the drawing room the smell of breakfast cooking was heavy in the air. It was warmer in the drawing room than his bedroom thanks to the iron stove in the corner of the room that was burning wood for heat. He was alone while Marissa and the others were no doubt in the kitchen preparing food for everyone.

He walked over to one of the windows and looked through the curtains, finding that the sun was only just beginning to crest on the horizon. It would start to warm up soon, and very quickly. He'd learned weeks ago that the hot and cold of the desert didn't fight each other for very long. One was gone as soon as the other arrived, like they were always fleeing from one another.

He pushed the balcony door open and stepped outside, hugging himself against the cold, to perform the ritual he'd started ever since he'd first seen it. The balcony did not give him the best view of the distant desert, but standing at the edge of the balcony he squinted his eyes and looked out past the lake of Anya Sur, and its many curiously green fields.

Far beyond the outer wall of the city, he could see the sands of Atina Nah stretching out into the distance. He didn't know what direction he was looking in, so he didn't know from which direction the

sun was going to rise. As cold as he was, he wanted to see it, since he'd not slept in so late that he'd missed the sunrise.

Several minutes passed and then he watched as a shimmering of light started to dance across the distant sand. Unfortunately, it wasn't so brilliant a sight as what he'd grown accustomed to. Maybe it was because he was so far away, or maybe he was too high up in the air. The desert of Atina Nah had been given its name by the dragons that lived in it. Waylen couldn't speak any Atinan, but Shane had told him that the name of the desert translated into Radian as '*the silver sea*'.

The shimmering of the sands continued for a time, and then it stopped. He sighed, disappointed. He wasn't going to get to see the desert shimmer like he had when they were still traveling here. Every morning the light of sunrise would catch the sand just right, and then it would become almost like a mirror. It would blind you with its light, like staring into a sea of polished, gleaming metal. You could look all around you and feel like you were standing in a great sea of pure silver, and thus explaining how the desert got its name.

And then it would vanish. It only lasted a few minutes if you were fortunate.

"Waylen!" A woman's voice startled him from behind.

He'd jumped nearly out of his skin and turned to see Marissa standing in the doorway. She was already stepping out to take him by the arm and pulling him back inside while scolding him for being on the balcony when it was still so cold outside.

She made him sit at the breakfast table while she quickly left to go back to the kitchen. She returned with Christa, who was then made to go fetch Codi from the men's room across the hallway.

"I've got Margo fixing you a cup of tea! Breakfast, too, soon!" She told him as she left for his bedroom.

He was glad for both and then waited for a few minutes. Christa returned with Codi in tow, and Waylen watched the pair part ways with the young girl going back to the kitchen while Codi left for his bedroom. Soon after that Shane entered, bowing to him before shutting the door behind himself. Of course, the old man would be quick to come as soon as he knew Waylen was awake. He'd been the most eager to learn how dinner with Her Majesty had gone the night before.

"Good morning, Your Highness." Shane greeted him.

"Waylen!" Marissa called for him, looking out his door and seeing Shane had arrived.

She exited his room and brushed off the front of her dress.

"Your Highness, I've set out something for your change. Should be something more comfortable for when the day grows hot." She told him, adjusting her tone, now that she knew Shane was in the room with them.

“Good morning, Shane.” He told the older man, then excused himself to his bedroom so he could change.

Codi helped him dress, most of the effort going into lacing his boots. Once he was done, Waylen was nicely dressed again in a fine tunic, though of lighter weight than the more formal ensemble he’d worn the previous day. Today’s outfit was thinner, lighter, and was the color of light beige. He looked at himself in the mirror that hung on the wall.

“You look quite good in it, Your Highness.” Codi told him.

Waylen twisted himself in the mirror, looking at himself from a different angle. He wondered if he would be mistaken for a servant by the dragons with how pale in color he was dressed. Well, at least they’d think he was of high status, if he was right about the color of their clothing being important.

“I do, too.” He agreed at last, and then turned to head back to the drawing room.

Codi got the door for him and followed him out. A cup of tea was waiting for him on the breakfast table along with a plate of bacon, toast, and eggs. He wasn’t sure where the eggs had come from, since they’d not taken any chickens with them on their trip.

Shane had waited for him at the table, and when he sat down in front of his plate he asked where Marissa had gone to. Shane told him she’d gone back to the kitchen. Waylen then told Codi to ask her where the eggs had come from. He assumed somewhere in the city; he just hoped it was from a chicken and not some strange animal. He was very grateful that camels were not capable of laying eggs.

He started to eat, and Codi returned to say that the eggs had been provided by one of the Queen’s kitchens. Much of their current kitchen stock was provided by Her Majesty, it seemed.

“Did last night’s dinner go poorly?” Shane finally asked him.

Waylen stabbed one end of a thick slice of bacon, then folded it over to stab it again, before doing so a third time until he had the entire strip skewered on the end of his fork. His plate had been drizzled with some kind of syrup, so he drug the bacon across the plate to gather up as much of it as he could, then popped it in all his mouth. The combination of salted, tender pork smothered in sugary sweetness was just what he needed after yesterday.

And he was in no hurry to answer the question.

Christa and Margo then exited the kitchen, each pushing a small serving cart. Waylen ignored Shane in favor of watching them. Marissa followed them out, then rushed around them to reach the front door before they could so she could open it for them. They must be bringing food to the men in the other room judging by how full the carts appeared to be.

“Can it wait until after I’ve eaten?” He asked after they’d all left.

“The longer you delay the more I fear it must have been a disaster.” The older man replied.

Waylen sighed, started gnawing on the side of his tongue as he leaned back in his chair. He licked the syrup off his teeth, then washed his previous bite down with a sip of his tea.

“Did you know that Princess Vienna has taken a husband, and that Princess Iolla is now engaged?” Waylen answered Shane’s question with one of his own.

The other man furled his brow, looking at him thoughtfully for a moment.

“No, I was not aware. Is this news a recent development?” He asked in return, questions for questions.

“Princess Vienna has been married for eight years, Shane. She and her sister both mentioned a male dragon by name, and because I was not aware that the *Heir* to the throne was married, I made the mistake of asking who she was talking about. She then understandably became very offended when she realized I did not know her husband’s name.” Waylen replied, and Shane rocked back in his own chair looking startled.

For a moment the old man looked at the table, then the floor, his eyes moving silently like he was sifting for something in his thoughts. Waylen ignored him and let the man stew for a moment while he slid his fork through the egg and pierced the yolk, spilling yellow across the plate like blood. He tore off a piece of toast and sopped up some of the egg, then ate it.

“It is not possible for us to have missed such a thing! There’s correspondence between your father... We have letters from Her Majesty, dozens and dozens of them all going back years! Nothing about her daughter being married was in them.” Shane replied at last, exasperated and frustrated.

“That’s because she didn’t tell us on purpose.” He replied, leaving the other man looking even more shocked, and so he continued his explanation.

“Father invited her to attend Nyle’s wedding, but since she did not attend, she felt that it would have been rude to tell us that Vienna had married.” He explained.

“She told you this?” He asked to which Waylen nodded in reply while stabbing the next slice of bacon.

The other man began to fidget in his seat with frustration.

“If she’s not telling us this then what else are we not being told? How little do we know!” He was agitated now, visibly growing angry to cover up his concern.

“I was asking myself that while Her Majesty and Princess Vienna got into an argument at the dinner table. The Queen excused herself first, then Princess Vienna, and then Princess Iolla shortly after that. It was a very uncomfortable room to be in.” Waylen replied.

“I hope the argument was not directed at you! At your or our expense?” Shane asked.

“To my eyes, it seemed that they were angry at each other, or more so just Her Majesty and her eldest. Princess Iolla kept herself mostly neutral.” He told him.

Shane exhaled a deep sigh.

“Go have breakfast, Shane. We have plenty of time to sort everything out.” He told the older man.

Reluctantly the older man began to stand, nodding his head. He departed out the door, and then Waylen resumed eating his breakfast. He took his time, and once his plate was clean, he patiently sipped at his tea while he watched the sun rise through the window. It was already starting to warm up.

The women soon returned with their carts. Marissa sent Christa to check on him, and he requested a fresh cup of tea which she went to fetch. Marissa was the one to return with it.

“While we were out serving the men, that dragon came. The tall skinny one.” She told him, setting his tea down on the table for him.

“*Ser Lyrren Er Yot’Ah.*” He replied, carefully enunciating from memory the dragon’s full name.

“That was his name.” She replied, then took a seat across from him, the one Shane had occupied not so long ago.

“What did he come to say, or do?” He asked.

“He explained to me, since Shane was with you, that you would not be needed for anything for now. It sounds like they expect you to stay in your room and rest until they decide to change their minds.” She told him.

“That sounds nice, until I grow restless.” He replied.

“The men are already restless! Have you seen their room? All of them packed together with nothing to do. I think they were expecting a chance to walk around to patrol a hallway or something, but it seems like they are being kept there to be alone with their boredom.” She replied.

“We’re going to be here for a long time.” He reminded her.

Waylen didn’t have any suggestions for what the men could do pass the time. This was not Castle Illian, so they could not just go about the Keep as they pleased, and it did not seem for the moment that the guards outside would give up their posts in favor of Waylen’s guards. It seemed like Her Majesty had expected him to arrive unguarded with how many of her soldiers were scattered all through the Keep.

“Me and the girls, we at least have more space in the kitchen and in the little side room with our bunks. We’ll be cooking and cleaning so at least we won’t go stir-crazy. I don’t know how well they will do, being a bunch of men accustomed to better.” She warned him, and he sighed.

“I suppose it would be good if the Captain thought of ways to keep them all busy. For now, I’m not quite certain what any of us are allowed to do.” Waylen replied, and Marissa nodded to him, saying she’d tell Landon just that.

“Shane did not look happy when he came to breakfast. I already knew that dinner must have been terrible if it made you want to rush to bed. Was it that bad?” She changed the subject to last night.

“It was. I discovered last night that Her Majesty has been keeping secrets from us. Her eldest daughter has been married for eight years, and the younger one is now engaged. Her excuse is that it would have been rude to tell us, since she did not attend Nyle’s wedding.” Waylen explained.

And Lynn’s, too, he thought. Father would have sent letters about her engagement and marriage, as well. Marissa took the news better than Shane had.

“I can perhaps see how she might think it rude, but she is still the Queen. A woman of her status should be far above fears of rudeness when it comes to matters of state. She should have sent a letter that her daughters were soon to take husbands.” She replied.

“I agree.” He replied.

“That couldn’t be all?” She asked him then.

He began to describe the rest of the dinner, starting from the beginning. She got more out of him than Shane had, partly because he was no longer eating, and partly because he felt more comfortable talking to Marissa about anything that was uncomfortable. When he told her the news that the dragons had thought he was going to make a fool of himself because he dared to take Eldest Thalla by the hand... Well, that shocked her more than anything else did.

“Ridiculous! It was a mistake and you’re a grown man. Between the Captain saying they put on a show to intimidate you, and everything else... Ridiculous!” Now she was upset.

Margo emerged from the kitchen with a water pitcher and made her exit through the front door.

“We have water in the kitchen?” He asked, wondering where everything was coming from between his tea and the pitchers of water being served to the men in the other room.

“There is a large barrel in the kitchen. It used to be a wine barrel, a very old one from one of our vineyards, but now it just holds water. While you were with Her Majesty in the throne room the giant blue woman told us that fresh water would be brought daily to refill the barrel. We are to also water the plants outside during the day at every hour, otherwise they will quickly die.” She explained to him.

“*Eldest Thalla Fah Kah 'Seh.*” He reminded her, reciting her name from memory, both for her and himself. He’d made enough mistakes already so he did not want to risk anymore by forgetting anyone’s name.

“That one.” She replied.

“I hope you remember their names when they visit.” He smiled at her.

“Oh, I will remember.” She replied, and then he explained to her not to use their full name more than once a day. Only for the first greeting, and then after that only use their title and first name.

She looked frustrated by the odd rules but nodded that she understood and would do her best to remember.

“We should show them hospitality of our own, if only to shame them for their lack of it.” She told him suddenly.

“They have shown us hospitality, Marissa, despite a sour dinner.” He told her, lifting his hand and gesturing to the fine room they were in.

She leaned forward and tapped the tabletop with both her hands.

“Here, Waylen. They gave you a horrible dinner, so we should give them a great one right here. You said the eldest one, Vienna, offered an invitation to eat with them? We can invite them to dinner here, we just need a bigger table! We can have them come here, and me and girls will cook a proper feast and serve them rightly!” She suggested firmly.

He thought about it, then nodded. That was actually a very good idea.

“I like it, but I don’t think it would be smart to thumb our noses at them so soon. We should wait a few days.” He told her, and she nodded in agreement.

“In the meantime, I can see what sort of feast our kitchen can be made to prepare.” She replied and then picked herself up out of her chair to make her way to the kitchen.

Waylen continued to watch the sun slowly rise until he’d finished his morning tea, and then he tried to take advantage of the luxury of time the dragons had gifted him. If he were at home, he’d have any number of things to do, and all of it dictated by his mother’s whims. Here in Anya Sur, he had no duties or responsibilities to attend to apart from simply recovering from his trip and thinking of how to make his father happy. After several hours of having nothing to do he began to realize that restlessness would be a problem for them all.

