

The Silver Sea, Act 3.

~ Offering Kindness ~

~ 12 ~

It wasn't so long ago that it seemed we were celebrating new life. Edgard was not as old as Yvvie and I, but for a Radian, he may as well be an Eldest. Theo's daughter has learned how to walk, and she speaks in the babbling tongue of a child fresh to words. Such things would normally be a delightful thing to see.

His children buried him today in the manner that is right for the Radian soul. They entomb their dead within the earth, wrapped in coffins made of the same wood that built their homes. Comfort in life, as well as in death. Edgard's passing had not been kind to him. Yvvie did not show any weakness on her face, but I fear I may have let something of my own slip in the ceremony.

We knew he was dying, his letters were no longer written by his hand, but by his wife's. When Heron made it clear that he was not going to survive another year I urged Yvvie to leave with me to see him. It takes weeks to reach them. I knew that we should be there at least one last time before he leaves us, but I am not so sure if I am happy that I made the decision now. We made it in time to attend his funeral, he'd only passed a few days before our arrival.

It was snowing when we arrived, and Castle Illian was grieving. Heron was always a small woman, even for a Radian, but with her husband gone and with her age, she seemed so frail. His sons stood strong, and Yvvie would later tell me she was proud that Edgard's sire were durable enough to weather his passing.

This is when I learned that it is customary to view the dead one last time before they are buried. It was a time of morning, and reflection. The family and friends of the deceased gather together, and Edgard's all gathered for him. It was a somber affair.

I never want to see the face of the dead again. This is not how I wanted to remember Edgard. I do not know what affliction of age took him, but he did not pass with peace. It was etched onto his face, and I could just barely control myself until I was alone with Yvvie in our guest room.

"You've seen death before." She tried to console me in her own way.

I have seen it!

But Radians do not age like we do! His face was paler than I've ever seen it, skin wrinkled and crackled like dry earth. He was no longer himself; he did not look like the man I knew from before. When we die, we retain our dignity, and then what is left after our passing is burned at the pyre. There is much I have come to love and admire about Radiah, but I cannot stomach how they die. I wish to never see it again, but I have many more years of life in me, and Edgard's children have so very few. I will have to watch them all die.

"I don't know if that is the wisest thing to do." Shane worried.

“But he’s right!” Marissa spoke up in Waylen’s defense.

The drawing room was awash with the smell of food being cooked. In the kitchen Margo and Christa were preparing dinner. Marissa would have been there, too, but she was currently busy helping plan the next step of the night’s meal. Since Her Majesty had rejected his invitation to dinner, Princess Vienna and her husband had offered to join him in her stead.

It had occurred to Waylen that it would be a good idea for him to personally go to the Princess and escort her back to his rooms where they were going to have their dinner. The breakfast table in the drawing room was really only fit to seat two people if you were serving food, so it had been removed and replaced with a larger one that could comfortably seat more. That should be plenty of room since only three people would be sitting at it tonight.

“You’ve already offended one of them by accident, what if this is also offensive to them! They’ve only ever come to fetch you and never the other way!” Shane replied.

“We’ve already asked Ser Lyrren if I could do this, and he didn’t offer any complaint. He’s never failed to correct me if I’ve made a mistake, so I think we are fine.” Waylen replied in return.

Waylen had an ulterior motive for wanting to personally escort the Princess. He’d only mentioned it to Marissa, since Shane would panic if you knew about it, too. What he hoped to do was deliberately insult them, but through the execution of kindness. Since Her Majesty had rejected his invitation, and considering her attitude the few times he’d met with her, he thought that going that extra step of graciously escorting both her daughter and son-in-law to his rooms for dinner as if he were a servant would turn into a benefit. An act of graciousness that would shame them for their lack of it.

Also, Princess Vienna, for all that Waylen could tell, was *not* like her mother. She seemed to be polite, and very aware of her mother’s sour temperament. If Waylen personally brought her and her husband to dinner that might trigger feelings of guilt in her, and in turn that may provoke some change from Her Majesty.

Or it would do nothing and be taken simply as a kind gesture. He didn’t think for a moment that it would hurt him in kind, but if there was that narrow chance that Princess Vienna might feel enough guilt over her mother snubbing their Radian guest that she’d exert some influence over Her Majesty, then he’d take it.

“I am just anxious; I would not want us to overstep our bounds.” The older man then told him.

“Lots of things make you anxious.” Marissa told him.

The kitchen door then opened, and Christa’s head popped out, calling for Marissa to tell her that the pudding was done. Marissa quickly excused herself to run to the kitchen. They’d been given a recipe for the *picti mal* dessert they’d been served at the luncheon a days prior, and now the girls were trying to replicate it.

“It will be fine, Shane. Let me try my idea and we shall see if they appreciate it or not.” He told him.

The older man sighed in reply, then nodded in defeat.

Marissa then came back out of the kitchen with a spoon and offered it to Waylen. Sitting on it was a small white lump of what could have only been the pudding.

“Am I to try it?” He asked.

“Well, of course, yes!” She shook the spoon gently at him, and he took it and gave it a taste. He swirled it around in his mouth and allowed himself a good lengthy moment to savor it before handing the spoon back to her. She was standing impatiently waiting for his input.

“I think it tastes fine.” He told her.

“But does it taste like what they made for us?” She demanded to know. Christa was standing in the kitchen doorway like she was waiting for his answer, too.

But Waylen could only shrug.

“I don’t know. I’ve only tasted it the one time. I think it tastes the same, but you would have to ask a dragon if it’s correct.” He told her honestly.

She turned away from him and looked over at Christa, then told her to grab more spoons and put some pudding on all them. The young girl darted back into the kitchen and a few moments later came back with four more spoons spread across both hands.

“Shane, make yourself useful and help Christa feed the dragons outside, and ask them if they think it tastes like it should.” She told Shane, making Waylen smile.

The old man didn’t protest it, either. Shane stood up and told Christa to come along with him, and the two started off towards the door. Christa did not look happy, as she was still very uneasy being around dragons. Only after the two opened the door and made their exit did Marissa say anything else.

“I don’t think it matters if it tastes the same, because I’m going to have small cakes made for it. One layer of cake at the bottom, then a layer of pudding, and then another layer of cake. I’m going to coat it all in a thin layer of white icing, then drop a big dollop of pudding on top along with some that green mint garnish they use.” She explained, walking Waylen through the dessert just as much with her hands as with her words.

“How small are the cakes?” He asked.

She then made a circle with both her thumbs and index fingers that was a few inches across.

“Like the little ones I make for your birthday.” She replied.

He smiled, those were good cakes, though the one she just described was a bit different from the ones she would make for him.

“Chocolate?” He asked, since that’s the flavor he always wanted her to make.

She sighed.

“I don’t know if that would taste good. Chocolate and mint does not sound like it would pair well to me.” She told him.

“It’s chocolate, Marissa. I want you to try it. It might be very interesting, and we can tell them that you wanted to... Mix Atinan and Radian desserts. It would be a kind gesture.” He told her.

“Well, that’s what I was wanting to do in the first place! I just don’t know if chocolate is the best way to do it, but I’ll do it since you like it.” She relented and then looked over at the doorway leading out.

“How is the rest of dinner coming along?” He asked her.

“Oh, very good. I’ve never had to cook camel before, but the meat is behaving as meat should behave, so I think the shepherd’s pie will turn out fine. The peas and cornbread will be fine, as well. I wish you would let me cook more than just this. This will not be much of a feast, Waylen.” She replied, complaining to him again about the meager meal she and the girls were preparing.

But dragons did not seem to be the sort to cook nearly as much as food as one would suspect, being that they were so much larger than a Radian. So, Waylen had decided that a modest meal would be better than a grand feast of one. So long as the food was distinctly Radian, that would be enough to satisfy.

Though he wasn’t happy that the shepherd’s pie was going to have camel in it, he’d make himself eat it since that’s what the dragons apparently enjoy the most. The rest of the food being prepared would be no different from what he’d have had back home, and Marissa was continuously surprised at how much access she had to ingredients here. The fields in Anya Sur apparently grew a wide range of fruits and vegetables, the weather and good care permitting. He didn’t know how they managed to grow things in such heat and beneath so much harsh sunlight, but somehow the dragons had found a way.

The door opened, Shane and Christa now returning with the young girl shutting the door behind them.

“Four dragons tasted, and all of them said that the pudding tasted like picti mal.” Shane told Marissa.

“Good! Christa, go run and tell Margo that the pudding is good, then check on anything else she thinks needs checking.” She told the girl, who quickly raced off with the spoons to the kitchen.

The older man heaved a big sigh and came back over to the table.

“The ones outside do not speak any Radian. That Captain Norra was missing, gone somewhere else.” He said, taking a seat at the table.

“Well, you speak Atinan, Shane.” Marissa reminded him.

“Yes, but the more time I spend talking to them the more I fear I do not speak it as well as I should. I was only trying to ask them to try the dessert and to tell me if it tastes as it should.” He replied

“Were you unable to?” Waylen asked.

“No, I was able, but I know how much they can butcher our language, and I now feel that I am butchering theirs in kind. They seemed confused by what I was asking them, and I don’t think it was because I was breaking a custom or the like. I think they were actually struggling to understand what I was saying to them. I did finally get them to understand, and they all said that it tastes right to them.” Shane replied, sounded dejected.

“You don’t get many opportunities to speak it in Radiah.” Waylen said in his defense.

“This is true, but that is not an adequate excuse when dragons like that Ser Lyrren can speak as we do like he was born to it! We’ve fallen, Waylen! I do not think anyone in Illian understands how little we know about Anya Sur.” He continued, now sounding depressed.

Waylen felt uncomfortable, but he couldn’t disagree with the older man.

“You’re right, we have.” He said after a moment.

“Let me go check on the girls.” Marissa said, then left them alone.

“Father did send us here to learn. We will have a great deal to tell him when we return.” Waylen added.

Shane shook his head, then sat himself up straight and exhaled a deep sigh.

“He is going to learn things he did not want to learn. We’ve not even made it to the Festival and we’re already learning that we know nothing, Waylen! We do not know the nature of their armies, we don’t know their language, nor their customs, it’s like we’ve spent these decades of peace learning to forget! I trusted those that came before me to pass their knowledge down to me, and now I think that every generation just let go of more and more until all that’s left is scraps!” Shane was actually angry with frustration now.

“Shane let’s stay calm. We’re here now and we will figure out the gaps in what we know. Most of what we’re missing isn’t important, and the parts that are we can find solutions for.” Waylen replied, not knowing how he’d even begin to do any of that.

How were they going to find solutions for any of this?