It's becoming so much more difficult now with so many Radians coming to Anya Sur. It was easy enough to navigate a conversation with Edgard and his family, and even with some of his advisors, but that's still a very small number of people. Now, we have so many merchants coming here and not a single one speaks Atinan very well, and we still do not speak Radian as well as we should!

I can speak it better than Yvvie, I think, but between the two of us we are far more keen at it than any other Atinan in Anya Sur. Even the merchants among us that have long traded with Radians are terrible at speaking their tongue, as both they and the Radians will just speak to each other like newborn whelps. They point to what they want and make a noise, and somehow, they all understand each other's gibberish.

Well, I do not admire nonsense like that. Yvvie hates me for this, I know, but I'm making her help me. We sit and speak in Radian whenever we gather together with our advisers, merchants, and anyone else that wants to learn. I've asked Thalla to learn it with us. She commands a great deal of respect within the city, and her husband Erram is well respected in his trade, so many more are now asking for ways to learn if only for the chance to get close to us.

It's important that I explore every means to get more of us to learn their language. We here in Atina Nah, we've long carved our words into stone or stitched it into cloth. But in Raidah, they make paper, thin like the finest cloth I've ever seen and pale like the whites of the eyes. They use ink to write on it. Like many things in Radiah, paper is fragile, but it is comfortable. Easy to carry, to store, and even easier to bind into a bundle that they call books.

As a gift to us from Queen Heron, Edgard wife, I was given three of these books. Each was thick as my palm measured from palm to back and protected by two hard shells that the Radians call 'covers'. I do not know how they make these things, but they were filled with so many of their words, so many dozens of pages of Radian script! I can't read them yet, but I intent to learn, and I will make Yvvie read them, too.

The Radians have so much more to offer us than we do in return, and so I think it would be a powerful gesture if we learn their tongue as well as they do, and to wield it in front of them as if we were born to it! To speak it, to read it, to write it. They won't sell us their chickens any cheaper for it, I'm sure, but it will be a gesture that shows them that we are earnest.

And Edgard likes talking to Yvvie, but always about military matters. I think he is keen on making sure that Darfell is kept frightened. I would think that job was long since done, but the more I listen to him talk of Darfell the more I realize the hatred he has for them is much like the hatred Yvvie and I both hold in our own hearts. I am learning to let go of it, but Yvvie's grip is far too tight.

Perhaps if I learn to speak Radian as well as Edgard, then I might join them in their conversations more often and speak sense and reason should either of them think of starting another war. There's so much anger left in Yvvie that she might ignore a chance for peace if strife came knocking at our door. I have to convince her to let go. She cannot keep her fists clenched forever.

The following day left Waylen feeling anxious. There was a part of him that was afraid he was wasting valuable time, and another part simply wanted something to do. He normally had a lot to do when he was at Castle Illian, be it tutoring, or some other task set out for him by his mother. But here in Atina Nah there was simply *nothing* on his agenda.

A few hours after he woke and had breakfast, he asked Shane to tell the dragons outside that he wanted to speak with Ser Lyrren. He needed something to do, something to make him feel productive.

At the very least he could ask to be shown more of the Keep. He'd only been taken to see a few places so far, but he knew there was so much more to see. Castle Illian had dozens upon dozens of rooms that served all manners of roles. He wanted to investigate their military like his father wanted, but he felt too sheepish to push for it so soon. He had no reason to believe the dragons suspected he had an ulterior motive for coming to attend the Festival of Founding, but the fear of it was still there, and so he hesitated.

A half an hour later and the tall grey dragon appeared at his doorstep, dressed again in the long white robe he'd worn the day before, complete with its red scarf that hung loosely around his neck.

"How may I help you, Your Highness?" Ser Lyrren asked him with his familiar smile.

This one liked showing his teeth when he smiled, but he couldn't figure out if it was exclusive to Ser Lyrren or if perhaps it was because he was a male dragon. Her Majesty had prominent teeth, but they did not seem to show when she, well, she didn't smile did she? Her daughters smiled, and neither of them made a show of their teeth. Nor had Eldest Thalla.

"I am restless, Ser Lyrren. I am happy that I have been given so much time to recover from my long journey, but I would like it more if someone could give me a tour of the Keep? I saw enough on my first day here to make me very curious to see more of Her Majesty's home. I hope my request will not offend her?" He asked him, being careful to mention that he did not seek to cause any offense. He did not want a repeat of his first day in Anya Sur.

The slender dragon tilted his head at him then.

"What would you like to see?" He asked.

"Anything. I am at Her Majesty's mercy, Ser Lyrren. I would be delighted to see anything that you might think I would find interesting or worthwhile." He replied, offering the dragon as much leeway as possible to meet Waylen's request.

The dragon stared down at him for a moment, seemingly thoughtful with his head still at a tilt. Was the tilt of the head a common habit of dragons? Her Majesty and Princess Vienna had both done it, too.

"I shall ask for you, Your Highness. Please, excuse me." Ser Lyrren replied.

"Of course." Waylen told him. The dragon then bowed his head before turning to make his exit.

Waylen had expected this reaction, but he hoped that the result would be him receiving permission. He knew his father enjoyed putting the castle on display. It was the finest in all of Radiah and all of the noble families envied its construction. It was a castle many generations in the making, a work of labor and love that many in the royal household were eager to show off to any guest that came to visit.

He did not know if it would be minutes or hours before he received his answer. Shane and Landon both gave him input on what they thought Waylen should be looking to see, but he knew better. There was no need to rush to their guard houses nor their garrisons. For now, he would satisfy himself with just Her Majesty's fortress, to get an understanding of her home. A few days from now he could begin to push to see more, to direct himself towards things that his father might find more valuable.

Ser Lyrren returned perhaps a half hour later to inform him that he could be shown the Keep at any time he found to his liking.

"Would now be good, if you have the time for me, Ser Lyrren?" He asked the dragon.

"My time is yours, Your Highness. We can leave at any moment of your choosing." Was the reply.

"Then let us go, I am excited to see what awaits me." Waylen told him with a smile, feeling grateful that something was finally going well for him.

The dragon nodded, then asked if there was anyone else in her party that he'd like to bring. It occurred to him to bring along Shane, but Waylen suspected a lot of walking was ahead of him and he decided against bringing him or anyone else. Whatever he learned he could share with them later over tea. He told the dragon it would just be him, and then he was asked to follow.

Margo was in the drawing room with him, so Waylen told her to inform Marissa and the others that he was leaving with Ser Lyrren to tour the Keep. Afterwards, he stepped out into the hall with the dragon leading the way. They stopped, and very briefly Ser Lyrren spoke with Sol Norra at the door in their native tongue, which led to the woman calling out what he assumed were two names. The first sounded like *Ah-rit-ah* and then the second sounded like *No?* With Sol Norra speaking her native tongue the accent was thicker and harder to follow.

Of the six dragons standing watch along the hallway, two stepped forward and approached. One was an auburn hued male, and the other a warm ochre female. It looked like they were to follow him and Ser Lyrren as they went about their tour. The pair stopped in front of them, then clapping their fists over their chests in salute.

"We may go now, Your Highness." Ser Lyrren then said. He lifted a hand for him to wait, Waylen looked at both of the dragons that had approached.

"Which of you is Ahrita and who is No?" He asked, hoping he had their names right.

The two dragons each wore a look of confusion, their eyes darting toward Ser Lyrren was now stepping close to Waylen's side. He leaned down slightly to close the gap in height between them, then lifted a hand to point with a finger at the male.

"Sol *Noll* Er Tol'Ut." The dragon told him, correcting Waylen's pronunciation before pointing to the female to do the same. "Sol *Arita* Fah Ger'Not."

“Both serve Sol Norra and were selected for service by Princess Vienna.” He added, his weaker accent making it much easier to grasp their names.

“Thank you, Ser Lyrren. If they cannot speak Radian, please tell them that I am happy to have them as my guard today. If Princess Vienna chose them, then they have earned my trust.” He told the dragon, letting this moment be a small, but hopefully memorable one for the many guards that were given to his service.

Small gestures were often the wisest ones, as he’d been told once by his eldest brother. When he’d been very little Nyle had told him that being nice to the servants often meant they might turn a blind eye to mischief if you were up to any. For a young boy this meant a great deal, but as a man his brother’s advice carried other meanings. If the servants all liked you, then they were much more willing to loyally serve you in whatever capacity you needed.

Ser Lyrren briskly spoke in their native language, the sound of his voice coarse to Waylen’s ear. Their language, the way they spoke, sounded aggressive even though it did not seem that they were being aggressive at all. The two dragons stiffened in place, then looked to Waylen. They each awkwardly seemed to nod their heads, tightening their fists over their chests. They were likely not expecting this, which was good, and they would remember this moment all the better because of it.

“Are you ready, Your Highness?” Ser Lyrren asked him then, and he told him that he was.

The dragon turned and began to lead the way, and Waylen followed with Ser Lyrren carefully watching his gait so that the two could walk side by side. The dragons, Arita and Gnoll followed behind them silently as they walked.

“I have no special request for what I am shown. I leave my journey to you, Ser Lyrren.” Waylen spoke up.

“Your Highness, I had the chance to speak with Eldest Thalla Fah Kah’Seh, and she suggested several things to me. Where I am taking you now is very close to the great lobby you entered the Keep from on the day of your arrival.” The dragon explained.

Waylen nodded and followed the dragon’s directions. Every so often the dragon would gesture with his hand any time they were to make a twist or a turn. He remembered some of these halls, and when they came to the large doorway that led back out to the massive set of steps leading up to the Keep’s main entrance, he remembered that if only for the ache they put into his legs. All while they walked, the dragon continued to list things he was planning to show him, such as the guest rooms Her Majesty had *carved* for any visitors. These rooms were mainly used by traveling dragons from other tribes.

He was not very familiar with the tribes of Atina Nah, but he did know that Anya Sur itself was considered a tribe by Atina Nah’s definition of it. There were dozens of tribes in the desert, and that’s all there used to be before Her Majesty conquered them all to bring them under her unified rule. He knew it was not quite the same, but when he’d first heard the history of Atina Nah it sounded to him like a great many noble houses had waged war against each other until one house came out on top, and then the victor crowned herself the Queen of Atina Nah.

“I would like to also show you the big kitchen. With how large the Keep is, there are multiple kitchens, but the one I will show you is the largest and is used for extra-large meals with many dragons attending. We will be using that kitchen to cook for this year’s banquet.” The dragon continued to explain.

The dragon was spending a lot of time talking about the details of things Waylen was soon to be privileged enough to see. They were still walking towards their first destination and yet Ser Lyrren was enjoying the sound of his own voice describing all the places he was taking him on the tour. The dragon appeared to be very knowledgeable about the workings of Her Majesty’s Keep.

They finally reached the banquet hall, which was significantly more impressive than the small dining room he’d eaten dinner in with Her Majesty. It was a large rectangular room with four stone pillars helping to keep the stone ceiling from dropping on the half dozen wooden tables beneath it. By the number of chairs and stools in attendance Waylen expected the room to seat as many as fifty, even sixty souls. Long red banners hung across every wall, and the tables were bare of silverware, but red tablecloths were folded neatly into piles on each one, waiting to dress the tables.

“Much larger than Her Majesty’s dining room.” He commented.

“Oh yes, this room is rarely used. Once a year for the Festival, and perhaps once or twice more for other matters. Her Majesty’s dining room was only carved to be as large as it needed to be. Not many meals are had there these days.” The dragon replied, and while Waylen listened, he heard that word *carved* again.

He guessed it did make sense that they would have had to carve out every room and hallway, but he did not want to imagine how much time and effort that would have taken. The Keep was very large! It would have been a lot of effort to carve out so much from raw stone.

“How many are expected to attend this year’s banquet?” He asked, since as he understood it, the banquet was a big celebration where important dragons from all over the city and the tribes came to gather. It was just a big feast hosted by the Queen, and he doubted it would be any different from the ones his father would host in Ilian, but he had to bite his tongue to stop himself from making assumptions.

He couldn’t afford to assume anything after how his first day here had gone.

His question then provoked a very long answer where more than a few dozen names were spoken that held no meaning to him, but it was clear they were very important people. What was especially clear; however, was that Waylen’s attendance at this year’s Festival had not been common knowledge to Anya Sur, and so now that everyone in the city knew he was here, a large number of important figures in the city had begun asking for seats at Her Majesty’s table when previously they had not.

It was... Flattering that there were people eager to show face at the banquet just to be seen in the same room as him. This was rare, as everyone in Radiah knew Waylen’s status was far lower than a peasant would have been led to believe. To the common folk of Radiah, a Prince was a *Prince*! That was a powerful and *important* person!

But Waylen was the third in line to the throne, born to a mother who was the King's second wife. Both his brothers and his sister were his half siblings. Everyone of *nobility* in Radiah knew that he held only a symbolic claim to his father's throne. Even Lynn's future sons would have a stronger tie to the throne than he would. This aggravated his mother to no end, as she spared no chance to tell him.