“We could use this as a good chance to discover what we need to learn most. Like how to speak their language better.” He continued to say.

“We used to speak it! King Edgard, may he rest, learned it and taught it to all his children! Your great-grandfather King Theo spoke it! We’ve fallen.” Shane sounded depressed now, his anger having fizzled out as he sagged into his chair.

“Maybe so, but we haven’t lost the ability to stand. We are here to learn, and that’s what we shall do.” Waylen tried to muster the confidence and optimism he knew Shane normally had at the table.

Shane did relent, nodding with agreement, but his mood was soured.

“Go back outside and ask one of the guards to find Ser Lyrren. I would like to ask him myself when it would be appropriate to go and fetch Her Highness.” He told the older man, who nodded and picked himself up from his chair.

As he left the room Waylen heaved a deep sigh. This was a lot more weight than he felt ready to carry. Nyle or Parr would have handled this better. They had more experience dealing with difficult things like this, and Waylen could only hope his struggle would amount to something better than nothing. All that something could be at this point was a list of all that they had forgotten.

If his father wanted to tap the Treaty with his finger to summon the dragons to his side, he honestly didn't know how Her Majesty would react to that. They'd never refused the call before, but it had also been a long time since it had been done. Well before he'd been born, during his grandfather's youth, he was pretty certain.

With the friendship so cold between Radiah and Atina Nah, would Her Majesty be so easily convinced to send troops on short notice? What would it take to motivate her into a war that doesn't involve her or her people. He couldn't imagine his father being willing to do the same for her if she sent a request for aid. Or, at least, he would not be eager to do it. Perhaps he would, but on his terms. Why wouldn't Her Majesty do the same? Dictate the terms of what and how, deciding how she answers the Treaty's call.

Waylen had only read the Treaty of Five Kings a few times, and that was a few years ago. A tutor had instructed him to read a large number of important documents, treaties and trade agreements. All Waylen remembered was that the Treaty was written so that Atina Nah was in debt to Radiah, and the payment was for them to send military aid whenever they are asked. The only limit to it that he could recall was in the name itself, *Five Kings*. The Treaty was to last through the reign of five kings of Radiah, starting with his great-grandfather, Theo Sundile. Waylen's father, Rylan, would be the 3rd king.

He sighed again, then picked himself up from his chair to make his way to the kitchen. He asked Marissa how much time she needed before dinner would be ready for serving. She did more than answer him, telling Codi to run to the bedroom to pull out Waylen's *other* green tunic so he wouldn't be seen wearing the same outfit so soon after the other.

It did not take long for Shane to return, his call for Ser Lyrren being sent by one of the guards outside, and shortly after that the slender dragon appeared at his door. Between Marissa and Ser Lyrren, it was clear that there would be another hour to go before it would be time to go and fetch Her Highness. Until then he had only to change his clothes and be lost in his own thoughts.

It's been well past a year since Edgard died, but my thoughts keep drifting back towards death. I feel like a dark shroud has been cast around me, and the only time I can shake myself free of it is whenever I'm well occupied by something. When I'm working, I am fine, or when I distract myself with Yvvie, but any time I catch myself in a quiet moment I always drift back.

His littlest grandchild will grow up not remembering their grandfather. That is how it is with Atinans, too, when the timing of life and death brush too close to one another. One life ends too soon after another has only just begun. It's left me thinking too much. I don't want to think so much on sad things, the regrets. I did not speak privately with Edgard nearly enough to know what his regrets might have been, but he surely had many. We all do.

I am no longer as young as I once was, but Yvvie still has her youth about her. I know I won't die for a very long time from now, but she has so much more left in her than I do. I do not want to leave this world with any regrets, and I especially do not want her to have any of her own. She's so angry all the time, and all for good reason.

The other day I stole time from Thalla. She's as old as I am and has wisdom of her own that I've come to trust. After confiding in her, she tells me my sadness is natural, because I spent the last thirty or so years of my life walking a path marked by death. Same as Yvvie, same as so many other Atinans across all of Atina Nah. We've all been touched by death in all the worst ways. We've felt the pain of loss too many times for our spirits to shrug off like it was but a blanket unwanted.

Thalla told me to have a child with Yvvie. Create life and raise it, instead of dwelling on the dead we've left behind. I struggle to imagine Yvvie allowing me to sire a child with her. She loves me, but she clings to her fear so tightly, wrapping her anger around it like a shell. She's already lost family dear to her, her first husband and her only child. How can I ask her to bring another life into a world that she still fears is filled with death?

How can I ask myself to do the same when my own wife is dead?

Yvvie will no doubt tell me that she will not see another child of hers die. She's seen enough children die. I, too, have seen enough dead children, but we fought a war to change this land! We tore the barbarism out of Anya Sur, and in its place built this city where every tribe now gathers peacefully. I will still ask her if only because Atina Nah needs an heir to its throne. If she cannot find a reason of her own to bring life into the world, then perhaps a sense of duty will.

We were both selfish enough to take new partners after our firsts were taken from us by violence. Atina Nah does not take kindly to those that ask for too much of Her. I can only pray that She will be kind enough to allow us children without seeing to it that we are punished for our greed.

She shouldn't have been nervous and yet here she was pacing back and forth on her balcony just like her mother would have done. Her private rooms were high above the city below, her large balcony looking down at Anya Sur with a stunning view that very few got to see for themselves. It took the strength of three stone pillars to keep the ceiling from collapsing, the rock face having long since been knocked out in favor of the view.

Her father had once told her that these rooms were meant for guests, but after she'd been born, he had them turned into a set of rooms just for her. Since entering adulthood she'd made small changes to them herself. At the center of her balcony was now a shallow pool of sand carved into the stone floor, only a foot in depth so that she could train in the sand without ever needing to step a foot outside.

"Please sit." Her husband told her with a deep sigh. He was sitting at the nearby table watching her walk back and forth.

Vienna Fah Ro'Un stopped her pacing and looked at him, then replied with a sigh of her own before pivoting on her heel to march towards the table, her hands tightly clasped behind her back. When she reached the table, she dropped into an empty seat across from him.

"You are not going out into battle, Vienna. He is only a footstep into adulthood, so don't be so nervous." Her husband chided her with a smile.

"Be polite, Karo." She scolded him.

"I do not mean disrespect, but you are not acting like yourself. Recognize that he is very young and frail. It is he that should be anxious, not you. Does your behavior not sound odd?" He asked her with a tap of his fingernail on the table.

She made the face she always made when she wanted to sneer like her mother but stopped herself partway through the act. It took effort to not lapse into habits inherited from her mother. Karo chuckled, knowing deeply her inner thoughts and mannerisms now that they had been married for eight years. Eight was but a blink of an eye for Atinans in wedlock, but it was still time enough for the two of them to share their minds and bodies until they felt they were as one. That feeling would only grow stronger with time, and she could only wonder how much better he'd read her in the future, and she him.

Now that there were two of them, her rooms here were insufficient for their needs. Karo still maintained his home out in the Queen's Village where many of his personal belongings remained. He had to make regular trips back and forth from the Keep and to his residence. It was not a proper way for a married couple to live, and so arrangements were being made for the two of them to take up new residence in another part of the Keep, but that was at least a year or two away from being completed. It took time to carve changes into the rock of Anya Sur.

"I just want this to go well. Better than his first dinner with us." She confessed.

"Oh, I know it will! You will do fine, so save your worries for me! I can't speak his tongue!" He smiled broadly at her.

"Say his name for me." She told him, and he stopped smiling, then exhaled.

He said the Prince's name, doing his best to bring life to each word, shaping them into the right sounds. Radian was a soft language with many complexities. Her husband did his best, but the Atinan way of speaking was too strong. It was a challenge to suppress, and she could remember all the times her father would tell her that in order to speak Radian as well as Atinan she must learn to speak with two voices instead of one.

If you spoke Radian with the voice of an Atinan you would butcher their tongue, giving shape to words that were difficult to understand, and likewise the voice of a Radian was not well suited to Atinan. Learning their language was not just a matter of knowing their words but knowing how to speak as they spoke. Karo did not know how to speak as the Radians did, but in time he would. He was already listening to Radian almost daily, picking up words as he went about his daily duties.

“Waylen Sundile.” She replied, and slowly at that, enunciating each sound carefully for her husband.

He sighed and repeated his name, doing slightly better now that he’d just heard it correctly.

“Do not say the *duh* so harshly, soften it. Sundile.” She helped him, and he tried again, and she was happier with the result.

“I will struggle with the rest if I cannot say even his name.” He chuckled at himself.

“Most struggle. Mother and father both said as much to me when I was still a whelp.” She told him, and he nodded.

“He seems to not be struggling, at least not at the moment.” He told her with a smile. She tilted her head at him then, unsure of what he meant. Maybe after a few more years of marriage she’d stop tilting her head at him.

“He cannot speak Atinan.” She told him flatly, confused.

“When he arrived, he took Eldest Thalla by the hand! And yet now here he is coming to fetch us for dinner. I doubt Lyrren or the Eldest both would have taught him that.” He went and explained himself.

She leaned her back against the chair, then licked her teeth as she considered what he’d just told her. Vienna couldn’t say for certain.

“I don’t know. Father liked to tell stories about his trips to Radiah and they always waited to be fetched for anything the Radians had planned. Waylen may just be doing what is normal to *him*, not learning our ways like you think.” She replied.

“But that was in *Radiah*, their city of Illian. Waylen is *here*, and we have been fetching him every day for everything we have planned. That is their way, is it not? He is breaking that tradition to come to us. I shall choose to believe that he is a very clever whelp.” He smiled.

“Do not say that in front of my mother.” She replied with a halfhearted glare, and he just grinned at her.

“Which part? Calling him a whelp or complimenting his wit?” He smiled at her.

“Either! She’s already irritated, Karo. Don’t remind her how young he is and telling her you think he is clever will just make her think he’s going to start acting like Iolla when she was his age.” She fussed at her husband.

Her sister, despite her frailty, had always tried to do as she saw everyone else do, and with her clever mind she got herself into as much trouble as Vienna had. Except, when that trouble resulted in injury, Iolla could not heal as quickly nor as painlessly as everyone else could. Their mother was always afraid of her getting hurt, and that was one of the reasons she was so upset that Waylen had been the one chosen to be sent to Anya Sur.

“I would *never* antagonize your mother like that.” Her husband replied. He had not been in their lives when she and her sister were young, but she’d told him the stories.

“Be sure that you remember. I cannot handle so many arguments with her in such a short time.” She lamented. Karo had heard all about *that*, too.

He stood up, and her instinct was to join him, but he gestured with a hand for her to remain seated. He stepped around behind her chair and put his hands over her shoulders.

“Don’t think about that. Think about dinner, and how nervous you are to share a table with a little whelp from Radiah.” He told her, looking down at her from overhead.

“Karo, don’t call him little.” She scolded him again, her husband too quick and loose with his tongue whenever he was in private.

“Let me get to know him first.” He told her, then leaned down.

She sighed and lifted her snout for him, and their noses touched gently. She felt his hands slide to her neck, grasping her gently before giving her a kiss on her forehead. Vienna exhaled a sigh, and reached up to grab his hands, giving them a squeeze.

When a light knock came at her door, she felt her husband’s hands jump. He’d been much too distracted with consoling her.

“He arrives early.” He told her.

“As I have been warned. He is an impatient one.” She replied and then stood up from her chair.

She turned to look at her husband, wearing what her father would have called a mixture of Radian and Atinan attire. It was such a rare thing to see an Atinan wear, and yet Vienna thought it best that Karo wear something that would seem familiar to Waylen without bringing her husband too much discomfort.

Vienna quickly reached out to grab the front of his tunic, adjusting the fabric around his buttons so that it would not seem crooked. The red cloth from their wedding ceremony was wrapped around her husband’s shoulders, and she touched her hands to it, too, adjusting it carefully. She should be wearing her own cloth, but it was not something fit to be worn with the tunic of a soldier.

“Calm, Vienna.” He told her, taking her by the hands and pushing them back down to her sides before taking her then by the shoulders to direct her towards the doorway.

She sighed and allowed him to lead her to the door, and when she reached it, she opened it to find Waylen standing there wearing a tunic dyed to an emerald hue, his fist raised as if to knock. He quickly lowered it to his chest and saluted her in the manner that was customary for a Radian. Standing behind him were both Norra and Lyrren.

“Good evening, Prince Waylen Sundile.” She said to him in greeting, Vienna now speaking in Radian for the Prince’s benefit, drawing her own hand up in salute as was their own custom.

“And good evening to you as well, Princess Vienna Fah Ro’Un. I hope that you and your husband are ready to join me for dinner tonight?” He replied with a subtle bow.

She smiled, looking down on him and being unable to stifle the reaction her mother must have had every time she saw him. He was barely as tall as a whelp who’d just come of age. He was so short that even Vienna had to remind herself that he was not so young as he seemed. When she’d walked him to the garrison yard, she had to keep telling herself that she was speaking to an adult, reminding herself not to dumb down her speech like he was too young to know better. He was far too well spoken and mature to be a Radian whelp, not that she’d ever met one to know for certain.

Mother and father both had, she knew, but that was a long time ago and Vienna had never been given permission to leave Atina Nah to visit Radiah. There was a part of her that held great regret that she was never able to see Radiah the same way they had, to meet some of these far way people she’d heard so many stories about from her father.

“We are very! We both thank you for inviting us, and please, you may enter. I would like to introduce you to my husband.” She smiled at him, taking a step back and beckoning him to cross the threshold of her door.

Behind Waylen, Norra was of placid expression, but Lyrren had the look of surprise. Inviting someone into your home was reserved only for those that were of your own kin, or those who’d proven themselves as loyal friends who were so close to you that they may as well be kin themselves. Waylen was a stranger, and yet she knew from her parents that in Radiah they were much more relaxed with whom they invited into their homes, and both her parents were repeatedly welcomed into Castle Illian, the home of the Sundile Royal Family.

She could not be rude and deny Waylen entry, especially since she’d lost her temper at him at dinner because her mother had been fool enough to not send word to Radiah that she’d married. It was time to make right and introduce him to Karo.

She stepped further back and allowed the young Radian to enter. He seemed in good spirits, by her best estimation. Radian faces were as expressive as any Atinan’s were, but their shape was strange. Their features were flat, like you’d struck them across the face with the flat of a sword. She would not stoop to calling them ugly, just very strange to look at, especially with how old their eyes were.

Waylen was so young and yet his eyes were a rich green like she remembered her father's being. She smiled at the memory.

She directed Waylen with a wave of the hand to look toward her husband. Waylen was already eyeing Karo, but had respectfully waited until being introduced, which she then did.

"This is my husband, Karo Er Ton'Vas. He has not yet learned Radian so he cannot speak to you the way he would like, but I can speak for him." She introduced her husband, at last correcting her mother's error.

She then turned to Karo and told him in Atinan to go ahead and introduce himself as he would if Waylen had been Atinan himself. Vienna waited as her husband drew his hand up and offered a salute, respectfully bowing his head before introducing himself very eloquently. She smiled warmly at her husband, wishing that he could speak so well in Radian that Waylen could hear it for himself. Karo was always very well spoken, a man with a mind and tongue so gifted that he reminded her of her father.

Though Vienna had never heard her mother say it, she felt that Karo must have reminded her of her father, too. It had genuinely surprised her that her mother had not criticized her for her choice of et'nol. She had seemed quite pleased, which in hindsight was a humorous memory since Vienna had been prepared to argue with her, only for all her practice and pacing in her room to be for naught.

Karo kept his words brief, and when she turned back to Waylen to repeat what he'd said in Radian, she embellished it a little for her husband's benefit.

"I am happy to meet you, Prince Waylen Sundile, and I am glad that you found us worthy to share a seat at your table. I have never eaten the food from your homeland, but I am excited to discover what you have in store for both of us. Tonight will be a special meal for us, the first of what I hope will lead to many more." She finished, having added a little bit more to the ending.

She watched as Waylen smiled; the Radian having been watching her husband while she spoke like he was trying to keep his attention on the man who'd spoken the words instead of the woman who was translating them. He nodded his head to Karo respectfully, and she was beginning to feel much better about their meeting.

"And it is a pleasure to meet you in return, and I am proud knowing that I am the first of my family that gets to treat you both to dinner. We are very far away from Radiah, but my servants have worked very hard to make sure that everything will be as it should, no different than how we would treat you in our homeland." The Prince replied, Vienna smiling and repeating it all back to her husband in Atinan.

Waylen then turned to her.

"I do not know what is customary to do now, Your Highness." He began to say, and she tilted her head as she was not quite sure what custom he was asking about.

“Should I take you and your husband to dinner now, or would that be rude to leave so soon?” He asked, and then she smiled at herself for not jumping to the right conclusion sooner. Of course, he would not know what to do next if he was trying to do as was custom for an Atinan.

Karo was right, he was a clever whelp. Mother would be so *very* pleased; she thought wryly to herself.

“No! You are right to take us now, you may lead the way.” She replied to him with a smile, then quickly turned to her husband to tell him in a few words that they were now to leave.

Karo nodded and stepped forward to stand beside her as Waylen nodded to them both before turning on his heel to leave the room. They followed the young Radian, and when he was in the hallway, he told Lyrren they were now going back to his rooms. Though she and her husband were following Waylen, he was following Norra and Lyrren as he likely would not know the way well enough to do it himself.

Two of her guards were following behind them now, and she was considering having them turn back once they reached Waylen’s rooms. There was no need to have so many guards standing watch outside for dinner. She could steal two of Norra’s guards to satisfy her mother’s anxiety and have them walk her and Karo back to her rooms after dinner was concluded.

If dinner was to be as long winded as her mother had feared it would be, she didn’t want to make Raun and Torca wait outside for that long.

As they walked, Waylen explained a little of what they would be serving tonight. He asked if she or Karo had ever had a *shepherd’s pie*, and she had to confess that she had not. Karo would of course have no idea what that would even be, as even Vienna had never heard of it. She knew what a pie was, a dessert that her mother and father had both told her about before. She struggled to believe a dessert would be served as the main course for dinner!

“There will also be something we call cornbread; it’s a special kind of bread that we like to serve along with vegetables.” The young Radian continued.

As he spoke, Vienna would quietly translate for her husband, and it seemed that Waylen was purposely speaking slowly and giving longer pauses between anything that he would say. It made it easier for her to relay what he was saying to Karo, which was appreciated.

“If he continues in this way then there will be no surprises left for us at the table.” Karo replied, and she was suddenly grateful that he could not speak Radian.

To His Highness’ ears it likely sounded like he had asked a question, and she was answering, but she was actually scolding. Just let the young man talk about his dinner, he’s trying to be kind! Karo wore a smile as they continued the rest of the way to the guest rooms, and as her husband had said there were no surprises to be found at that table. Waylen had done a very good job of explaining everything that would be served tonight.

None of Norra's guards were at their posts, but the hallway was not empty. Vienna had to smile at this, as what she was seeing instead were several of Waylen's own soldiers, each standing in their proper places as His Highness' guards. The elder Radian of their group, the one named Shane, waited for them. He greeted them with a deep bow, then opened the door for their small group as they made their approach. Waylen stepped ahead of them before turning to face them both.

"Please, you may enter." Waylen gesturing for them to step inside first, the young man moving to the side to give them the luxury. Vienna politely thanked them, then quickly whispered to her husband to follow her lead. She entered first, followed by her husband, and then Waylen came in last behind them.

Once inside, she had to ask herself when was the last time she'd stood in this room, and the answer was many years. Since Radians so seldom came to visit, these rooms stood empty most of the time. Only servants entered them to water the plants and ensure that the rooms remained clean of dust.

"It was fortunate that Ser Lyrren was able to help find us a better table. Please, you may both sit!" Waylen stepped around them and approached the only table in the drawing room, a large round item that must have been stolen from elsewhere in the Keep. It only had three chairs, which was exactly as needed, though it could have seated as many as five or six.

"Thank you, Your Highness." She told him, then gave her husband a glance and a whisper and he then in turned thanks the young man as well.

They sat. Norra and Lyrren, along with their escorts, had been left outside. Now the pair were surrounded by Radians. The women that served His Highness were the only ones present, save the much younger looking male. That one must have surely been a whelp, as he was even shorter than Waylen. Perhaps taking mother's place was for the best.

She tried to admire the table arrangement. It was very different from what she was accustomed to, and everything was in the wrong spot! And why were there extra forks and spoons? She thought it was all very odd, but it was the centerpiece of the table that was drawing the majority of her attention. A large steel platter sat in the middle of the table, and it was covered in thick slices of bread, which all appeared to be moist and sprinkled with flecks of green seasoning.

Waylen joined them, sitting across from where the two of them sat, and as soon as that was done his servants appeared. Three women came, bringing them small glasses of a dark steaming liquid before a separate pitcher was placed on the table for them.

"I'm having Radian tea served first, but you can have unni or picti nef if you would like, or even wine if you would like that as well." He told them, one of the women now bringing an empty wine glass to sit next to Waylen's side.