But here in a desert so far away, no one knew that. They might as well be Radian commoners, thinking that a *Prince is a Prince, a powerful and important person!* He smiled as Ser Lyrren continued to think of the names of people Waylen would soon come to meet in person, counting them one by one on his fingers. The dragon's astute memory was actually quite impressive, as Waylen stopped counting the number of names once the dragon reached forty.

Once the dragon had exhausted himself with the banquet hall, he led Waylen to the *big kitchen*, where they spent considerably less time. It was indeed a large kitchen, but he wasn't an expert on such things as he hardly knew what sort of kitchen Castle Illian even had. He had vague memories of sneaking into it once as a boy, but he had been quickly chased out by Marissa who had been trying to find him after he'd escaped from her care.

"You may not have found the kitchen that interesting, Your Highness, but perhaps the garrison will." The dragon surprised him, now leading him down a new hallway.

Waylen was suddenly very interested, the chance to see something of value dropping into his lap through no effort of his own!

"The Keep has its own garrison?" He asked.

"Oh, yes! It is on the western side. You would not have seen it when you arrived. It is not the largest in the city, but it need not be. The garrisons on the east and west sides of the city are more than enough for Anya Sur's defense." The dragon explained with a wave of the hand.

"So, there's only three of them for the entire city?" He asked, politely digging.

The dragon hummed.

"Yes, for what we would call a garrison. There are other places where soldiers dwell, but it is in those three places where every soldier answering the call lives and works until they are done." He answered.

"What do you mean by 'answer the call'?" Waylen then asked.

"That is when someone in Her service is called to duty. Her Majesty does not keep her entire army in the garrisons at all times. Many of our soldiers also work in the trades or the fields when they are not answering her call. I am not well versed in all of those matters, but I believe our soldiers rotate in groups of three. While one group answers the call the rest do other things." Ser Lyrren told him, then stopped walking.

Since he stopped, Waylen stopped, and then he watched as the dragon turned his head to quickly say something in Atinan to the two dragons following them. The pair responded, leading to another brief statement from Ser Lyrren, who then smiled and turned his head back to Waylen.

“Yes, that is correct. They rotate in groups of three.” The dragon told him, then began walking again, drawing Waylen and the two guards into his wake as they continued their path.

Waylen nodded. That made it sound like Her Majesty potentially had an army so large that she didn't have the means to maintain it at full strength year-round. Alternatively, it might mean that she has lost her need for a large army and has begun to shrink it, only keeping enough soldiers on hand to do whatever was deemed essential. He'd have to wait and see which was true, but he was soon to see at least one garrison so he might learn something there.

They'd walked quite a bit more, then found their way to a narrow flight of stairs. The dragon apologized for the long walk as they ascended, and Waylen felt like they must be going fairly high up considering how many steps they were taking. Had they not been walking in a perfectly straight line he'd have assumed they were ascending a tower. When they finally reached the top the dragon opened a wooden door, and light flooded the narrow passage.

Waylen was momentarily blinded, being forced to blink until his eyes adjusted. He followed Ser Lyrren outside and found himself standing on top of the large outer wall that wrapped around the Keep's courtyard. They were very high up, and the dragon ahead of him spun on his heel to face him, then with both hands he pointed to his either side.

“Your Highness, to my right is Her Majesty's Keep! We are quite high up and few get to see it from his vantage!” He told him with a curiously uneasy and toothy smile.

Waylen looked to his own left, seeing that they were standing at a higher elevation than most of the Keep. The only exception was the center of the Keep, which stood as tall as the wall they were standing on. Illian had a few high walls like this, but none were so close to Castle Illian that you could look at the castle with a similar view as this.

“And to your other side is the garrison.” The dragon told him, drawing his attention to the other side of the wall.

The dragon stepped over to the edge of the wall and towards a waist high stone parapet, which was the only thing keeping you from tumbling down to the courtyard below. Waylen followed while the guards followed them out to stand idle as they waited. But the four of them weren't alone, as in the distance Waylen could see that there were more soldiers standing watch up and down the full length of Keep's outer wall.

The Keep would be a very difficult place to conquer if war were to come here. Just this one wall surrounding the Keep was as thick as the fortress' hallways were wide. You would never break through it with any ease, and there was so much room to move about on top of the wall that a small army of archers could rain arrows down on any invader.

Waylen carefully approached the edge, gripping the stone tightly for his safety as he looked down. Far down below him was a courtyard similar to the one he'd walked through to enter the Keep. There were several stone buildings, and a few more made of wood. A small gate rested at the foot of another much smaller wall on the opposite side of the courtyard. There were... Fifty or more dragons mingling down below? Most of them were in the middle of the yard engaging in different kinds of combat. Practicing their swordplay, he assumed, but there were a fair number of dragons openly fighting like they were brawling, bare fists and all.

He leaned further, looking down to see what might have sat at the foot of the wall below. A warm hand then touched his shoulder, surprising him.

"Your Highness, please." The dragon said with concern, the grip on his shoulder urging him to keep his distance from the edge.

"Of course. My curiosity got the better of me." He took a step back.

The hand then quickly left his shoulder, Waylen taking note that dragons weren't so averse to touch that they'd refuse to grab you if they thought you were in danger.

"Do soldiers live in those buildings?" He asked, pointing at the buildings below.

Ser Lyrren stretched his neck, looking over the parapet without getting too close to the edge of the wall. Was he afraid of heights? The dragon made a face, then turned his head to the two dragons behind them. He spoke curtly to them in his native tongue, rattling off a string of foreign words until the woman of the two began to move.

She walked over to the edge of the wall, standing far closer to the drop than Ser Lyrren allowed Waylen to stand. She reached out her hand, then pointed to the courtyard and began to speak. Waylen didn't understand a single word of it, but as she spoke, she was pointing to different things down in the courtyard, and then Ser Lyrren began to talk to him in Radian.

"Your Highness, some soldiers sleep and have their meals in the stone buildings below, others live inside the Keep. The wooden buildings are for storage. Her Majesty has ordered that the wooden buildings be torn down next year so they can be replaced with stone ones like the others. The wooden building next to the gate is a stable for camels. The open area in the middle is where all of the training is done, which is what the soldiers below us are doing now." Ser Lyrren translated everything the other dragon was saying.

He listened intently, appreciating the speed at which the dragon was able to turn Atinan into Radian. Shortly after the other one had finished speaking, Ser Lyrren was able to finish. His quickness with both languages was impressive.

"Thank you, Ser Lyrren. You're very good at speaking Radian." He complimented the dragon, who then immediately stood up straight and smiled.

Waylen could tell that the dragon was taking this as very high praise.

“Thank you, Your Highness! I have been learning your language for many years in the hope that it may one day be put to good use. Your arrival has been very rewarding.” He replied with a bow of his head.

“How many years have you been learning it?” Waylen asked.

The dragon looked thoughtful for a moment, shutting his eyes briefly as he gave a tilt of the head.

“At least thirty years, Your Highness.” He replied finally, and his answer was a surprise.

“You’ve studied my language for longer than I have been alive, Ser Lyrren. You might just speak it better than me.” Waylen replied, fully intending to flatter.

The dragon smiled very broadly then, showing off his teeth before tightening down his smile and keeping control of himself. Of all the dragons Waylen had interacted with, Ser Lyrren was the only one he’d spent a lot of time around, and it was looking more and more like this one enjoyed gloating to his peers whenever someone of higher status gave him praise. In Illian, there were plenty of servants, soldiers, and even nobles that all acted the same way. Waylen had grown up watching them smile big while they gracefully accepted praise before running off to tell someone.

“There is much I still do not know, but I thank you for your kindness in telling me so.” The dragon humbly replied, still trying to control his smile so it did not grow too large.

“You are welcome to it. The soldiers below seem very busy with their training. I would like to go down and watch them if Her Majesty would allow it.” Waylen then asked, feeling that he’d get a good answer if he did. They’d already volunteered to show it to him, so why not let him mingle through the courtyard and see it all up close?

Ser Lyrren’s mood then changed, his smile warping into something different. Waylen’s heart sank. He was going to be told no, wasn’t he? The dragon was looking positively anxious now.

“Your Highness, I would need to speak to Commander Tann Er Al’Lon to get permission for that.” The dragon replied, clasping his hands in front of his stomach before bowing his head apologetically.

“And who might that person be?” He asked, wondering.

“Commander Tann is the master of all the Keep’s defenses. He serves Her Majesty as one of her Commanders. There are three of them, and each is responsible for a part of Anya Sur and Atina Nah’s defense.” Ser Lyrren replied.

Waylen remembered this from the day he arrived.

“The other two are Commanders Roc Er Fel’Noy and Nell Fah Sol’Nu?” He asked, testing his own memory.

He might not be able to remember over forty names for a banquet, but he could at least remember two of Her Majesty's most important generals! The dragon's face lit up at Waylen reciting their names.

"Yes! You would have met both of them on the day of your arrival!" he replied. "Commander Tann, you have not met, but he will be attending the banquet for the Festival!"

"Will I have to wait that long to tour the garrison?" He asked.

The dragon's face lost its light, and he returned to making that uncomfortable expression.

"Commander Tann does not like *change*." The dragon replied flatly, then nodded his head almost as a sign of resignation.

"But I will speak with him and ask if you may be given a tour of the garrison. Effort will be made, Your Highness." Waylen was told.

Commander Tann must be a difficult sort of person to deal with. Waylen nodded, and thanked Ser Lyrren for agreeing to forward his request. The dragon now seemed to be genuinely depressed, which was almost amusing as all he wanted to do was look around the garrison. There is only so much *change* a man can make in a courtyard if all he does is look at what's around him. This Commander Tann would surely survive the turbulence of his visit.

Waylen then changed the subject by asking about the other places the dragon had intentions of showing him, and Ser Lyrren quickly agreed and led him back inside and down the narrow stairway. The difference in temperature was immediately felt as they began to descend back down the stairs and into the Keep.

The rest of the tour was interesting, and informative, but not in any way that would have satisfied his father.

I've recently acquired several bottles of Radian alcohol. It's the same kind that Edgard likes to serve at his table, so I wanted some for our own when he visits. Yvvie hates it, and honestly so do I, but it's rude to refuse food and drink at someone else's table. Radians have such awful taste in alcohol! Edgard's favorite is a red color, like fresh blood. It's such a morbid drink and it tastes very strange! When I was first told that it was dry I thought that I had misunderstood yet another Radian phrase, but no! How could something so wet taste so dry! I do not understand it.

Then it was explained to me that wine has many subtle flavors, and that there are ways to taste them properly. From what I understand it is considered to be a very fine and sophisticated drink that is expensive in Radiah. I am polite, so I will just assume I am being told the truth. Yvvie would rather drink the pale-yellow colored wine that's actually sweet, but Edgard apparently doesn't like the flavor of that one, so it rarely graces his table.

The only reason why I went through the trouble of buying bottles for ourselves was so that Yvvie and I could teach ourselves to tolerate it, as I struggle to keep myself from making ugly faces whenever I have to drink it. It's such an awful tasting thing, and they tell me it's made from a fruit! Grapes! I've eaten those during my trips to Radiah, and they are delicious! It should be a crime to take something that tastes so good and turn it into something so foul.

Yvvie thinks she's clever and tries to drink hers as fast as she can so she doesn't have to taste it, but she can't do that in front of Radians! They don't drink like that! You're supposed to drink it slowly and let the wine sit on your tongue and splash it across the roof of your mouth. I pretend to do it, and then agree with whatever nonsense I'm being told about the flavor. I hate being so rude to them, but I honestly would prefer to drink an entire jug of picti than this.

Or just give me the plant and I'll take a bite from it raw.

Perhaps Yvvie is right. I can't imagine either of us learning to enjoy the taste of wine.

He didn't know why Marissa insisted on him wearing one of his better tunics today. This one in particular was uncomfortable around the neck, but she was adamant that he wear something *nice* at least until their lunch had concluded.

And Waylen didn't know what had provoked today's special occasion, as there were any number of things that it could have been, but this morning Ser Lyrren had come by to speak with Marissa, explaining that they did not need to prepare any meals for lunch today. Her Majesty had arranged that her kitchen, probably the 'big kitchen', would prepare food for everyone much as they had on the day they'd first arrived.

They weren't told what they were going to be served, but it was another 'feast' and since it was a catered affair a different room in the Keep had been selected for them to use. All Waylen and the others would need to do is make their way through the halls to reach it.

It was not customary for everyone to eat at the same tables in this manner, and Shane had the mind to explain that Waylen should have a table of his own, but he warded him off that. Things were uncomfortable enough as they are, and no one from his party needed to risk making it worse by quibbling

over the details of how they were to be served a meal. It was not being done as a slight to Waylen, he had assured Shane.

Between the three people in his service that held any responsibility, Waylen felt that Shane was the one struggling to adapt the most. Marissa was right at home, apart from the heat. She hated the weather, but she was a very strong woman and didn't complain unless it was something that mattered. Captain Landon complained, but he was a soldier who'd slept in a foot a snow before, or so he'd claimed. He knew hardship even if he was prone to exaggerate its severity. Waylen just thought he liked to gripe as a way of coping.