She thanked him, then turned to her husband to tell him the liquid in the glass was Radian tea, and that he could have any choice of alcohol. He replied that he would like unni since it was being offered. Vienna replied that both she and her husband would like the unni, and one of the other women left to a side room where Vienna knew the kitchen was.

“You may go ahead and try the bread; it’s there for us until the main course arrives.” The Radian told them, before reaching out his hand to take up a piece for himself and delivering it to the small plate in front of him.

She conveyed this to her husband and they each took up slices for themselves. It was wet to the touch, very moist like it had been soaked in something oily. Was this what he had called cornbread? There were no vegetables, unless the flecks of green were the vegetables? It had a curious smell, the spices used were familiar to her but never had she seen a cook use them in this way. She took a bite.

The taste of it was... She hoped that their host would not notice her expression. It was soggy, drenched in oil all through! What a strange way to serve bread! She ate it anyway, being very polite and patient with her bites. It was too rich for her taste, the strength of the oil with the spices far too much. If she was to eat something with so much power to it, then she would have much preferred something meatier.

“I cannot taste the bread for the flavor.” Karo told her. Neither could she.

She replied to him that one day a Radian might sit at their table that can understand Atinan, and then she lied to Waylen that both she and her husband enjoyed the bread. The unni came out of the kitchen along with a bottle of wine. They were served their unni while she took a second piece of bread out of guilt and urged her husband to do the same.

It was a delicate matter to maintain a conversation in two languages, as her instincts kept coaxing her into wanting to speak in Radian in such a private setting. Apart from her moments with Karo, she mostly found herself speaking Atinan only when she was performing her duties as heir and as the Commander of the Armies.

“Soon, I will be able to take you to the tournament grounds.” She changed the subject away from food. “It will not be complete, but I believe you will see it well enough to understand it.”

“I would like that very much! I have spent a lot of time thinking about the tournament, and I think it may be the part of the Festival that most excites me.” He replied.

Perhaps he was a still whelp after all, and she was so grateful her mother was not here. The younger the Atinan the more intense their love for Festival. Older Atinans loved the Festival, too, but it was the nature of the young to admire the excitement and spectacle. And a spectacle it was, often with no deeper meaning to the average whelp. The fighting in the tournament, the delicious food and drink, the many fire dances all across the city. And very little responsibility. Most, save for the most ardent of workers, stopped what they were doing for the Festival and only enjoyed their holiday. And there were no chores for whelps on Festival.

“Most in the city enjoy watching it. When you get to see it for yourself you will struggle to count the number of onlookers as they gather around the tournament grounds.” She told him, then quietly whispered to her silent husband that she was telling Waylen about the upcoming tournament. He merely nodded in acceptance.

The kitchen door opened, and their dinner came out on a serving cart. All conversation stopped as the three women from Waylen's group took away the small plates from in front of them and replaced them with larger plates. Then, upon that plate, there was placed another, but smaller, plate that had a steaming pie sitting in its center. Why so many plates!

And the shepherd's pie really was a dessert! She had to control her expression so tightly, as they could not possibly...

"I believe your mother lied to you about her reasons for not coming. She did not want to eat soggy bread and dessert for dinner." Karo said with a smile, and Vienna felt herself flush hot. Mortified.

She was so very blessed that Waylen was not gifted with their tongue!

"The shepherd's pie was made with camel, since I was told that is the best meat to use for a celebration." He told them both with a smile while the women produced more food from the cart.

Camel in a dessert! She could feel her face struggling to contain her confusion while her husband passed her a worried glance. Meat! Inside a dessert!

"I was not told we were celebrating, Your Highness. What is the occasion?" She asked him while a single plate was brought around the table to rest in the empty space where someone else could have sat.

That plate contained a large, flat, yellow and brown disc of bread, which was then sliced into wedges while one of the other women brought out a serving bowl filled with peas. She understood what the peas were, at least!

"I would not consider this a celebration, but I am very happy to have dinner with you again. I have been in Anya Sur for a while now but have not had many chances to speak with you, your sister, or Her Majesty." Waylen replied while one of the women slipped a large serving spoon into the bowl of peas.

Fresh plates were then brought, small ones, and set next to each of them. So many plates, so many forks, so many spoons, there was hardly any space to rest one's elbows!

"We are both glad you invited us, Prince Waylen. Perhaps the occasion we celebrate is that you are able to meet my husband. I must apologize to you for my mother's failure to introduce him to you and your family sooner." She replied, being forced to address a grievance that still stung.

"And I am glad to meet him, or I should say that I am glad to meet you, Ser Karo." Waylen replied, and Karo chuckled then turning to look at her.

"No, not *Ser*." She replied, then quickly whispering a translation of what Waylen had said to her husband.

"They must not teach their whelps anything about us in Radiah, educate him please." He chuckled more, Vienna finding one of those rare moments where her husband irritated her, as she would have hated for the Prince to have heard what her husband had said.

Waylen, meanwhile, only seemed confused.

“Ser is not Karo’s title. You may address him as His Highness, or Prince, same as I may do for you.” She corrected him.

Waylen seemed thoughtful then.

“I see, I’m very sorry. I had thought I understood something about the words you use, but I have made a mistake.” He replied, and to her best judgement he seemed embarrassed now.

The women all left the table, as it seemed that now dinner had been properly served.

“Everyone that I have seen wearing white clothing, like His Highness is now, has been addressed as Ser, much like Ser Lyrren. I thought it was the correct word to use, especially since both your husband and Ser Lyrren wear the red cloth around their necks.” The Radian tried to explain himself.

“Oh, no.” She felt a little better, allowing herself to laugh a little. “The red cloth is from our wedding ceremony. It is a tradition to wear it for formal gatherings like this one. Lyrren only wears his every day because he is a very sentimental sort of man.”

The Radian seemed thoughtful then, before nodding.

“I would like to learn more about your language, Princess Vienna, and your people. There is much I do not know, and I feel guilty for coming to Anya Sur so ill prepared.” He seemed to confess.

Karo was casting a glance at her, unable to understand anything between Waylen and his wife. She did not know how best to respond, but her father would have been overjoyed to sit in her place had he been alive to do it. Vienna then found herself feeling sentimental herself, his absence suddenly very strong in her heart. She could hear his voice in her head, and she replied in the way that she thought he might have done.

“So long as you are here, Your Highness, then you are always learning. When the Festival comes and goes, if you choose to stay a while longer, then I am certain I can find someone who can teach you something of Atina Nah so that you may take it home with you.” She replied, smiling.

It was nothing so elegant as what her father would have said, but that was not a skill she inherited. Iolla was much better with her words. All Vienna was good at was fighting. Like her mother.

Waylen looked very happy then, wearing a smile.

“I would like that! But our dinner is growing cold. Please, join me.” He replied through his smile, taking up his fork and knife to poke a hole in the top of the pie, steam breaking free.

She quietly recounted to her husband what they’d said to each other, finishing at last with Karo nodding to her. To his credit he tried to use the fork and knife as Waylen was using his. This was a very strange meal, a pie that was not a dessert but rather like a stew baked within a flaky crust. It was very odd,

but it was filled with tender camel meat with a rich and savory gravy. It had a mixture of vegetables in it, as well. A curious, but delicious meal.

Waylen asked for her small plate, and she offered it to him, and he moved a slice of the equally strange bread to it, and then he asked for Karo's plate. She repeated the exchange of providing the plate and receiving a piece of bread in return.

"You can eat the cornbread on its own, but its best if you mix it with peas like I am doing." He explained to them, using his fork to break apart the yellow breading until it fell into a crumbled mess. With the large spoon he scooped out a large helping of peas from the bowl and poured them over the crumbled bread.

Karo stuck his fork into the bread and picked up a piece of it, then put it in his mouth. He chuckled then, looking at her with this big grin.

"It's cake. Sweet cake with peas." He said with an toothy smile.

She was embarrassed again, wanting to take her husband by one of his horns to drag him away from the table.

"My husband is surprised that the breading taste like cake to him." She confessed.

"It is a bit sweet, but not enough to be cake. It pairs well with the peas, but if he does not care for it, I will not be offended." Waylen replied.

She translated it to her husband, but she added that he would be very wise to eat his cornbread and peas like Waylen was doing or she would be very upset with him. He did as he was told, and did not complain even though he could not suppress his grin as he mimicked what he saw Waylen do with his own cornbread.

Vienna's turn came, and while the two men began to try their pie, she took her own taste of the mix of cornbread and peas. Oh, what a very strange place Radiah must be if this is what they enjoy serving at their tables! Oily bread, sweet cake-like bread with salty peas, and meat served inside of a dessert crust!

"We don't have anything like this on our dinner tables. I have never eaten anything like this before." She commented, cutting deeper into her pie to expose more of its innards. At least the stew portion of the pie was very good.

And it truly was! The gravy inside reminded her of what would come with meelish, but it was not quite the same. It had a different color and texture, but very flavorful. The bread crust that encased it was not sweet like the cornbread but was more of a source of salty flavor that added crunch to every bite whenever it was included.

"The pie is very good." Karo told her, and she conveyed this to Waylen.

While they ate, she returned the conversation back to what had been brought up before.

“You were not wrong for thinking that white was a color worn by servants. Only Atinans who have been given authority over many are allowed to wear white. It is not unlike how we dress our army. Lyrren is a commander in his own way, and before you came to Anya Sur, he was responsible for a large number of servants that work within the Keep.” She told him, if only to assure him that he had not been completely wrong before.

“That is what I had assumed, but since your husband wore white, as well as Eldest Thalla and Princess Iolla, I thought that Ser had a broader meaning. I should have asked Ser Lyrren beforehand to be sure.” He replied.

“Mother and father chose white as the color of leadership for anyone that was not a soldier, but my sister and Eldest Thalla would not be considered servants. Ser is reserved only for servants, and likewise Sol is only for soldiers. A small lesson, but we do not address a commander as Sol, but as Commander or Captain, depending on their importance.” She added.

“Ser means servant, and Sol means soldier in Atinan?” He asked.

She thought about it briefly, then shook her head.

“Ser and Sol are not really Atinan words, Your Highness. I would have to ask my mother, but I believe we just borrowed the words from Radiah and shortened them to make it easier to say.” She replied, as there were a number of words spoken in Atina Nah that were originally from Radiah. Special borrowed words that sometimes held their original meanings, and others having earned new ones.

“I do not know why I did not recognize that sooner. I feel silly now for not having figured it out.” He replied, a puzzled look on his face.