The problem of the men going stir crazy was still something to be dealt with. So far, they were managing themselves by playing games and exercising. Waylen suspected that wouldn't be enough, and he wondered if he'd need to bring it to Ser Lyrren's attention. He might could find a moment to do that today.

Waylen was in his bedroom, and Codi was with him helping him lace a new pair of boots that better matched his tunic.

"Thank you, Codi." Waylen told him, standing and tapping his boots on the floor to get his feet more comfortable.

"Go and find Shane and ask if there is anything they need help with." He continued, and Codi rushed off to do as he was told with Waylen leaving the bedroom to follow the younger man. The drawing room was empty, but he could hear the women talking through the kitchen door.

It sounded like Margo was complaining that they weren't being allowed to brew their own tea for lunch. Apparently, the dragons had served their own idea of tea when meals were brought to them while Waylen had dinner with Her Majesty. It had not been to anyone's liking, but Marissa was being very firm that it would be rude to show up to their meal with pitchers of their own tea.

He approached the kitchen door and looked inside.

Margo and Marissa were the only two he could see, no Christa in sight. The kitchen was clean, though it looked like all the components of a future meal were in their proper places. Pots and pans, plates and silverware were all out on the counters like Marissa had already planned what she would be cooking for tonight's dinner.

The women noticed his entrance, Margo stopping her complaints and bowing to him respectfully while Marissa quickly crossed the gap between them to look him over.

"Very good." She said, stepping around to his side, touching her fingertips around his tunic and straightening that which she felt was wrinkled, and fixing what she thought was a mess.

"The collar is too tight." He told her.

She stepped back around to his front and grabbed at his collar, running her fingers around his neck between the fabric and his skin. She undid the top button and opened the collar wider.

“Go fetch a sewing needle and some brown thread.” She told Margo, who quickly hurried to the side room where the women slept.

“You don’t need to make me a new collar.” He chided her, but she ignored him.

Shortly then Margo returned with a small spool of brown thread and a needle. Marissa grabbed the errant button and yanked, snapping the thread and removing the button cleanly. She then pinched the needle between her lips and began to unwind the spool.

“Since I am attending today’s feast, they may not serve tea. When I had dinner with Her Majesty, they only served alcohol. Wine, and two types of local drinks, called picti nef and unni nef.” He told Marissa, but it was actually for Margo’s benefit.

She plucked the needle from her lips, then licked the end of the thread to straighten it to a point.

“Which is the one that looks like milk but tastes like a mouthful of bitter mint?” She asked.

“Picti. I’ve yet to try it, but when Princess Iolla described unni nef to me during dinner it sounded just like mead.” He replied.

She replied that the mead would be a sight better than the other option. He did not want to agree without having tasted it himself first, but the description of it did not sound appetizing. Marissa then threaded the needle and began to sew the button back onto his collar.

“Margo, our sharpest knife, please.” She said, without removing her eyes from the button as she carefully sewed it, being careful not to nick him with the needle point.

Margo searched, Waylen watching as she produced a small but sharp-looking knife.

“Shane would be very upset if he walked in to see you playing tailor on me right before a function.” He told Marissa.

“He can be distressed all he likes. I’m sure he’s over there telling all the men to be on their best behavior because he doesn’t trust a one of them.” She replied.

“Shane is just a worrisome sort. There’s been plenty to worry about.” He told her.

“That may be so, but I think he could afford to drink a few glasses of mead if they serve it.” She told him back, then finished sewing the button.

She then began to sew the original hole for the button shut, so that it would not look too unseemly, before taking the knife from Margo and carefully cutting the fabric to make a new hole. She spent the next few minutes carefully sewing the fresh hole so that it would be sturdy, then finally buttoned him back up. She ran her fingers around his neck again to check the gap.

“Good?” She asked.

“Very, thank you, Marissa.” He told her.

In the drawing room a door opened, followed by voices, prompting Marissa to remove her hand and step around him to check the doorway.

“Waylen, come.” She beckoned him, and she stepped outside to stand next to the door as he followed her out.

Shane was standing near the front door with two dragons, one being Ser Lyrren and the other was dressed as a servant but was not a face he recognized. Ser Lyrren watched him enter, then smiled. Shane then took a step towards Waylen.

“Your Highness, Ser Lyrren comes with food and drink. The tables are already being prepared for us.” The older man said.

“By the time you and your service arrive everything will be ready. You may leave now if it would please you, Your Highness.” The dragon told him.

Waylen smiled and agreed that leaving now would be best. Ser Lyrren volunteered himself to personally lead Waylen to the dining room while the other dragon was left to guide everyone else. Marissa and Shane stayed behind to make sure everyone was ready before they departed.

“Will Her Majesty be in attendance, if this lunch was her doing?” He asked as the two of them walked, Sol Norra and another of her guard trailing behind them.

“No, Your Highness, and she offers an apology for being unable to. She simply has too much to attend to for today.” He replied, but it didn’t come to him as a surprise. It seemed to him that apart from the small number of servants and guards there would be no one of note in attendance.

The dining room he was taken to had obviously not been intended to be used as such. It was larger than Her Majesty’s dining room, but the stone walls each had rows of shelves carved into them, which were completely empty save for the dozens of lit candles being used to add extra light to a room lit only by lanterns. There were four tables set up, and no two were alike. There were long rectangular patches on the floor where the stone was a darker color than the rest, like something had once been sitting there before being recently moved.

This had likely been a storeroom the day before, and Her Majesty had ordered it to be cleared out and converted into a temporary dining room for their guests. It would likely remain this way until after everyone left back to Radiah, if he’d had to guess.

“Today’s lunch was a very spontaneous decision, Your Highness, so please forgive the furnishings.” Ser Lyrren told him, the dragon approaching the first and largest of the four tables, all of which were laden with covered platters and troughs of an unknown food. He noticed that once again the table settings were neatly organized into their incorrect places. He smiled, since between the mismatched tables and the silverware he did not know which would upset Shane more.

Ser Lyrren pulled out a chair for him, indicating that he was expected to sit there. This table had room for seven people, and the other tables could seat as many as five a piece. With only twenty people to feed there would be room for everyone with chairs to spare.

A commotion from outside told him that everyone else was coming. Waylen told the dragon that he would remain standing until everyone else arrived, and then Shane stepped through the doorway, followed by Marissa. Everyone else entered after them with Captain Landon following Shane's directions, quickly directing everyone to get to a table, starting with the smaller tables so the largest of them would be left open for Waylen.

There had been no discussion beforehand as to who should sit where, since no one knew the table arrangement would be, so Waylen took control and began to give directions on who he thought should sit where. He directed those few of his service that were in leadership to his own table, and then he had Codi sit next to the Captain. Waylen smiled, seeing that Shane looked the most uncomfortable as this was breaking all manner of Radian tradition.

Waylen finally accepted his own seat, which was next to Marissa. Now that everyone was seated only two empty chairs remained, which were at his table.

"The food is ready for you all." Ser Lyrren gestured to the four tables, then turned to snap his fingers quickly towards the door.

A small parade of dragons entered with pitchers and jugs to serve drinks, while another pair moved from table to table to remove the lids off every dish. As the first group moved about the room to pour either unni nef or water, most chose water, as they did not know what the unni nef was. Waylen asked for the unni, as he'd not yet had the chance to try it much like with the picti. His decision to choose that led to the Captain and Shane choosing it as well, but Marissa and Codi just asked for water.

Waylen began to serve himself, telling everyone else to do the same, Shane now looking pale at such a break from what was normal.

"It is customary to serve oneself at their dinner tables, from what I gather." Waylen said quietly to everyone at his table. The other tables followed in his footsteps and began to serve themselves, as well.

The only dragon that might have understood him was Ser Lyrren, but he was across the room checking every table and asking everyone if they needed anything. By the looks on everyone's faces they were all slightly bewildered by being treated like fine guests.

What was being served today was a kind of soup made with a thin brown broth and a collection of vegetables, all finely chopped. It had stringy bits of white meat, and judging by the flavor of it, Waylen thought it might have been chicken. It had a salty flavor, but there was a current of very faint sweetness that might have been coming from one of the vegetables.

And there were no ton, the little bread rolls, which was tragic as he'd really enjoyed those. Instead, they'd brought out long loaves of bread that had been sliced in the kitchen and brought to the table on long slabs of wood. The bread was not fluffy or tender but toasted until crunchy. Ser Lyrren described it as a bread intended for dipping within the soup, and so that's what everyone did.

There was no meelish, which was also tragic since Waylen had grown fond of it. He only had the one chance to eat it so far, but the memory of it was lingering, and he'd have liked to try some more. The gravy it was served with was very good, especially with the ton.

"I like the soup. It's like something I'd have made for you if you were sick. I would like to know what sort of peas they used." Marissa said, examining two small green peas in her spoon.

She'd grown very comfortable at the table, but she was always like that. She had always been a very unflappable woman, and Waylen owed his own nature partly to her tutelage, not that she was aware of it. He was just good at watching and learning. Marissa had unknowingly helped him cope with his mother as he grew older, and as she had grown more demanding.

But now it seemed that most of his group had grown comfortable, too. Everyone was now easing into simply enjoying being served instead of doing the serving. The lunch was really very simple, but it was plentiful and delicious. Waylen was beginning to think that the word *feast* simply meant two very different things between Radiah and Atina Nah. Maybe for the dragons a feast is simply a larger portion of only one or two foods?

"I'm sure one of the dragons can provide you with an answer if you asked. Are you intending to steal the recipe?" Shane asked her, finally accepting that today's lunch was just going to be different from what he thought it ought to be.

"I can only ask the one, and he does not have the look of a cook about him." She replied, referring to Ser Lyrren.

The dragon had left some time ago, their lunch dragging on past the half hour mark. More loaves of bread had been served to them, and more drink. The unni nef was no different to him than mead. It was sweet like honey, but you could taste the alcohol well enough to know better than to have too much of it. Waylen had to ask for water after he'd drank half of his second glass of unni. He asked Shane and Landon to make sure none of the men drank too much of it, and the message was quickly passed around the tables.

Ser Lyrren eventually returned with another cart, pushed by a shorter male dragon. The small team of dragons that had been serving them descended upon the cart and began to take out small plates and spoons. In the middle of the cart was a large bowl, and one of the dragons took on the task of scooping a thick pudding-like substance from the bowl and carefully depositing it onto each plate.

As soon as a plate had a sizeable scoop of jiggly white pudding, another dragon took it and sprinkled a green and white blend of shavings. A spoon was then set on the plate, and the first completed ensemble was brought to Waylen.

The dragon sat it down next to him, and he pushed aside his empty soup bowl to take the little plate. He held it up to his nose and gave it a sniff. Mint and sugar. The rest of the room was watching him.

“It’s a dessert.” He said aloud for everyone’s benefit, before putting the plate down and taking up the spoon.

As the dragons finished more plates of pudding, they served the rest of the room one by one while Waylen dared to take his first bite. It was sweet! Sweet, and with a cool taste of mint. It almost made his teeth hurt from its richness, but the pudding was very good! He could imagine something like this being served on a warm summer day back in Radiah, though here in Anya Sur he couldn’t begin to guess what the dragons would consider a good time for pudding.

Suddenly, every dragon in the room stopped what they were doing and stood up straight, each turning to look towards the doorway. Waylen turned his head to see the cause. What he found was Her Royal Highness Princess Vienna standing next to the serving cart. She was looking down at the large bowl of pudding while Ser Lyrren scooped out a serving of the dessert before putting it onto a fresh plate, quickly garnishing with the small flakes just as the others had all been.

When he was finished, she took the plate from him, complete with spoon, and then stepped over to the table next to Waylen.

“Your Highness.” Waylen spoke up and began to slide his chair back to stand. His gesture provoked the rest of the room to do the same.

“Sit! Sit and eat!” She shouted, but not with anger. With a wave of her free hand, she gestured for everyone to return to their seats.

Immediately, half the room dropped back into their chairs, and the other half waited for Waylen to do so himself. The Princess grabbed the back of the empty chair next to him and pulled it out, and then took a seat.

“I was not told that you would be served picti mal. I now have no choice but to join you.” She told him with a smile and then took one spoonful of the pudding.

“You are welcome to, of course.” He replied, drawing his fist up to offer a gentle salute to her. The rest of the table did the same.

“You don’t need to salute at the table, Your Highness. If I expected such formality I would have arrived before everyone had taken their seats.” She replied, almost dismissively. “How was the lunch? It is not the most decadent thing the big kitchen could have prepared, but this is a very popular dish in Anya Sur.”

“It was quite lovely, Your Highness. There are similar dishes to it in Radiah, so I am certain everyone enjoyed it.” He told her.

With the Princess now at their table the rest of the room’s noise had become quite muted. The servants had returned to their duties, making sure everyone was well taken care of, but everyone that was eating was doing so very quietly.

“The news that we were having this meal today came as a surprise. I’m sad to see Her Majesty was unable to attend” He told her.

“I, too, was surprised when I first heard of it this morning. Mother can be quite unpredictable when it comes to meals.” She smiled at him.

She chose not to comment on Her Majesty’s absence, he noticed.

“I will be sure to thank her then when next I see her.” He added, probing gently.

She then put another spoonful into her mouth, then made a humming noise, like she’d found something amusing, and he wasn’t so sure that it was the pudding.

“I do not know when you will see her next. She keeps herself very busy.” She replied after swallowing.

“The weight of a crown is very heavy. My father is busy as well no matter the time of year, and my elder brothers have been sharing in that burden for the last few years now to help him.” He told her, then ventured a bit further. “I’m sure that is true for you as well.”

“Yes, I have taken some duties away from my mother, but I am still able to find time to have my favorite dessert.” She smiled, taking another bite while also revealing a little bit of herself.

He hoped Marissa was paying close attention should they manage to host their own lunch or dinner in the near future. There was at least one member of the royal family that was going to be easier to keep happy.

“It is very good.” He agreed.

“Someone will have to explain to Marissa how it is made, if given the chance.” He volunteered, forcing the woman next to him make that mental notation.

“Who is that?” Her Highness then asked.

Waylen then drew the dragon’s attention to poor Marissa who was not prepared for it. The older woman then nodded politely to the dragon. She was seldom in a position at Castle Illian to directly interact with much of the Radian nobility. For most of his life Marissa had largely been one of his primary caretakers, tending to all of his needs when his mother didn’t have him by the ear. He could not recall her having much to do with formal matters, as that was left to others people Shane to manage.

“Marissa manages some of the servants that came with me from Radiah, and she rules over our kitchen.” He explained, Marissa bowing her head and quietly introducing herself with a scant few words.

“You may know Shane, he also manages some of my servants, but also is the only one here gifted enough to speak Atinan. He assists me whenever needed for matters that might relate to Anya Sur.” He directed the dragon’s attention to the older man across from them.

“Greetings to you, Your Highness.” Shane spoke up and bowed his head similar to how Marissa had done.

Princess Vienna was polite in her reply, a nod of the head and a smile.

“And I should introduce Captain Landon. He commands all the guards that came with me.” He told then lastly, deciding then that he wouldn’t mortify anyone else today, especially young Codi who had only a single empty seat between him and the heir to the Atinan throne.

“Your Highness.” Landon replied, snapping a quick salute to the dragon.

She nodded in reply, then turned to look at Waylen.

“Yesterday, on your tour, you asked if you could visit our garrison. When I finish my dessert, I will be going there myself. You are welcome to join me if you would like.” She replied, lifting another spoonful of pudding.

“Of course, I’d be delighted to. I would also like to bring Captain Landon with me if you didn’t mind?” He asked, the man sitting a few seats from him sitting up straighter.

The Princess looked to the older man, then back to him.

“You may.” She replied, then took up another spoonful of pudding. Waylen really hoped Marissa figured out how to make that dessert.

I've had to console Yvvie a lot more these days. When she's not helping me to argue causes with the merchants or the tribal elders, she's out there on the sand with her warriors. She's spent the last few months trying to turn them into a proper army, mimicking all that she'd seen when she marched to Radiah to wage war against Darfell. She feels like she's a failure, though she's much too proud to admit it to anyone but me. She's afraid her army will not master the craft of war like Edgard's has.

I had thought that once we put the past behind us, rebuilding Anya Sur would heal her wounds, but she's been very different since she returned from Radiah. Edgard's war against Darfell was a success, and actually ended much more swiftly than I had ever imagined. Our own war to unite Atina Nah had taken years. When she returned after only six months, I was happy, but the look on her face was one I'd seen too many times.

I've had to tell her she needs to ease herself back, to slow down, because the time for war has passed us by. She's gathered so many Atinans that are willing to fight for her, swelling her army to be as mighty as the one in Radiah. We have so much growing support that we do not lack for fighters, but Yvvie is afraid of shadows. She cannot hide that from me, especially with how often I've listened to her vent her frustrations. There is a tone of voice she uses when she's afraid, and she may be able to hide it from others, but I've held her too often and too closely to mistake the voice she uses for anything less than fear.

Radiah and Darfell are very cold places, much colder than our own coldest nights, and when she marched there to fight it was during their winter season. The cold stings and burns us, so their snow is like hot glass fresh from a smith's kiln, and Yvvie's army was not well prepared for it. She described to me their first battle, and even though I am not one to understand war the same way she does, I do understand what it means to narrowly escape from danger.

She described to me what it was like to see Darfell's army march towards her in the snow, in neat orderly lines with their weapons drawn, while she and her soldiers stood in freezing agony. Both Darfell and Radiah knew how to fight in the snow, thick like sand that reached past their ankles, bundled properly in armor that both protected and kept them warm. Yvvie was shaken, having thought so little of Edgard's army because of how pitiful they were in the fight to conquer Anya Sur.

But in the snow the Radians were skillful and hardy. Yvvie tells me that every Radian soldier that did not return home, did so for having died in battle, whereas every Atinan that did not return had died from the cold. Not proudly in battle, dying to foe worthy of it. They'd all frozen to death. She's been making her army train in loose sand now, both during the day and in the dead of night when the air is at its coldest, to prepare them should they ever have to march with snow around their ankles and falling painfully across their snouts.

She tells me that if they had not outnumbered Darfell so greatly, that they would have lost. For someone who has already lost so much, I cannot blame her for being afraid of losing more. I can only hope that burning Darfell's castle to the ground is enough to frighten them from ever inviting Edgard's wrath again.

Waylen now found himself walking next to Her Highness, Princess Vienna Fah Ro'Un, as she guided him down the hallway and towards the doors that would take them out into the courtyard he'd seen the day before. Ser Lyrren had been left behind at the makeshift dining room to continue managing what

was left of their luncheon, and Waylen was finding that he missed the slender dragon's presence. For all of Her Highness' good demeanor, she had him eclipsed in status.

Ser Lyrren was polite, his only faults being his haughtiness and willingness to talk a lot more than necessary, but he was also subordinate. He didn't realize how comforting it had been to be led around the Keep by someone who was essentially tied to his service. Princess Vienna, on the other hand, could tell him what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and she would not need to explain to him the why. He had no reason to assume she would be difficult with him, but his experiences with Her Majesty had planted a quiet fear that he simply could not shake away.

Her Highness was also probably still upset with him that he did not know that she was married. If the women of Atina Nah were anything like the ones in Radiah, then they would not forget nor forgive such a slight with ease. *Even* if it was not his fault.

"I doubt you will find anything amiss, Your Highness." She told him then.

Up to this point in their walk, she'd been explaining to him that after he'd asked Ser Lyrren if a tour of the garrison could be arranged, that his request had quickly found its way to her ear. His request had apparently sprouted legs and began leaping from Ser Lyrren to Commander Tann, and then to her.

"I did not expect to. My curiosity just got the better of me. I'd seen it from above and only wanted to come down to see it up close." He replied, pointing his finger up and in the direction of where he thought Ser Lyrren had taken him before. With all the Keep's many indistinguishable passages, he was quite lost at the moment.

"He took you up onto the wall?" She asked him with a curious tilt of her head.

"Yes, he took me up so that he could show me a view of the Keep's courtyards. It was a very nice view." He told her, always remembering to be complimentary. If they didn't think he was enjoying his visit, then they might not be so eager to show him more.

And then she laughed, a sound that was warm and feminine.

"He is more afraid of Tann than he is of heights." She replied, speaking more to herself than she was to him.

He smiled in reply but was not sure where the humor was coming from. He did recall that Ser Lyrren had looked very uncomfortable when asked if he could see the garrison, but he hadn't thought too much of it at the time.

"He did seem to be uncomfortable near the edge and encouraged me not to stand too close to it." He told her, which left her smiling more.

"There are very few high places in Atina Nah and most of us like to keep our feet on the ground. However, Lyrren is a bit more frail than most when it comes going up on the walls." She took her own turn to point a finger upward.

“There is Anya Sur. The mountain, that is. And then there are many others like it throughout the desert that I could see. All look to be quite high up.” He added, knowing that of course she’d know of them much better than he would.

“This is true, but there is nothing on top of them worth climbing up to see. You could get a nice view of Atina Nah from on top of Anya Sur, but then you have to climb down. I’m told that all that lives atop Anya Sur or its many sisters are but bird nests.” She replied.

They finally arrived at the doors that lead outside. There was a pair of soldiers posted to either side of the doorway, and as they approached the pair opened the doors, allowing Her Highness, himself, and the rest of their small group to pass. Behind Waylen was Captain Landon, who had been silent for most of the walk from the dining room to here. Along with him were two other dragons. He did not know their names, but he knew they were not a part of the group that Sol Norra commanded. These two were some of Princess Vienna’s personal guards, or so he assumed.

“But here in the garrison there is something worth seeing.” She continued, gesturing with both hands to the courtyard in front of them.

The heat was already roasting him, the sun beating down on them from its noontime vantage.

There were dozens of dragons in the yard training and doing so as if the heat did them no harm. He had to lift his hand over his eyes to shield them from the sunlight. He panned his eyes around, seeing that the dragons were all split off into pairs, and it looked as though they were sparring against each other with different kinds of weapons. Some used spears, others had swords, some were with and others without shields.

His interest was not only piqued, but his relief was palpable. Finally, he could relax knowing he was accomplishing something for his father after days of delayed effort.

“What’s done is different each day, so I asked Commander Tann to organize something that might interest you. Everyone gathered in the courtyard today is practicing what they should already know by engaging in single combat. I’m sure your own army does similar to keep them from forgetting.” She explained, stepped ahead of him to admire her own soldiers on display.

Waylen turned towards Landon and looked to the older man, gesturing with a hand for the older man to speak up. He nodded in reply and cleared his throat.

“Yes, Your Highness. We regularly gather our troops in a similar manner to what your soldiers are doing now. We have them perform many different kinds of drills to keep their skills sharp.” Landon replied on Waylen’s behalf.

Waylen was not a soldier, so he was not the best person to speak to when it came to how his kingdom prepared for war. The Princess listened, and then seemed to quietly repeat the word drill to herself, feeling out the word silently.

“A drill is like they are doing?” She then pointed to the dragons who were fighting in pairs.

“Not quite, Your Highness. A drill is more... It is more... It is what we call it when we have many soldiers in a group practice a plan of battle. If you understand?” The Captain replied, struggling to find the way to explain a word that came so naturally to him that explaining it to another was a challenge. Normally, he was a man that was always confident, but at the moment it seemed that even he was being knocked off balance by the state of affairs they all found themselves in.

She nodded, looking out at the soldiers gathered.

“We just call that practice.” She replied.

Before either Waylen or the Captain could comment she lifted her hand to her mouth, and with two fingers she blew a sharp whistle. At least Waylen was prepared for it, having watched her touch her fingers to her lips right before she blew. He’d already been embarrassed enough; he didn’t need to jump from his boots in front of several dozens of Her Majesty’s soldiers.

Her whistle was clearly a signal for everyone to stop, and every dragon in the courtyard broke away from their sparring partner and turned in the direction of the whistle.

They all stood with their back straight and gave them a salute. Waylen then watched as the Princess raised her right hand and made a gesture with three fingers over her head. This signal relaxed all the dragons who then returned to what they were doing before the whistle. Waylen was admittedly dimwitted when it came to how commanders and soldiers plied their trade, but to his eyes this seemed quite impressive. Just a whistle and a single gesture of the hand was sufficient to get such a large group to stop, observe, salute, and then return to their duties. He’d have to ask for Landon’s opinion on this later.

“Commander Tann should be coming now.” She said aloud, turning her head to look in the direction of one of the stone buildings across the yard.

“Ser Lyren told me he was one of Her Majesty’s Commanders?” Waylen asked.

“Yes, he is. He has served as Commander of the Keep for the last...” She started to say before stopping herself to draw in a breath like she was thinking deeply. “I don’t remember. It was before you would have been born, but not by a great amount.”

“That is still quite a long time to serve at one post.” He told her, Waylen glancing to Landon then. The other man seemed curious for the moment.

She turned her head back to look at Waylen.

“Commander Roc Er Fel’Noy has been the Commander Beyond the Wall since before I was born, Your Highness. That is quite a long time to serve at one post.” She told him with a smile.

Dare he say that her smile seemed warm? Actually pleasant! How much of her mother actually made it into the daughter, he had to wonder. It was hard for him to see any familial resemblances between dragons, though he admittedly lacked much experience in seeing dragons that he knew to be relatives. He was sure there had to be something, but he was too new to their people to know what those things might be for now. Whatever resemblance Princess Vienna had to her mother was invisible, and that contrast was

made all the more powerful by how differently the two acted. Her Highness was actually smiling, and she appeared to be a truly pleasant person.

“And how long would that be? Your age that is, if it is not rude to ask?” He asked, knowing he might be in trouble for asking her age, but she was the one to first bring it up.

“No, not rude. In a few months’ time I will celebrate my fifty second year of life.” She told him, and then her head suddenly tilted with curiosity as she watched Waylen’s own face twist into disbelief.

“Is something the matter, Your Highness?” She asked him.