“You can feel no stranger than me and my sister as we were taught to speak Radian. You are in like company, Waylen.” She replied, dropping the use of any title in hopes that a more intimate use of his name would relax him.

Radians were very formal, or so she’d been often told. She could remember father telling her about his many visits to Radiah, and of the times when they would come to see us. Before she was born, at least. She could remember some of these visits, remembered some of the strange faces of the Radian royalty that had come long before Waylen. They liked using their titles no matter where they were, be they in public or private they clung to them. It was simply their way of things, as her father would tell her. *They don’t mean disrespect; he’d tell both her and Iolla. It’s just one of their ways, different from us, but once you understand their ways and they our own then we both will see we are not so different.*

It did not seem that her dropping his title had caused any offense, and she began to change the subject further away to something he’d confessed excitement in. While they ate, she told him about the tournament grounds, explaining that he’d passed through them once already to enter the Keep’s outer wall. It would have been empty then, but when he sees it next it would be a bustling hub of activity.

Even now as the evening grew darker and colder, crews of workers would still be erecting the structures that would soon house onlookers, combatants, and merchants looking to sell food and drink to both.

Since Karo could not join in on the conversation, he finished his meal first. She felt awful for him, as this dinner was not one he was accustomed to. Usually, he spoke more than she did at the table. The only thing that was good for him was that he must have enjoyed the pie, since she knew his mannerisms very well now. She could always tell if he was eating to be polite or out of genuine enjoyment.

When they reached the end of their meal, with every plate minus its pie, she wondered how long the rest of the evening would go. She'd warned Karo it could go overly long, as mother had told her. She was also curious about the rest of the food they would serve. Waylen had only told them of these few items, but by the way mother spoke of Radian meals, they were full of waste. Dish after dish would be brought to the table with no expectation of it being eaten in full. More food than any could eat, a show of wealth no different than any Atinan draped heavily in steel jewelry at the marketplace.

"When I planned to have this dinner with you, I had arranged dessert to be made. I hope you will enjoy it." Waylen told them both, though he was looking at her when he did it. He then turned to look at one of the women standing patiently by the kitchen door.

She nodded and left into the kitchen.

"Desserts are quite rare at our tables. We often save them for special occasions, like how we used to do with unni." She replied, even though she'd never been alive during a time when unni was rare. By the time she was old enough to be allowed a sip of it, the honey it was made from had become quite plentiful.

"We serve dessert with most meals in Radian if we are serving guests. I hope you will like what we've prepared." He repeated himself.

She had not interacted nearly as much with him as she should have, but he did not seem the sort to repeat himself, especially in such a short amount of time. He turned his head to look back towards the kitchen door, expectantly. She then whispered to her husband that dessert was next, but she did not know what it would be, only that Waylen hoped that they liked it.

"Maybe it will be a roast, since we've already been served pie." He teased, and she wanted to shake him.

The littlest of the women emerged holding a large serving platter covered with a lid. Vienna could not imagine how old this one was, as she was so much smaller than Waylen and very slight of build. She, and that little male servant that had sat at the lunch table days prior, had to be very young. Younger than Waylen, surely. Mother would not have been pleased, but since Vienna hadn't heard any complaint about it yet then that must mean her mother had not seen or heard of either of these two little ones.

The other women took from them their plates of finished pie, so that the table in front of them would be clear. The lid of the platter was then removed, and there sat three small plates with some kind of dessert sitting on it. As the little woman held the platter the other two delivered the small plates to the table with a fresh fork placed next to each.

She looked at them curiously, as did her husband. It was a small pastry of some sort, coated with a layer of white icing, with a large dollop of pudding sitting on the top of it with a familiar looking garnish.

“When you said that picti mal was your favorite dessert, I asked Marissa if she could learn make it herself. What she has made for us tonight is a mix of picti mal and traditional Radian cake pastry. I thought it would be a nice gesture, to mix Radiah and Atina Nah together into something delicious. I hope you like it.” He replied, repeating himself for the third time, and she so desperately hoped that it tasted good so that she would not have to lie to him.

“What is it?” Karo asked. “It looks like they put picti mal on it.”

She smiled at Waylen, ignoring her husband for the moment.

“Thank you, Your Highness. This is a kind gesture, please let me explain the dessert to my husband.” She replied, then turned to her husband to tell him that it is picti mal and cake mixed together and that he was not allowed to say anything bad about it, because this was a very kind gesture and Waylen obviously hoped that they would like it.

He nodded, then picked up his fork, and she did the same. Never had she felt so uncomfortable taking a bite out of a dessert with four people now expectantly watching them for their reaction, as all three of the women were now standing at a distance watching them.

And Atina Nah had blessed them with Her kindness, because with that first bite, she knew it was good! It was so rich with its sweetness she was almost taken aback, but the cool flavor of the picti mal mellowed out the rich flavor of the brown colored cake.

“It is very good! Thank you, Waylen. I would never have thought to mix picti mal with anything like this.” She thanked him.

Next to her Karo was taking another bite of his, but was silent.

“This is a very expensive dessert, Vienna. They used chocolate for this.” He finally said after a swallow. “It is very good, decadent. I don’t think even the big kitchen has much stock chocolate in their pantry, it’s very rare in Anya Sur. They must have brought it with them from Radiah.”

By his tone of voice, he was speaking to her as a merchant, and she tried her best to just convey to Waylen that her husband enjoyed it, too, and that he was curious about the chocolate. As the three of them continued to enjoy their dessert, her husband took control of the conversation and forced her to translate for him, as he wanted to know how such a rare ingredient had come to Waylen’s small kitchen.

Vienna did not know this until now, but apparently chocolate comes from a place even further away than Radiah, and the Radians have to trade for it. She did not know where this faraway place was that possessed chocolate, but a piece of it had somehow found its way to her plate and was now sitting on her fork along with a healthy portion of her favorite dessert. Her father would have been very happy.

The rest of their dinner was pleasant, and was not anywhere near as long as her mother had warned her it would be. She hoped father would be proud of her for doing what her mother could not. Her mother should have been the one to sit at this table with Waylen. Father, too, but Atina Nah decided long ago that that was not to be.

Theo still struggles at speaking Atinan, much more so than his father ever had. But we, Yvvie and I, are now much better at speaking Radian than we once were! His Atinan is quite terrible. He does get most of the words correct, but he lacks the strength of voice. Edgard's voice was always strong, and Atinan seemed to come a bit more natural to him once he began to know what words to say. Theo is still young and seems to be gentler than his father, so when he speaks it there is an uncanniness to it.

Yvvie thinks he's soft, and that irritates her. I warn her not to compare the two, as Edgard ruled during a time of war and Theo rules over peace. It would be nice if we had peace here, too. I do not remember if we've ever experienced it. Well, I know that I have not. My mother has told me stories of how things used to be, and father too before violence took him from us.

It's been a very long time since Atina Nah knew peace of any sort. I do hope that Theo shows wisdom and keeps Radiah well. His father put his kingdom through war to see to it that it would not come again to its doorstep, and in so doing he helped Yvvie and I do the same for our people. Now that I am much better at speaking their language, when we have our visits here or there I can listen well and speak whatever wisdom I can. I do not see our friends in Radiah often, as it takes such a long time to travel back and forth, but we do still exchange letters.

Edgard had told me when he was still with us to send letters to him written in Atinan, nothing important, but merely something to read that was natural. I don't think Edgard ever really learned to read our language with much skill, but Theo seems to have. Not very well, of course! All the letters we send written in Atinan are simple things, small messages no longer than a single page and it's always of Anya Sur.

When Theo was young, Edgard brought him every time he'd come to visit. All Theo did was complain about the heat, or gawk at the world around him with his big bright eyes. I wish Radiah had been brought into this world better suited to Atina Nah. Had he been able to endure the heat, Theo might have come to enjoy the city much more than I know he did. I believe this, because he sends back his feeble attempt at Atinan, hardly skilled enough to compare it to a whelp's writing. But he still does it and asks about things in Anya Sur he remembers from his youth or asks for news of things I had told him in previous letters.

These small curiosities he shows me are so much better than all the talk of war Edgard and Yvvie would do. I do hope this time of strife we find ourselves in ends soon, as I very much enjoy the glimpses of peace I see through our letters with Radiah.

“That can be arranged, there will be more than enough room on the tables to have an additional dessert.” Her Royal Highness Iolla Fah Ro’Un replied first to Shane, since he was the one who had asked the question, then turned her attention back to Waylen to nod politely.

“What would the dessert be? We will need to inform the big kitchen, so that they do not prepare something too similar.” Eldest Thalla Fah Kah’Seh then asked them.

It was all a big disappointment, but alas sometimes things don’t go according to plan. Today was the day Princess Vienna was to take him out to the tournament ground for a tour, but that had been put on hold so that this meeting could be taken care of first. A tour was a luxury, this meeting was not.

Waylen was now in a new room in the Keep, something small that was reserved for meetings. He was joined by Shane and Marissa, and together they represented the Radian side of the arrangement. On the other was Eldest Thalla and Princess Iolla along with some other servants Waylen had never seen before.

“Not long ago Princess Vienna and her husband shared dinner with me, and I had my cooks prepare a dessert that was a kind of cake made with picti mal pudding. The two of them enjoyed it a great deal so I would like to have more made for the banquet for your guests to enjoy as well.” Waylen replied, and as he brought up the dessert in question Princess Iolla’s expression seemed to light up, but it was very subtle.

Eldest Thalla’s expression did not seem to change at all.

“That should not be too difficult for the big kitchen, though some may be disappointed in the absence of traditional picti mal.” The Eldest replied.

Princess Iolla then hummed in a negative.

“I think the big kitchen can still make picti mal. The dessert His Highness describes is different enough to be unique. It has picti mal, but it is strong of chocolate, from what my sister has told me.” The Princess replied before turning back to him. “This is correct, Your Highness?”

“Of course. It is strong of chocolate, and the picti mal my cooks can make surely does not taste the same as what the big kitchen would prepare. I cannot imagine that there would be any reason for your other guests to be disappointed.” Waylen assured them.

Today’s meeting was to cover several important topics now that the Festival was growing so near. Only next week, and finally it will have arrived. Even if it sometimes felt as though Waylen had only been here for a few days, he had to remind himself that far more time was passing than he realized. Each day there was a new batch of distractions, and whenever he had a quiet moment to himself there were his worries. The time was passing quickly.

No one had managed to take a single step outside of the Keep since their arrival, and even though his guards were allowed to train in the Keep’s garrison, there was little for them to learn there. Waylen was stressed that he may have very little to tell his father upon his arrival back home. Her Majesty’s army was of a mysterious size, and that was partly due to his own fear induced hesitation.