He looked at the Captain, who was as shocked as he was, and he had nothing helpful to say in reply. So, Waylen was left confused. He knew both of Her Majesty’s daughters were older than him, but he’d assumed they were perhaps Nyle’s age, or maybe a little older? At least Vienna, surely since she was the eldest of the two siblings.

“Honestly, I do not see how you can be fifty-two, Your Highness. You do not look so old to me.” He confessed. Her confusion lit up with an amused smile before she started laughing.

“I am still young!” She told him, laughing still.

Waylen had only ever seen the Princess dress herself as a man would do. Her tunics and trousers, the armor of a soldier, had all betrayed the truth that she was still in fact a woman. Her voice and laughter were distinctly feminine, warm and musical in their own way. It was such a stark contrast, and he had to wonder if all the other woman he’d seen in armor here were the same as Princess Vienna, femininity hidden behind the clothing of war.

“It is hard for me to tell, I’m sorry. I knew you were older than me, and my siblings, but no one told me how many years you had.” He apologized to her and offered a flimsy explanation as to why he was so confused.

He felt so silly now, since he knew Her Majesty was ancient, so of course why wouldn’t her two children be old as well? In fact, he should have been more surprised that she was so *young* as she’d said, since Her Majesty was alive during King Edgard’s reign over a hundred years prior.

She looked away from him and back out at the crowd of sparring dragons. He watched as she raised her hand and drifted her finger in an arc to cover the whole lot of them.

“Did no one tell you we grow taller with age?” She asked him, her voice full of amusement.

He didn’t know if she was being serious or not.

“Everyone grows taller with age.” He replied.

“Yes, but we don’t stop growing until we become an eldest. Look out at them. If you see one of them is taller than another, then the taller one is older.” She explained.

He glanced back at the Captain who was not much help, as all he did was shrug, revealing that this was news to him as well.

“Then that must mean Eldest Thalla is quite old.” He replied, feeling like he was now understanding what her title of Eldest really meant. It really did just mean that she was old, and very old at that if she was even taller than Her Majesty.

“She is over two hundred, has been for the last several years. There are now... Thirty-one eldest in the city, I think. She is not the oldest of them, but she is still much older than most Atinans living in Anya Sur.” She told him.

Over two hundred... That was so many generations of his family, she was even older than Her Majesty! The truth that dragons lived long lives was not news to him, but he'd only ever heard it spoken in passing. The only dragon whose age was ever made clear to him was the Queen's, and only due to the history that Atina Nah shared with Radiah. One could not learn about Atina Nah without also learning that its reigning monarch was older than old!

Her Majesty was almost legendary, something unreal until you truly grasped that she was in fact a creature alive in the world, physical and breathing. Now Waylen was in Anya Sur discovering that there were many *many* such legendary figures that were so very old.

“There he is.” She then said with a smile after turning her head back towards the stone buildings.

Waylen had wanted to ask how old exactly Her Majesty was, but the attention was being drawn to a dragon that was now swiftly approaching them. By the time he reached them Waylen could see he was wearing a brown tunic, similar to what many of the other dragons in the yard were wearing, with the addition of light armor. His face was locked into a scowl, framed by skin an even darker shade of brown like the bark of a tree. This one had yellow eyes, too. He'd only counted a few dragons during his stay that had colorful eyes, since all the rest seemed to only have shades of grey.

The dragon clapped his fist over his chest in salute, directing his attention squarely at Princess Vienna without sparing any attention for him. He spoke two words, but both were in Atinan.

“*Your Highness.*” The Princess then said, and Waylen first thought that she was asking for his attention, but her eyes were locked onto the other dragon's.

And it actually looked like the other dragon was sneering.

“Your Highness.” The dragon said, now speaking Radian with a thick accent.

Princess Vienna then nodded to him before pivoting gently on her heel to gesture to Waylen with her hand.

“Prince Waylen Sundile wanted to see our garrison. I have decided to personally show it to him as I know you are very busy.” She told the Commander.

“Yes. Very busy, Your Highness. I have much doing in little time.” The dragon then replied with very broken Radian, and it was honestly surprising to hear a dragon speak it so poorly. Up until now every dragon he’d heard speak either only spoken Atinan or they had a firm grasp of Radian.

“*Yes, I am very busy, Your Highness. I have a lot to do and very little time to do it.*” The Princess replied, turning her attention back to the Commander as she spoke, enunciating her every word very carefully.

The other dragon seemed to sneer again, until Her Highness snapped something at him in Atinan. It was only a few sharp words, that aggressive sounding language hitting the air like violence. No matter how much he heard it, it never seemed to soften unless he’d catch a dragon speaking it in a whisper.

Commander Tann then repeated himself, but in proper Radian, exactly as Her Highness as done. His accent was thick, and his speech wasn’t any easier to understand, but at least it was correct. When he was finished, he looked very aggravated. Waylen glanced at Landon, who was silently watching the two dragons interact. Was it normal for the Princess to embarrass one of her Commanders like this? The Commander also seemed to have an ill temperament about him even before Her Highness began to speak to him.

“You may return to what you were doing for now, Commander Tann.” She told him, then lifted her hand, three fingers up just like before, to dismiss him. Commander Tann then looked angry but said nothing in reply, before nodding curtly to her and spinning on his heel to storm off back where he’d come from.

She even had the gall to flick her fingers, like she was shooing away a pest. Waylen glanced at the Captain who had noticed it, too. They shared a silent moment of shock before the Princess interrupted them.

“Commander Tann has much to learn. I apologize for his poor grasp of Radian. Before he was the Commander of the Keep, he served under Commander Nell Fah Sol’Nu and never needed to speak it. He’s been learning it the last couple of years, but he is a very difficult Atinan to teach.” She explained, then tucked both her hands behind her back and began to walk.

Waylen walked with her, falling in next to her on her left while the Captain followed in Waylen’s wake. She then stopped suddenly, forcing them both to stop as well.

“If you are the Captain of His Highness’ guard, then you will profit more from this tour, I believe.” She said, looking straight at the Captain, then pulled one hand from her back and invited him to stand at her right side.

It was only after she was flanked by both Waylen and Captain Landon that she resumed walking.

As she led through the courtyard she spoke patiently, using her hands whenever necessary, to point out what the many pairs of dragons were doing to hone their skills. Most of it was probably boring for the Captain, but Waylen found it interesting. Her Highness invited the Captain to speak if he had any questions, which he did from time to time. It was mostly idle commentary, but for someone uneducated on the subject, Waylen was entertained.

He was grateful that he'd brought the Captain along. He was asking all of the important questions, and the Princess was unafraid of giving him answers. All Waylen had to do was patiently listen and learn that in Atina Nah they used every manner of weapon that Radiah would use in battle, but with the addition of a few things he was unaware of. Though no one in the yard was using them at the moment, it seemed that the dragons are also fond of using slings, but he only had the vaguest ideas of what that would look like in practice. Waylen only knew it was something you could use to hurl an object, like a rock, harder and further than if you'd tried throwing it yourself.

Further, they also learned that the garrison was currently drawn down to a third of its normal complement of soldiers. Most dragons that served in Her Majesty's army did not serve all year round, like Ser Lyrren had told him before. Most had other jobs in the city by working as farmers, tradesmen, and the like. With the Festival of Founding growing so near, there was a lot of preparation required and most dragons that would have been in any of the city's garrisons or the Keep itself, were being sent elsewhere to help prepare the city.

What was left in the garrison were the dragons least skilled in other trades, or more politely put, they were the most professional soldiers in Her Majesty's army. At least, that's how Her Highness had described them.

She stopped them in front of a group of eight dragons who were sparring against each other in mismatched pairs. On one side of each pair, the dragon held a sword while their opposite wielded a spear. All the weapons he'd seen the dragons using were fake, made of solid wood or blunted metal. None of it looked like it was intended to kill, but he was sure it would hurt quite a lot if you were struck with one.

Her Highness addressed the group with a few words in her native tongue, which brought the eight all to a halt. They stood at attention and went to salute, but she stopped them with a wave of her hand before they could complete the gesture. It was another of her three-fingered signals, but this time she was holding her ring finger separate from her middle and index. Interesting.

They relaxed with their hands at their sides, their weapons lowered.

She began to speak more in Atinan, pointing at two dragons, each from a different pairing. Quickly, the other six backed away to leave the two selected dragons to come forward.

"We fight with weapons of course, but in times long past when my mother was still young, we did not have Radian steel, nor plentiful supply of good wood. My people had to fight with crude tools, and often our bare hands. My mother believes that we should be prepared to fight under any condition, and so we train not only to use weapons but also with our bodies." She was speaking to the Captain, but her eyes glanced at Waylen as if she was signaling that this was all for his benefit and not Landon's.

"A wise decision. We do similar, Your Highness." The Captain replied.

"My mother tells me she's seen Radians fight without a weapon, and that she feared the day your kingdom ran out of steel." She replied, adding, "If she were here to say it, it would have sounded rude, but trust that when she told that to me it was out of concern. Radians are not so strong as Atinans."

Waylen chose to stay silent, and it was somewhat refreshing to see someone else struggle for a reply, as the Captain seemed to be at a loss as to what he could say that would not cause offense.

“So long as the sun rises, I should think Radiah would have steel.” Landon surprised him by replying to the most controversial part of what she’d just told them, as Radian mines have never struggled to rip ore from the earth.

“I should hope so, Captain. Steel is the most valuable thing in Atina Nah.” She replied, her tone of voice suddenly much more serious.

The Princess then gestured with her hand, uttering a quick word in Atinan. The two dragons she’d picked out began to undoe the buttons of their tunics, and in moments both were bare chested and handing their discarded clothing to the dragons who had stepped aside. It was a surprise to him seeing that both dragons had two colors of skin, the flesh of their chests was a darker color than everywhere else. He’d never noticed it until now, but the off color ran all the way up to their necks.

When they were ready, they each began to stalk to the other in a circle.

Her Highness shouted something at them in Atinan, spooking the dragon that had his back turned to her, while the other stole advantage from it and leapt at him with a snarl.

Waylen was then treated to the spectacle of watching too fit and capable dragons brawl on the hard packed earth of the courtyard. There was nothing elegant about it, as it was nothing like swordplay with its practiced, sweeping motions. There was no grace. The pair were grabbing each other by the arms, by their necks, lifting one another off the ground and tossing them down violently. Each body blow was enough to make Waylen wince in sympathy.

The dragon that had been spooked before, then used his tail to slap his opponent across the side of his knees, buckling the other dragon’s leg. This turned into another aggressive brawl that ended with the former pinning the latter to the ground with two hands wrapped tightly around his opponent’s neck. The dragon that was pinned struggled for a moment, then went limp and started slapping the ground with his palm.

The one on top of him quickly let go of his opponent, then picked himself up off the ground before reaching to help his companion up onto his feet. The two had been fighting for more than a minute or two, and yet Waylen struggled to imagine himself lasting more than a few seconds if he ever found himself on the receiving end of a dragon’s anger.

“That was very impressive, Your Highness!” Waylen said, feeling very satisfied with the display. He’d always enjoyed watching the horseplay and practices in Radiah, or at least when he was allowed to. His mother did not want her son to be a soldier, and she worked very hard to keep him as far away from it as possible.

“These two are talented, but they need to be better about staying on their feet instead of rolling on the ground like a mouse.” She replied, then stepped forward and began to speak aggressively in her own tongue at the two dragons, pointing at them with her hands and making hand gestures that held unknown meanings.

He could not understand what she was saying, but by her posture and tone of voice she must have been lecturing them. Waylen passed a look at the Captain, who then quickly stepped over to him to lean close.

“They fight like savages, but I would not have survived either of them even in my prime.” He whispered, then stood himself back up straight.

Waylen nodded to him. A harsh way to describe their fighting, but it was very dirty. He’d never gotten into a fight before, only having held a toy sword in his childhood. He wasn’t going to judge them too critically, especially if the goal was to win. As ugly and dirty as it might have looked, it would be effective, especially if they found themselves fighting Darfell without a weapon in their hands.

The Princess stopped lecturing the pair, then stepped back over to Waylen and the Captain.

“I needed to instruct them on their mistakes.” She told them both, and Waylen’s eyes drifted to Her Highness’ neck.

The collar of her tunic rode high, but within the narrow gap between her collar and the underside of her snout he could see that there was indeed a different color from the rest of her face, except it was a lighter color instead of the expected darker one.

Behind her the two dragons were quickly joined by the other six. All of them were now undoing buttons to remove their tunics so that they could fight the same as the first two had, and Waylen had to quickly look away from them to keep his gaze solely on Her Highness. Three of the eight dragons had been women, and they were removing their tunics the same as the men were, leaving themselves bare-breasted.

“Have you been told yet that you will be a guest of honor at this year’s tournament?” She asked, looking at Waylen.

“No, I have not, Your Highness.” He replied, keeping his eyes firmly on her and not the dragons behind her.

Thankfully, she began to walk and gestured for him to follow. The sparring dragons were quickly put behind them, Waylen’s eyes catching an amused look on the Captain’s face as he’d seen it, too. He wasn’t sure how he felt about a dragon’s bust being his first.

“Every year for the last eighty or more, mother has arranged a competition of skill. Every Atinan that serves in a role of leadership is expected to hand pick soldiers under their command to participate. I believe you have similar traditions in Radiah, since that is where mother stole the idea.” She told them as they were led back the way they’d come.

“We do, Your Highness, though not at the same time each year. We host tournaments alongside celebrations for weddings and other important occasions.” The Captain replied. Waylen’s mind quickly turned to the riding competition that had been held the day after Nyle’s wedding. There weren’t many memories that Waylen’s could call his favorite, but that was one of them.

“Well, we hold this one the day before the Festival. Next week, the soldiers that were chosen will be gathering in this garrison to train until the day of the tournament. When the barracks were built, we did not expect to have to house so many soldiers in them. There will more than five hundred competing this year and we will have to house many of them outside the gate over there.” She told them, gesturing to the wooden gate across the courtyard.

“There is a large training yard on the other side of the wall that we use for pretend battles. Commander Tann has been responsible for keeping everything organized for the tournament, which is why he is very busy. He is still learning how to do the job well.” She continued.

“Is it always five hundred?” Waylen asked.

“No, when mother first held them, it was much less. A hundred or so. When I was as young as you, I remember there being maybe twice that, but then she just kept making it bigger. This is the tenth year we’ve gathered so many.” She told him.

That sounded like a lot of people competing. He didn’t think that any of the competitions or tournaments in Radiah had so many.

“Were any of ours that large, Captain?” He asked the other man.

“No, Your Highness, I don’t believe so. Smaller competitions are often only in the dozens, and the larger ones might only have a hundred or more.” He replied.

“If you only host them for celebrations then it would be sensible to keep them small. Mother would host the tournament another time of year if it were not for tradition. Everyone in the city expects the tournament to be the day before the Festival and so it’s too late now to change it.” She replied.

They were now getting close to the doors that led back into the Keep.

“If it’s an event the people enjoy, then it seems like a good idea to keep it that way.” Waylen volunteered.

“Our people do enjoy it. We have teams of builders working very hard to get everything ready for them. We let anyone who wants to watch sit on the sidelines, so we have to erect tents and awnings, places to sit, all while the merchants argue with each other over where they get to set up their stalls. It’s a great deal of work to be done in a short amount of time.” She told him.

Waylen agreed with her that it did sound like an awfully large amount of effort.

“Would it be possible for me to see where the tournament is going to be held before its time? I’d like to see it empty before I see it full of people. I assume I’ll be there to watch it on the day of?” He asked her, now very interested in the tournament.

If there were to be so many dragons competing, and if they were all handpicked, then it should be quite exciting! The little brawl he'd just watched was entertaining enough as it was, so to see so much more of it in a grand tourney was sure to become a wonderful memory!

"Yes, of course, you will be there. Mother and Iolla will be way up there with you." She lifted her hand then and pointed up at the top of the wall, right where Waylen had been standing with Ser Lyrren not so long ago.

"On the wall?" He asked.

"Yes, but right above the gate you walked in through when you first arrived at the Keep. There is enough room on top of the wall to sit several people and that's where mother likes to be. You will be able to look down and watch the competition." She explained.

"I'm glad I have been invited, Your Highness. It sounds very exciting." He told her.

She smiled.

"I won't be there to enjoy it with you, as I will be down here on the ground conducting it myself. Mother used to do that, but she passed the duty to me a decade ago." She replied.

"Would it be fair to say that it is an important role to fulfill? It sounds like it is." He asked her.

She nodded, agreeing that it was, but added that she missed being able to sit and watch like she used to. They returned to the doorway that led back inside the keep and the Princess walked them all inside, freeing them from the courtyard's oppressive heat.

"Thank you for allowing me to see the garrison, Your Highness." Waylen told the Princess. She smiled in reply, offering him a nod before turning her head to one of the two guards that had been trailing them the entire time. She spoke to him in Atinan briefly, and then Waylen watched as that one quickly departed.

"You are welcome. I'll walk you back to your rooms, and that is where I will be leaving you today. Like Commander Tann, I have much to do, as well." She told him.

"Of course." He replied.

They resumed their walk, the Princess guiding him back the way they came. He was trying to be careful to remember where they were going, as it bothered him that he'd gotten mixed up on the way to the garrison. Waylen liked knowing where he was in Castle Illian, and that habit was holding firm here in Anya Sur. He doubted he'd ever find himself back at the garrison, but... Ah! He remembered!

"Your Highness, I have a request, if it's not too much to ask?" He began, hoping that the Princess' good demeanor would lead to a solution to a problem!

Today we received letters from Radiah! Most of them were what I always expect to see; questions over goods or offers of trade, but one was special, sealed with wax in the way that Edgard likes to do with all his personal letters. He likes using a ring made of gold to press wax into the envelopes that contain his letters, and when we started sending letters back to him, I tried to do the same. I don't think their bees make the same wax as the ones we have, as I cannot seem to get it to melt the same way Edgard can get his to! My seals always turn out ugly compared to his, so I've since given up trying and have taken to simply pressing my thumb over the wax in frustration and being done with it. It isn't as pretty as Edgard's, but you can still tell it's my seal by the mark of my thumb.

But today's letter was very special! Had I known it beforehand I would have planned something nice with Yvvie to celebrate, but by the time I opened Edgard's letter it was far too late in the day. I had expected something formal, as Edgard was always that way in his letters, but instead I was surprised by something very personal from him! When I told Yvvie she was awkward about it, and I wanted to take her by the shoulders and give her a shake! For Edgard to send us a letter like this meant so much, it meant that we were close to them! It was such a relief to me that our two kingdoms had forged a bond like this.

Only those closest to you would send word that they had brought a whelp, or children I should probably be saying, into the world!

It was not Edgard's child, but that of his eldest son Theo. I've met him fewer times than I have his father, but he seems very much like Edgard. Radians all look strange to me, but I could see that the shape of his jaw, and the angle of his nose, were the same as his father's. He was very much a young man struck from the mold of his sire, but with his mother's wizened blue eyes. I have to keep reminding myself the color of their eyes do not tell me their age, but whenever I see one of their little children with bright eyes, I can't help but pause at the strangeness of seeing so much wisdom in someone so small.

Edgard's letter was only to tell us that Theo's wife had given birth to a daughter. I didn't know what the Radian custom was to do for such an occasion, so I made plans for us to have a fine dinner tomorrow, just me and Yvvie. We are very far away from our friends in Radiah, but we could still honor the new life that they'd brought into the world. Yvvie grumbled that she didn't think Edgard would care, but I told her I'd be feeding her good camel meelish and unni, and she gave in. I know how to bribe her.

I will try to write him a letter in return to congratulate Theo and his wife on their new little one, though I worry my grasp of their script may still be lacking. I want to ask if we should plan a visit to Radiah, as it is our custom to visit family after they've born new life. Surely, they do something similar in Radiah? If they do, I must think of something suitable as a gift! Maybe the Radian merchants would have some wisdom to share, so that will be in my list of things to do before the week is done.

Her eyes scanned down the list, reading each item off silently before darting her eyes to the right side of the page where the price had been written. Each item had a value, and that value was being paid for either by steel or by trade of another good. What she was reading was a trade ledger between Anya Sur and Ulta, a kingdom to the north at the far edge of Atina Nah. After a few moments she put the paper down to rest on the small end table next to her, then reached over to the bar of wax lying next to it. She pinched off a fingertip's worth of wax and began to roll it between her thumb and finger to warm it.

“They want even more glass now.” Her Majesty, Queen Yvvie Fah Ro'Sah, said out loud in her native tongue. She made no effort to hide her irritation.

Glass was not easy to make in Ulta, and the glassware made in Anya Sur was some of the finest in all of Atina Nah. It did not have much value to her people, but outside of Atina Nah everyone loved it, especially Radiah. It was a very valuable item for sale to the Kingdom, and if they gave more of it to Ulta then she would have to coax her smiths into producing even more glass to keep up with the demand.

“They discovered that we now have a taste for gold, sadly.” Thalla replied, speaking Atinan just the same.

She sneered in reply to that. Gold was a worthless metal, afforded its value only by the blind belief of those that ripped it from the earth. The Ultans to the north gave it value, and so did all the Kingdoms east of the desert, like Radiah, but it had no place here in Atina Nah. Steel was the only metal of any real worth.

“It was your idea to begin asking for it.” Yvvie reminded the eldest, since gold was never an item up for trade before. Only within the last few years did they begin to barter for small amounts of it, and only because Thalla had suggested stocking small amounts for future use should Anya Sur ever need to directly purchase goods from Radiah using a currency they preferred.

“We were discreet.” The eldest replied.

Yvvie replied to that with a grunt, and the wax was now beginning to melt from the heat of her hand. She pinched the wax gently between her fingers to flatten it, then reached down to the corner of the page and pressed it down tightly with her thumb. She rolled her thumb off the wax seal before picking up the ledger up again. She examined it one last time, ensuring that her fingerprint was legible in the wax, before handing it off to Thalla.

The two women were sitting in a room that Myunn had once used as his own. Of all the rooms in the Keep that were considered hers, this room was the only one that matched the décor of the Radian guest rooms. He had wanted it that way. When the guest rooms had been completed so many decades ago, her husband had all of the leftover pieces of wood and furniture that could not fit anywhere else, be brought into their own rooms so he could have himself a study that matched what the Radians had. This is where he liked to work, as he thought it was comfortable.

Thalla took the paper from her and set it in her lap to join the others. Every month this was the ritual that stole many evenings of her time. Signing away the fruit of Atina Nah so that she might in turn receive the fruits of another. With every year, with every decade, the amount of trade only grew. He would have loved to see such a tall stack of papers sitting in Thalla’s lap. He would have been proud.

She picked up the last one, which was much shorter. It was a list of... Dyes, apparently. She was being asked to trade one pound of filtered sand to Radiah in exchange for two ounces of dye. There were several dyes listed, dozens by the look of it. All total they would be sending more than several hundred pounds of sand for Radian glassmiths, all in exchange for what she felt was a very small amount of color. He would have done a better job of negotiating this, as he knew the value of dye better than she ever would.

Yvvie tore off another piece of wax and rolled it in her fingers to warm it. Soon as it was beginning to melt, she pinched it onto the corner of the page, leaving her wax seal in place before handing it off for Thalla to take. She took it, then began to neatly stack the papers until they were well organized.

Her ear twitched when she heard a door open in another room. It was the front door, her daughter's footsteps. She reached past where her stack of papers had once been sitting and picked up her half-emptied glass of wine. It was fully empty by the time her daughter entered the study. Vienna looked at her, then at the large stack of paper in Thalla's lap. She watched as her daughter offered to take the stack from the eldest, and then carried them over to the desk to sit them down.

"After their lunch yesterday, Waylen asked me if his guards could have permission to train in the garrison. He told me they were restless sitting in their room all day." Her daughter told her, speaking in Radian, now turning away from the desk to face her mother. As soon as their daughters were old enough to talk, their father taught them to speak in Radian whenever they were in private. It is the only way to learn such a language, to speak it long and often.

"I told them that they were welcome to, and I've given Tann the instruction that he is not to bother them." She continued.

Waylen had brought far too many guards with him, as if Rylan had forgotten how many soldiers she had under her command. It'd been a long time since he'd come to visit, so perhaps he did. Their memories were always poor, especially after they grew old enough to see their children become grown themselves. Four of them, she grunted at that thought, leaving her daughter to tilt her head at her curiously. Yvvie shook her head to dismiss it. Theo Sundile, Edgard's son, had had three children, though the third had died shortly after his birth. The rest of Edgard's line had only two at most. Rylan had been greedy to want four.

"Have someone be your eyes and ears when they go to the yard." Yvvie told her as a precaution, switching from Atinan to Radian to match her daughter, as the habit of speaking Radian in private was too strong to break. He'd taught them all well.

Yvvie did not think Tann would have the tact to control himself if activity in the yard broke tradition for longer than a single day. He was frustratingly strict with keeping things *the same*. Too stubborn, and very irritable. He was a good choice for Commander of the Keep, since nothing ever changes inside these walls and Yvvie generally agreed with his decisions for how best to organize her guard. Outside the Keep, leadership demanded that an Atinan be more flexible. Tann would snap like a twig if you asked him to bend.

Her daughter nodded, replying that she had already given instruction to Norra to have Waylen's men be escorted to and from their rooms. Escort that was told not to let them leave their sight. Yvvie nodded to that, agreeable to it.

"How far along are you with the tournament?" She then changed the topic back to her daughter's affairs.

"It's going well. The merchants and vendors have already supplied us with their materials, so I have begun construction on the tourney grounds at Soldier's Village. It will be completed within the

week, and then I will have the workers move to the Parade Grounds. Everything should be finished with time to spare.” Vienna replied.