He had not wanted to be too obvious with his questions, and everyone in his service knew it. No one went too far out of their way to ask questions like how many generals Her Majesty had, and how many soldiers they commanded. Waylen knew she had three Commanders, but two of those only seemed to hold power over Anya Sur and the Keep itself. Commander Roc Er Fel’Noy was the only dragon he knew of that had power over anything outside the city’s walls.

Princess Vienna was Commander of the Armies, but what did that even mean? The three Commanders all answered to her, but was Her Majesty’s army really just her daughter and three subordinates? It couldn’t possibly be with how large the desert was. Just look at any map and the Silver

Sea stretches out for a great distance in all directions! There were allegedly many tribes scattered about the sand, numbering in the dozens.

Eldest Thalla then nodded and with a glance to her right, one of the servants seated next to her began to write down something on the parchment in front of him. The way dragons wrote their language was rather ugly. The strokes of the dragon's quill were short, a long series of scritch scratches as the dragon wrote in their foreign script. Almost every letter was just a combination of little lines with the occasional dot. They all blended together so much that even if Waylen had been looking at the page right side up, he'd still not be able to make much sense of one letter from the others.

"With that settled, the actual time for when you are due to arrive will be given to you the day prior. There will be some things left to plan until the day before, which might affect when the banquet can begin. You will, however, be one of the first to arrive in the hall. Her Majesty was against the idea to have you enter after everyone else." Eldest Thalla then told him.

"There will be a place for you at our table, and you will be told which seat is yours." Princess Iolla quickly added.

"Will any of His Highness' service be expect to attend, and in what capacity?" Shane spoke up.

"Under other circumstances it would be expected some of you would attend alongside His Highness, but with so few of you being able to speak Atinan, that creates a conflict. The great majority of the Atinans in attendance will not be able to speak Radian." Eldest Thalla answered.

"That would be a problem, yes. I can speak Atinan, but not as well as I would like to. No one else in our group can speak it at all, sadly." Shane told her.

"Your Highness, as you are all our guests, we assure you that the banquet will not be the only means of your service to participate." Princes Iolla then said to Waylen.

"If it is any consolation, everyone will be welcome to attend the tournament, as well as the parade held after. That should not cause any conflict. Am I correct, Eldest?" She then continued, turning then to Eldest Thalla to ask.

The larger dragon hummed, then lifted a quill of her own before beginning to write something down on a page in front of her, which was already filled with other chicken scratch symbols. As she wrote, she spoke.

"The tournament will be easily done. A spot for them has already been selected, but a proper awning needs to be erected, and some additional planning to ensure the heat does not wither anyone in your service too greatly. The tournament usually lasts for a few hours, and it is known to us that Radian do not fare well under our sun." She replied, then stopped writing.

"The parade would be more difficult, with them being so many." The Princess added, and the other dragon nodded.

"If it is a problem then we can select a smaller group." Shane volunteered.

“If the soldiers in your service are fit and willing to ride atop camels for the duration of the parade, then they can ride with the carriages alongside our own soldiers, and then the rest of your group can be afforded a single carriage.” The large dragon replied after a moment.

Waylen looked to Shane then. The men in his group had mostly ridden on horses and camels all the way to Anya Sur, and that was weeks of arduous travel. It was hard on their bodies, but a parade lasting only a few hours would be simple for them to do. The older man looked back to him, and nodded in agreement, signaling that he could see nothing wrong with the suggestion.

“I think that would work well, Eldest Thalla. In addition to myself that would need a carriage, there are five in my group. I do not know how large your carriages are for the parade; will they be able to fit so many comfortably?” He asked her.

“If it is only five Radians of your size then there will be plenty of room, but you will not be riding with them, as Her Majesty will expect you to ride with us in her carriage.” Princess Iolla interrupted him.

“Oh! So, the royal family will have its own carriage?” He asked.

“My mother, myself, and my sister will be in one carriage. There will be more than enough room to include you.” She smiled at him.

“I hope I am not displacing His Highness, Karo? Or your own et’nol?” Waylen replied, having wanted to say Karo’s full name but he didn’t have enough time to jog his memory enough to remember it. He could only remember *Er* and something starting with a *T*. At least he remembered their word for fiancé! Et’nol, such a strange word.

Eldest Thalla smiled but said nothing.

“My et’nol would not be riding with us, as we are not yet married. However, you will be displacing Karo, but please do not be concerned.” She assured him, and Waylen began to chew on the side of his tongue.

He had only just enjoyed a very nice dinner with Princess Vienna and her husband, making up for him not having any idea she was even married, and now he had to sit in a carriage with her knowing that her husband was kicked out of his seat because Waylen needed one! Steps forward, steps backward.

“That’s very unfortunate. Would there be any way of avoiding this, I would hate to offend either of them.” He asked.

“They will not be offended. Not by you, at any rate. This would be Her Majesty’s decision.” Eldest Thalla spoke up, lifting her quill again to write something else. “She does not like having too many people in a carriage with her.”

“She has been this way since I was very small, Your Highness. Four is her limit, even if the carriage has room for more than that.” The Princess assured him.

“Well, if this is how it must be then I will abide by Her Majesty’s wishes. I am happy to attend the parade with you all, though I fear I may have to plan a way to make it up to Prince Karo before I leave to return back to Radiah.” Waylen told them, testing the word Prince with the dragons and finding some satisfaction in not finding any resistance. It must be the correct word to use!

“There will be time enough for such things.” Eldest Thalla replied, then set her quill aside.

“The parade begins before noon and lasts until the afternoon, so expect it to take a few hours. The carriages will follow a route through the much of the city, so you will get to see Anya Sur from a much better angle than your balcony.” The dragon continued, the Princess falling silent as the older dragon spoke.

Seeing more of the city would be nice, and it was good that the rest of his group could see it as well. It may be for the best that everyone be left out of the banquet, even Shane. If more of his people could speak Atinan, then it would have been nice to have Shane and Landon join him. Waylen knew he would have to urge his father to have more of his advisors learn it, and to be honest his children should all know it, too! No one in the family could speak it despite Her Majesty and her daughters speaking Radian so well.

“Is there anything you will need from us before the tournament or parade?” Shane asked.

“There should be nothing, but we will keep you informed on the day and time for when you will be brought outside. You should have more than enough time amongst yourselves to plan what you will need to wear, and for what you will want to bring with you. Food and drink will be provided so you need not concern yourselves with that.” Eldest Thalla told him.

“I would like to request that plentiful water be provided, as opposed to alcohol, if we are to spend so much time outside in the sun. The heat and alcohol do not mix well for us.” The older man asked.

The large dragon nodded and agreed that water can be brought in good supply for everyone, the dragon tapping a fingernail on the table next to her, which prompted the servant besides her to begin scribbling more on their own piece of paper, revealing that even the servants here seemed to know enough Radian to dictate a request.

Marissa quietly asked for Eldest Thalla’s attention, the older woman having not spoken very much during this meeting, despite being Waylen’s head cook.

“Yes?” The Eldest asked.

“I will be in charge of preparing the dessert, and I will need to know how much to prepare. How many guests will there be, and do you expect them to want more than one serving?” She asked.

“We do not yet know.” The Princess replied first, prompting Eldest Thalla to nod in agreement.

“For now, we know who might arrive, but it is not unusual for that to change in the final days before the banquet. It happens every year. When we are certain of how many will attend, I will have that

number sent to you. Expect it to be in the dozens, and the kitchen in His Highness' rooms may not be adequate to the task." The Eldest replied.

"There should be room in the big kitchen. There are only three of them and only making one dessert." The Princess added.

"The big kitchen will be very busy." The larger dragon replied.

"If I may be allowed to see the big kitchen beforehand, I would be able to explain how much of it I would need. I do not think I would need much room." Marissa told them.

"This can be arranged. The big kitchen will be cooking their normal meals tomorrow, so I can send word to Ser Lyrren to escort you there for your review." The Eldest replied.

"That would be very good." Shane added.

"We may not have enough chocolate, Marissa." Waylen pointed out. He didn't imagine they'd brought so much of it that they could feed a room full of dragons.

"Chocolate is not so rare that it cannot be acquired. There are merchants in the city that sell the beans as a luxury." The dragon replied.

"I hate to impose on Her Majesty in such a way, but if we could be assured enough chocolate for the dessert that would be appreciated." Waylen answered.

The Eldest then picked up her quill and began to write.

He looked over to Marissa, who looked a little wide eyed. It would only be much later in the day that he would learn that between the three women in his kitchen they'd only collectively made chocolate once. They were going to have to learn, and quickly, if they were to make good on that dessert.

I do not like lying, but Yvvie has forced me to swear to speak nothing of how much the rot still spreads in Atina Nah. So much blood spilled and yet all it earned us was the feeblest hold on power.

To our East is the safety of Radiah, distant though it may be. The riches that flow freely from their border have pacified the tribes that lie between Anya Sur and Radiah. All I can do is make sure the goods continue to flow back and forth, to keep everyone happy. Every chance I see to collect a luxury that I can pass off cheaply to the tribes, I do it. It's bribery, but it's also sewing peace.

Like a fattened animal, it gets lazy and wants to sleep. Atina Nah needs to be fat and lazy if it ever is to see a moment of peace.

To our North is Ulta, and they are very reluctant to trade with us. I do not know how to resolve that problem, as I cannot say I would do any differently than they are. From their mountain home they peered into Atina Nah and watched as we marched from one tribe to the next, waging our war, slaughtering everyone that opposed us, only to then lay siege upon Anya Sur until it was broken. We then built our city upon the old one's corpse and called it our Capital.

So, the Ultans do not trust us. Yvvie doesn't think the same way I do. She gets angry that it is Ulta and not Radiah that mistrusts us. She looks at the Ultans, at their squat and thick bodies made of hard flesh and tough hide, and tells me that Ultans are too much like Atinans to be so quick to lose trust. She thinks the Radians, being both frail of body and pale of skin, have far more right to fear us than Ulta does.

Perhaps this is true, for when I look upon an Ultan with my own eyes I see what Yvvie sees. Of all the creatures in the world, Ultans and Atinans are quite alike when you consider what Radians and their kin look like. I've never seen a Darfellan before, but Yvvie tells me they look no different to her than Radians. Frail, pale, short, and frustratingly well suited to the cold.

The only good to come from Ulta is that they do not seem to be interested in war. There is an uneasy silence in the North as a result. It is instead the tribes to the South and West of us that are the source of our kingdom's rot.