She nodded, feeling good at least about that. The tournament was the only thing that ever seemed to finish on time. She’d have a parade afterwards that took her through most of the city, and no matter who she put in charge of its planning it was never on time. She’s been hosting this parade for longer than her daughters had been alive and yet still no one has found a way to make it work as cleanly as it was written on the page. Yvvie only continued it out of tradition, and for him. For the last month she had to spend day after day working with merchants to ensure everything was purchased and ready, and then instructing her staff to run about the city to organize it. She was glad it only happened once a year. Too much work.

“Though I’ve heard that the parade is not doing so well.” Her daughter had to say it, which left Yvvie curling her lip with irritation.

She glared at Vienna, who replied with one of her father’s defusing smiles.

“It’s not so bad mother. We’ve never failed to host a good parade.” She told her cheerfully.

“A good parade with unfinished decorations, or awnings that collapse onto the crowd below, or a fire dance that caught something alight that was never meant to be lit aflame.” She grumbled, now irritated that her glass was empty.

Thalla noticed this and stood up from her chair and walked to the desk where the bottle was sitting. They waited in silence until her glass was again full, and then for Thalla to retake her seat.

“We’ve not had anything go wrong with the fire dances since we outlawed them in certain parts of the city. I think everyone is happier with them being hosted at all of the cisterns.” Vienna replied, now that her mother had something to drink again.

She took a large swallow of the red liquid, letting it spill across her tongue. There were only three alcohols of any worth in Anya Sur, and it’d been years since she’d drank two of them. She couldn’t even stomach picti anymore with its poor illusion of cold, and then unni was now too rich for her sense of taste. She used to enjoy the sweetness of it, but that was when it was rare. Anya Sur now had dozens of beekeepers working tirelessly to produce as much honey as was possible, and unni had long since become a cheap luxury. Back when Yvvie enjoyed it you would be lucky to get a single sip, as you could only afford one jug that had to be shared with far too many people in your tribe.

“It was a wise change.” Thalla agreed, the Eldest now speaking in Radian out of her habit of using whatever language Yvvie was using at the time.

And of course it was wise, considering he was the one who thought of it. She took another drink.

“Did you only come to give me a report on Waylen, or did you have something else?” She then asked her daughter, since duty was now the only thing that led them to cross paths during the month of Festival.

The other woman sighed, stepping over to the desk to pick up the bottle where Thalla had left it, before walking it over to the table next to Yvvie where she sat it down.

“A duty, I suppose, if dinner is considered such. Lyrren told me earlier today that Waylen had invited you to have dinner with him, but that you had not yet given him a reply.” She told her, and Yvvie frowned.

Vienna stepped back towards where she’d been standing before, watching her mother curiously.

“Why that face?” She asked with a tilt of her head.

“No one will be attending, unless you or Iolla decide to take my place.” She replied.

Yvvie watched as her daughter’s demeanor immediately soured and she snorted in frustration at the argument she knew was about to start.

“Mother, why? You cannot tell him no!” Her daughter told her loudly.

Yvvie twisted her glass between her fingers, revealing her aggravation by rocking the glass back and forth in her hand. The red liquid gently swirled within it, lantern light reflecting off its bloody surface.

“I can tell him no.” Yvvie replied, completely opposed to having dinner with him on his terms.

And she’d have sent that message to him earlier had she not been so distracted with so many other things. If she wasn’t trying to stop herself from strangling a group of merchants or arguing with the Atinans in charge of the parade, then she was dealing with this stack of ledgers. Days like today, when she not only had to manage the daily affairs of her kingdom, but also its monthly finances, and the stress of trying to plan a successful Festival... These were not days she liked to see wasted by idle time at dinner tables.

“Are you being rude to him on purpose?” Vienna asked her bluntly.

“I am not being rude.” She scowled back at her daughter.

Even though she’d said it, a small part of why she didn’t want to have dinner with him was precisely because she’d been very rude to him. Yvvie was a great many things, but an idiot she was not. She had not handled her dinner with him very well, and her failure to send word to Rylan about her daughters’ marriages had come back to strike her hard across the snout.

Vienna openly laughed, making her scowl at her own daughter all the harder.

“You stared him down in the throne room like you were challenging him, mother.” She told her incredulously.

Yvvie set her glass down on the table where it’d be safe.

“I was not challenging him.” Yvvie replied, feeling blindsided by Vienna bringing up the throne room instead of that night’s dinner.

“Well, that’s what it looked like to everyone in the room, challenging a Prince of Radiah now that one has finally come to visit after almost thirty years!” Vienna angrily countered, and Yvvie bit her tongue to stop herself from correcting her daughter’s poor sense of time. It was closer to forty, since Rylan never brought his children with him when he visited, and his father before him had only brought Rylan twice, the last being shortly before his own coronation.

“I only saw him once before as a whelp, Vienna, hardly a year into life. I wanted to see who he had grown to be after so long.” She said in her defense, and she was being honest when she said it.

And the Prince could hardly be called a man, being so short and *whelpish*! Rylan was a fool to send someone so young, Yvvie would have never sent Vienna or Iolla when they were his age! He has three other children he could have sent instead, and he sends the weakest! He was so small she felt like she was looking down at her own daughters when they were still whelps themselves, and it was insulting that Rylan would do such a stupid thing!

Thalla made a quiet noise, getting their attention.

“I am sure that it was not so ugly a scene, Vienna. Your mother is wiser than that.” She tried to defend Yvvie, but what would she know, she wasn’t there! Yvvie was only growing more upset with herself.

But she was also too proud to admit it, especially to her daughter.

“Well, if you were there you would agree with me, and I am not the only one who can tell you how it looked. You can say in private you only wanted to see him, but the talk outside is that you were glaring at him like he’d done something worth taking him by the horn!” Vienna continued to grind into her. For all of the good she took from her father, she’d taken her temper from her mother.

“Thalla, I was thoughtless in the throne room.” She confessed, in her own sharp way. Not fully committing to the apology as the person deserving of it was absent. She would not be apologizing to her daughter for a slight committed against someone else.

“And again, you were thoughtless at dinner, and you were apparently thoughtless for the last several years since you didn’t tell them I had married Karo! Iolla is going to marry soon, too, are you going to send them a letter for that or am I going to have to take that responsibly from you as well?” Vienna asked her, staring her down.

She didn’t get the quick answer she wanted, as Yvvie remained calm and took up her glass again, and made Vienna wait until she’d finished taking another big swallow.

“Yvvie.” Thalla spoke up, and she rolled her eyes.

“You will chastise me, too?” She asked in reply.

“You have forged bad habits.” Was all that came from the Eldest among the three. As if Yvvie was not aware of her own faults! She was as rich with fault as Radiah was of water, and Atina Nah was of sand.

“I hope it’s only for refusing to send letters about marriages. When Karo puts a whelp in me I would like it if Radiah were to know it! I remember when they told us Rylan and Edlan brought Waylen into the world, and his other whelps with Willow! They tell us!” Her daughter angrily continued.

Of course she was upset. She was the one to lose her temper at Waylen only to find out that it was her own mother who had delivered the insult. Yvvie could not fault her daughter for her anger, which was why she was letting her shout it out. Bleed it from her like wine pouring from the bottle, and when she was as empty of anger as that bottle would soon be of wine then perhaps her temper would finally settle itself.

She was a lot like her mother, except Yvvie preferred drinking instead of bleeding.

“When you have your whelp with Karo, I swear that a letter will be sent, as they have sent them to us.” She told her daughter calmly.

“Good, I would hope so!” Her daughter replied.

“It would be wise to accept his invitation. A kind gesture to replace the ones that came before.” Thalla interrupted.

Yvvie sneered again, feeling her own stubbornness rise. She took a swallow until the glass was empty.

“I have much to do, and not enough time to do it. Go in my stead.” She told Vienna.

“You are not so busy that you cannot spare a single evening! Tell me what busy thing you must do, and I will do it for you.” Vienna challenged her, putting her on the spot enough to make her expression sour further. “Do not frown at me like that, mother, I am no longer the whelp it works on.”

“Vienna. Stop.” She told her daughter firmly.

Next to her, her second assailant began to strike.

“Yvvie, is one evening truly too much to spare?” Thalla asked her.

No, it wasn’t, but she had already made up her mind, she did not want to sit and eat at a Radian table for hours on end! She had too much to do and too little time for herself to sit and recover from all that the day asks of her, every day!

“They take all evening, the both of you! Radians think the sun stops setting when they sit at the table, that it will wait for them until they are done! I will not go to him and sit and listen to idle talk all evening until nightfall! If he is like his father that is exactly what he will have me do!” She barked back at both of them.

“Then tell him you are busy! Tell him you cannot spare more than an hour! I’m sure they can arrange a short dinner if you ask, this is your house, mother, you can tell them when you arrive and when you will leave!” Vienna barked back, speaking too much sense for Yvvie to simply cast it aside as idiocy.

She slouched into her chair and reached out to briskly snatch the bottle off the table, finding it far too empty for her liking. There was only enough to partially fill her glass with what was left. Yvvie smacked the bottle back down onto the table with a hollow thud, and then tossed the wine back down her throat too fast for her to even taste it. Both women waited for her reply as Yvvie sat there silent, glowering at her own daughter. She might yet be a good Queen in her time, but that was the most irritating thing about her. She was too good at confronting her mother, and life would be so much simpler if she was more like Iolla. She snorted.

“So, is that a yes?” Her daughter asked.

She lifted herself out of her chair and stepped around her daughter to find a fresh bottle of wine from the nearby shelf. The wall was full of bottles she’d yet to open, as it was quicker to get what she wanted if she kept them here instead of the cellar by the big kitchen.

“No.” She grunted, as she dug the tips of her nails into the top of the cork, then carefully popped it free. She’d done this so many times she no longer needed a screw.

“I do not understand you, mother! Just go!” She shouted, and Yvvie poured herself a new glass before plugging the bottle back tight with the cork and leaving it to rest on the table right next to the empty one.

“No! Now you can leave.” She told her daughter, turning to look then at Thalla. “You, too! Papers are there, all have my seal, done.”

Her daughter snorted with frustration, glaring at her. Thalla made to stand, but Vienna did not budge. Yvvie turned to her with a glare of her own, then took a drink. When her daughter refused to give in, she put the glass back down onto the table.

“Leave, Vienna.” She told her daughter, her anger rising further.

“You have no excuse! You’d sooner see him go home to his father to speak of how foul you are than you would make one effort to break bread with him!” Vienna shouted.

“Leave, Vienna!” She shouted back, lips curling.

Thalla stepped forward, drawing her hands together looking at the both of them.

“Please, there is no need for so much anger between you.” The Eldest urged them, but Yvvie shut her up with a glare.

“This will be settled as I see fit!” She shouted now at the eldest who quickly backed down.

“You can shout until you are hoarse, mother, but that won’t change how foul you’ve been from the moment of his arrival!” Vienna shouted, pulling Yvvie’s attention back to her.

“Shut up! Leave. Now!” She growled, making sure her teeth were showing.

Her daughter sneered in reply, showing teeth of her own.

“Shouting me silent will not work this time! There is only one person here that seems to care! Iolla won’t even speak an ill word of your behavior, so I have to shoulder it all myself!” She replied.

“Why do you care, Vienna! You have your own duties! Tend to them instead of worrying how I spend my evenings!” Yvvie shouted.

“Because father would be ashamed of what you’re doing!” Vienna shouted back; teeth bared.

Thalla took several steps back as the rage in Yvvie swelled until she burst.

“Get out! Both of you, get out!” She roared, stepping towards her daughter until they were face to face, so near they were almost touching, Vienna standing still and matching her mother’s challenge until the outer door slammed open in the distance.

Footsteps echoed until three of Yvvie’s guard were standing in the adjacent room, staring with confusion through the doorway as mother and daughter stood against one another while a silent Thalla crept towards the doorway. Yvvie did not break her gaze from her daughter’s, but she could still see that Thalla was attempting to keep her guards from interfering.

“Get. Out.” Yvvie repeated herself.

Vienna stood still for a moment, until Thalla’s voice from behind urged her to leave. With two elders asking her to back down, Vienna at last sneered and pivoted sharply on her foot, then stormed out of the room and past Yvvie’s bewildered guards. With her gone, all that was left was Thalla. Yvvie snapped her fingers at her, pointed to the stack of papers she was to take, and then told her to get out. The eldest picked up the stack and left, taking the guards with her. Yvvie did not move again until she heard the outer door close. It was only then that she finally broke, sagging backwards and into her chair, sagging into its seat.

She picked up her glass and drained it as quickly as she could swallow until wine was running down the sides of her mouth. When she placed the empty glass back down on the table her hand was shaking. Yvvie reached up to wipe her mouth clean with the back of her hand, then used her thumb to wipe away the tears that were beginning to shed. He *would* be ashamed of her.

~ And Finding Walls ~

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.

Name	Pronunciation	Who are they?
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>
Tann Er Al'Lon	<i>Tahn Err Al-Lan</i>	<i>One of Queen Yvvie's three Commanders. The Commander of the Keep.</i>

Location	Pronunciation	Description
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>

Location	Pronunciation	Description
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>
Ulta	<i>Ull-Tah</i>	<i>The mountainous Kingdom of Ulta, located to the north of Atina Nah, beyond the desert.</i>

Term	Pronunciation	Definition
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>