Yvvie has sworn me to secrecy, she does not want Radiah to know. She can't command all of Atina Nah to silence, but it is to her favor that so few Atinans speak Radian, and that the reverse is equally true. The war Edgard helped us win is not over. He merely helped us crush the head of a serpent, whose body still wriggles in the sand in defiance.

She keeps trying to crush what's left of its corpse, but hate is a powerful thing. It doesn't die from violence, as that'll just make it stronger like breathing heat across an open flame. The Radians call Atina Nah the Silver Sea in their tongue. If they could look westward and see the hatred burning all across Anya Sur, they would no longer know what to call us.

All they would see is fire, as deep and endless a flame as the eye could bear to stomach.

For the first time in many days Waylen found himself approaching the very same gates that had once led him to the Keep of Anya Sur. Camels had been provided so they could make the journey much quicker than when they'd arrived, no more walking the great distance from the front steps towards the gate. He rode his own camel while several others joined him on their own beasts. Princess Vienna was

riding on his left side, pointing out to him where Waylen would soon find himself on the day of the tournament.

“There. It isn’t much to see from this vantage, but if you were standing atop the wall, you’d see there is plenty of room. I don’t think the wall was intended to have a crowd of us sitting on top of the gate when it was first built, but now that we know we can its mother’s favorite place to watch the tournament.” She explained to him as they rode.

“I can see why even from here. If I stood there on the wall, I could easily see everything in the courtyard, so I would image it’d be the same on the other side, too.” He replied, agreeing with her.

On his other side was Landon, having been brought along much as he’d been on the day they’d visited the garrison. With his eyes and ears, he’d be a good asset to have at Waylen’s side, as he’d no doubt notice things that Waylen might have been oblivious to. The rest of the camels riding with them were all a part of either the Princess’ personal guard or soldiers borrowed from the Keep’s defense. Being led around so much by armed guard left him feeling a bit foolish. The child in him felt powerful and important, but the adult was anxiously wondering why so many guards were needed. Even his father didn’t need so many men to protect him when he moved about the castle.

They emerged through the open gate, and into what the Princess explained was the ‘Parade Grounds’. The same roadway they’d taken on their first day in the city was clear as day to see, a well-worn path through the Grounds, but to its either side was new construction that left Waylen impressed. There were as many as a hundred laborers moving about and working, often grouped into twos and threes as they worked with a myriad of tools to erect buildings and the like.

As Waylen scanned the area from atop his camel, he could see that the city was a much livelier place now than it had been on the day of his arrival. Though they’d only just crossed the threshold of the gate, he could see that in the distance there were hundreds more dragons moving up and down the roadway, mostly on foot but with the humps of camels spotted here and there. All of them were no doubt the common folk of the city he’d missed seeing on his arrival, all of whom were going about their daily lives no differently than the people of his homeland.

They moved on and began to ride deeper into the Grounds, Her Highness in the lead and in control of their path. Waylen was smiling, watching everything around him with great interest, spying everything he could. Just about every dragon he saw was laboring away, bare of chest, dressed only in light weight trousers or loin cloth wraps. There were women amongst their number, as bare of breast as the men were of chest, surprising Waylen enough to encourage him to keep his gaze politely averted towards more modest subjects.

The way these dragons dressed was so very different from what he’d expected, and not just because it was different from how things were in Radiah! Even inside the Keep the dragons all wore proper outfits, be they the tunic and trousers of a soldier or the robes or dresses of a servant or royalty. To see the commoners of Anya Sur so stripped bare was such a strange thing to see!

The Princess shouted something brief in Atinan, spooking him, and everyone stopped their camels with Waylen and Landon being the last to do so, wrangling their animals to a halt with their reigns.

“We will dismount.” She told them, then began to step off her camel. Everyone else joined her, Waylen struggling slightly with the size of his own camel being a bit too great for his height. A few new faces approached them under the watchful eye of Her Highness’ guard and began to take control of the camels to lead them aside.

“First, Your Highness, I can explain what these are.” She told him, gesturing for him to join her at her side.

He did, Landon in tow, and he was then shown what was being constructed. Scattered about the Parade Grounds were these large circular plots. The sound of hammers and saws were buffeting his ears from all directions now as Her Highness took a step into one of the circles, gesturing for him to remain outside.

Now alone, she stepped into the middle, then pointed her finger all along its perimeter.

“Each of these is where two will fight. When they are completed, they will have a thick layer of sand.” She told him loudly, stamping her foot on the packed earth to make a point that no sand had yet been brought. He nodded, looking then around the perimeter itself, seeing that wooden stakes were being driven into the ground in a circle, and upon those stakes planks of wood were being nailed tight to create a ring that would presumably hold the sand in place.

“Two soldiers only, and they will fight with any weapon of their preference. Swords, shields, spears, and maces are available. No armor stronger than leather is allowed, and to win a duel you must either force your opponent out of the arena or force them to submit to you. Most choose to former, as the latter is much more difficult.” She explained, the Princess now patrolling the inside of the circle.

“May I?” He asked, gesturing, if he could step inside.

She welcomed him to. He took one step in and tried to count the feet from one side to the other. As he approached Her Highness, he guessed that from one end to the other it might have been two dozen or so feet wide, missing or adding a few. Meanwhile, Landon stalked around the outside perimeter, eyeing it silently with his hands drawn behind his back, likely putting his own thoughts together about what he was seeing and hearing.

“You said they can choose a weapon of their choice? Are they real weapons or fake?” Waylen asked.

She reached down to her side, taking a grip of her sword and sliding it from its sheath. Her Highness stepped up to him and held her sword out for him to take. He rarely found himself holding a sword, so he felt strange taking it from her, feeling how heavy it was. It looked razor sharp to his eye, and he felt uneasy letting the blade get too close to him.

“The shields offered are real, made of wood and held together with bands of steel, but all of the weapons will have their edges blunted. They will weigh the same as my sword, be forged from the same steel, but cannot cut as a real blade would. Have you never held a sword?” She then asked, studying his awkward handling of her weapon.

“Very rarely have I held a sword, Your Highness. Especially one as heavy as this one.” He confessed. She extended her hand, and he returned the sword to her, after which she sheathed it.

“Princess Vienna, you say the edges will be blunted, but will the spear’s tip be blunted as well? What of the maces?” Captain Landon then asked, taking a step inside the arena to join them.

“The maces are the deadliest weapon in the tournament, Captain, though we use wood for their shafts, so they are prone to breaking in the middle of combat. My mother decided that that was sufficient enough of a trade to allow maces to be used. And yes, the points of every spear are blunted, but a spear is still a spear, same as a blade is still a blade. It is not pleasant to be struck by either.” She replied to him.

“Are many hurt each year?” Waylen asked.

She smiled down at him.

“A great many are hurt, yes. Now come, I have more to show you.” She told him and then gestured in the direction she wished to go.

He followed along with Landon being quick to fall in line behind them. As she moved, her guards all moved around her like flowing water. Wherever Her Highness seemed to go the soldiers that served her kept a polite distance and were like silent watchmen.

“These here are like a kind of barracks. When the roofs are added they will look more like stables, but they are for our soldiers. Chairs and benches will be brought in and the soldiers waiting their turn can sit and watch their peers fight.” She explained, directing his attention to more construction in the distance, a long line of small wooden plank buildings, each without a roof. Teams of dragons swarmed them all, hammering and sawing off excesses, preparing them for their eventual rooftops.

Landon then asked if it was expected that all soldiers waiting their turn are required to sit by the sidelines, and she replied that that wasn’t quite true. Any soldier who was next in line could mingle and meander through the parade grounds to watch the fights up close, but if you were not next, then you were expected to sit until you were told you could move about, otherwise the Parade Grounds would become too crowded with people.

“I would show you where your servants and guards will be seated, but the location has been changed by the construction crews. A new spot must be found, but it will be somewhere near here where the finalists will gather for their duels. I can, however, show you what the accommodation will look like further down the road. Let us get you back on your camel.” She told him with a smile, then turned her head and whistled like he’d seen her do before.

She lifted a hand, closing her fist with only her pinky extended, then gestured for the camels to be brought back. His camel was brought back to him, and Landon helped him rise into its saddle before climbing up into his own.

“Progress may not seem like it has gone well, but it will all be ready for the tournament with time to spare. This here is the easiest part of the preparation.” She told him as she rode her camel up to his side, gesturing all around them to the many arenas under construction.

“What is the difficult part?” He asked her. She kicked her heels, spurring her animal to begin marching ahead, and Waylen urged his own to do the same.

“Managing the crowds and merchants, and all the planning that came before. You will see soon. Every year we build places for Atinans to sit and mingle while they watch the fighting, and then we have to erect awnings and stands for the merchants who come to sell food and drink.” She told him.

He nodded, not sure what he was supposed to imagine, but memories of Radiah filled his mind. He wondered how similar it would be to reality once he saw it.

“How many people come to watch?” Waylen asked.

The Princess drew in a deep breath, looking thoughtful for a moment.

“I do not know. We don’t count such things, but I would say that if there was enough room along Anya Betine, we’d see half the city come to watch.” She replied.

“Anya Betine?” He asked her what that was, leaving her to briefly tilt her head.

“Ah, it means *The Great Road* in your tongue, this here.” She replied, gesturing to the road they were now riding down, the same one he’d ridden through when he’d first arrived in the city. He nodded, making a note of that special name.

“Is there something special about the word Anya?” He asked, since he was now aware of two things that shared that word in its name, both the city and now the road they were riding upon.

“*Anya* just means great, or something similar, in Radian. *Betine* is just our word for road. Anya Sur would be *The Great Well* in your tongue.” She explained, and he nodded. Interesting.

“Anya Sur is both the city and the rock overlooking us. I do not think either of them are wells, unless I am not understanding what you mean by well?” He asked her, prying more into their language as their camels carried them further down the roadway.

All around them there were even more dragons, dozens upon dozens of them. Most of them were stopping where they stood to gawk at Waylen and his group. He couldn’t blame them, surely the entire city knew he was here visiting, and now these dragons all had the chance to see him for the first time. The laborers in the Parade Grounds were being left behind, and what he could see now were the very same rows of clean, sun-bleached buildings he’d seen on his first day, except they were now very full of life.

The merchant stalls were manned by dragons, many of which were watching them ride their camels from beneath the colorful fabric awnings. Waylen was watching them as much as they were him, but he couldn’t begin to guess who thought who was the stranger. Merchants from Radiah did travel to Anya Sur, but it had been a long time since someone as important as Waylen had made the journey.

He had to continuously avert his gaze, his eyes wandering across the crowds of dragons and catching sight of their women, just as bare of chest here as he'd seen before. These folk did not seem to care for modesty, or perhaps their understanding of it was so far from his own that it was as foreign as their native tongue. It was very strange, so strange that he didn't for the moment feel embarrassed by the sight of it. It was a bit too overwhelming of a shock, to be honest, but that would probably change as soon as he had enough time to digest it.

"It means the same as in Radian, Your Highness. It is a well for water. The Anya Sur that looks down upon us all is named for the lake that sits at its foot. We call that *Anya Valas*, but Atinans have always called Anya Sur *The Great Well*, even if the lake is where the water actually comes from." She told him with a smile.

"I see, and what does *valas* mean, if I am not asking too much of you as a student." He asked her.

She smiled at him again.

"No, not too much. *Valas* is our word for *cistern*. These names are all very old, older than me, my mother, and her mother's mother. We see the error in the names now, but when we Atinans first gave Anya Sur its name it was what felt was right." She told him.

"And now it's too late to change it." He told her.

"It would be silly to do after so long, yes. Now, look ahead and to our left. Past the merchant stalls." She told him then, lifting her hand from her reigns to point something out to him.

He followed her finger to a long row of stalls, to throngs of dragons he'd noticed earlier.

"Behind those stalls is a long clearing we use throughout the year for different things. Now that the tournament is so large we have the finalists duel on the Parade Grounds behind us, but the first of the fighting will always start here. We will dismount and I can show you." The Princess told him.

He listened and nodded, following along by her side until they neared a set of stalls that appeared to be selling food. She lifted her hand and shouted in Atinan, and everyone began to dismount their camels. He dropped from his saddle and joined Her Highness as Landon and the rest of her guard flocked around them.

"Are you hungry?" She stopped to ask him suddenly.

"Not overly so, Your Highness." He replied, unsure now if she'd stopped them to show off more arenas or if she actually only wanted to visit the food stalls.

She said something in Atinan to one of her guards, then he rushed off towards one of the stalls.

"I am. If you discover that you are hungry, I will share." She told them, then gestured for him to follow. He did.

She led him between the stalls and into the clearing behind them. The ground was of well packed earth, dusty, but it was littered with even more laboring dragons. Large teams of them seemed to be using wagons to deposit sand into completed arenas, allowing Waylen to see what the final product would look like up close. Then, around the edges of the clearing, which was a long wide rectangle like a banquet table fit to seat many thousands of people, were even more buildings under construction.

Her Highness continued to walk, and Waylen with the rest of the group followed. Many eyes followed them both with great curiosity, but no one stopped working. She led him to a completed building, a tall wooden structure with three walls and open on one side. Within, there were already benches and chairs arranged for sitting.

“What we will be making for your companions will be much like this building, but wider to accommodate so many. It will have a larger roof to shield them from the sun, and plenty of benches for sitting, and tables for their use. Food, like what is sold from the stalls we walked by, will be brought to them along with plenty of water.” She explained to him, and Waylen stepped under the roof of the small building to escape the sun.

Now in the shade he felt a bit refreshed, enough at least to wipe his forehead dry without it being a wasted effort. She stepped in to join him.

“I think that will be more than enough, Your Highness.” He told her.

The guard that had left before was now returning with a parcel in his hands, wrapped in a thin sheet of paper. This attracted the Princess’ attention and when he arrived, he offered the parcel to her, but instead of taking it she reached between the open folds of the paper and pulled out a long, narrow, sandy looking stick.

She bit into it with a crunch.

“If there is anything else you think your companions will need, just tell Ser Lyrren and he will make it so.” She told him after swallowing.

“So far, I think everything is going to be fine, but I will certainly convey any requests to Ser Lyrren should they arise. I am very pleased to be able to see the city and the tournament grounds today. Thank you for taking the time to show me.” He replied, Her Highness loudly biting into the stick again.

It looked like a slender piece of hard bread, coated in some kind of coarse powder.

“You are very welcome, Your Highness. It’s called a yik.” She replied, noticing he’d been watching the stick of bread between her fingers.

He nodded. She then said something in Atinan, and the guard with the paper offered it to him, and Waylen reluctantly looked inside the paper, saw there was a small bundle of the narrow sticks wrapped within. Since it was now being offered to him, he wanted to be polite. He reached inside and took one. It was grainy under his fingertips, the sandy powder revealed to be grains of salt.

Lifting it to his nose he smelled salt and sugar. He bit into it with a crunch of his own and was met with a strange combination of salty and sweet. The salt on the outside was the first flavor, then as he chewed, he was met with the taste of the crunchy bread, somewhat bland and only slightly sweet.

“During the Festival, yik will be sold all across the city alongside fresh honey. Yik is more salty than sweet, but the honey gives balance.” She added, taking another bite.

“Interesting. I think I would enjoy it more with the honey when the Festival is here.” He replied.

“Most do, but honey is expensive. Many years ago father made arrangements to sell certain things at lower prices to the merchants, in order to make their produce cheaper during the Festival. A lot of our city’s luxury is easily obtained during the Festival, so Atinans come to visit us every year during this time.” She told him.

“That’s very wise, Your Highness. I would imagine the city becomes quite crowded as a result if too many arrive.” He told her, and she nodded.

“It changes from year to year, but we always see many thousands come all at once. Already most of those that want to be here have arrived. It’s good for Anya Sur, as they all bring goods for trade, and money to purchase more for themselves. They flood the city with things we want in exchange for cheap yik with honey, the fights in the arena, and much more.” The Princess replied.

“That certainly sounds like good fortune for the people of the city, Your Highness.” He replied.

Thousands coming all at once was a large number of people, all of whom would have come by camel and with their own luggage. They would have to stable their animals and find lodging for themselves. He certainly saw no evidence of any of this when he first arrived in Anya Sur. The road of Anya Betine had been completely empty save for the soldiers that guarded it.

Her Highness finished the last of her yik, then took another one from the guard.

“Is there anything else you’d like me to show you while we are here?” She then asked him.

He thought for a moment.

“I’ve already taken a lot of your time today, Your Highness, but I do have a question if you can answer it?” He asked her. Waylen would have liked to be shown more of the city, but that would take hours to do and surely, she would have no time to give in to that request.

She nodded for him to ask.

“When I first arrived in the city, after I was greeted by Commanders Roc and Nell, I noticed that Anya Betine was empty of its people. No one except soldiers were in sight, all of the regular folk were gone.” He told her, gesturing to the laborers nearby that were still devoting themselves to their work.

“Yes, Anya Betine was cleared for your passage hours before you arrived.” She replied, confirming everyone’s suspicion.

“We had thought that was odd, so I wanted to ask about why Her Majesty thought it was so important to clear the road? I would have liked to have seen how the city looks with all its people.” He told her.

She took a particularly large bite of her yik, less than half of it now left in her hand and waited until she was finished before replying.

“Mother was of the belief that when you arrived you would be exhausted, and so clearing Anya Betine would make your arrival at the Keep that much faster. Anya Betine is the main road of Anya Sur and sees a great deal of travelers on foot and by camel. Clearing the way of people as you moved in your wagons would have been very slow.” She explained.

“I see, that does make sense. It would have been nice if there had been another way. I hope not too many of your people were troubled by my arrival. I noticed there were a great many stalls for merchants all along the road. That’s a lot of merchants unable to do business.” He pressed, although he was not so sure why he was. Something in him just wanted to know more about why the dragons were doing as they were.

Her Highness did not immediately reply, instead finishing off the last of her yik before rubbing her fingertips together to knock the salt from her fingers.

“If any of them were inconvenienced by your arrival, it would not be you that the anger would be aimed. Everyone in Anya Sur is aware that my mother is the source of decisions like clearing Anya Betine. She can be very... She has her own way of solving problems.” She told him with a pronounced sigh.

This was not the first time he’d been told that someone’s anger would be aimed at Her Majesty for something she had done. Was this something of a common occurrence, he had to wonder.

“I was riding with Prince Waylen in his carriage when we arrived, Princess Vienna.” Landon interrupted them both.

Now that he had their attention he continued.

“The display of your military was very impressive. You must have brought soldiers from all across the city to muster so many.” He told the Princess, phrasing it as a compliment.

“Only from the Garrisons. The City Watch was not called upon to stand at attention along Anya Betine. We had enough soldiers between the East and West Garrisons to accommodate your arrival without trouble.” She replied.

“I counted many hundreds of soldiers. If you had arrived in Illian to visit Radiah, we would have had to pull soldiers from much further away. His Majesty, King Rylan, does not like keeping a standing army of great size in Illian.” Landon continued.

Waylen was now gnawing at the side of his tongue, anxious that Landon was pushing to pry into Her Majesty's military. As much as it was needed, he was worried it would not be taken well.

"I do not recall mother ever describing your army when she visited. All I know of it is what I've been told from when we marched to aide you in battle against Darfell many years ago." She replied.

"Illian is a very large city, Your Highness." Waylen interjected. "It does not have a wall around it like Anya Sur, so the city is allowed to spread out very far. Our army is spread out, too. Landon will explain it better."

"We have a garrison in Illian, but it is small. It is much like the one you have in the Keep. It is more for the defense of Castle Illian than it is for the city itself. We have small forts scattered across Radiah that serve as defense from invaders, and all of our Noble Houses employ their own armies for themselves, all of whom serve the King in times of war." Landon explained.

The Princess furled her brow.

"Mother and father have spoken to me before of these *Houses* of Radiah. They are not the kind you live in, correct? They are the other kind of house, like a kind of family?" She asked.

"Yes, Your Highness. Something like that. Old families of great wealth and reputation." He replied.

She nodded, accepting his answer.

"I cannot say that we have houses such as those in Atina Nah. Our families are old, but none but my own have an army to call its own. But like with your forts, there are tribes scattered all across Atina Nah. Somewhere in the Keep we have a record of such things, but that is something I leave to Iolla and the others. I could not tell you them all by name." She replied.

"So, it would be fair of me to assume they each had their own garrison? A village or town in Radiah is basically one of your tribes, and we have always needed to keep a garrison at each of them. Even though we have not been at war in such a long time, our history is stained by it, and we've learned hard lessons about not being prepared." Landon told her, Waylen standing silent to allow the older man to do what he himself should have found a way to do on his own.

As much as his anxiety gnawed at him, this was what his father had wanted, and now it started to happen. Waylen could only hope it would not come off as strange to their hosts.

"Yes, all of them do. It's the reason why we have so many soldiers here for the tournament. Every tribe has a garrison, led by one of our Small Commanders, and they know to watch carefully throughout the year. They pick out anyone they think has earned a place in the tournament, and then send word of it to Anya Sur. We collect the names and make a decision. This used to be something my mother would do, but she's since passed it on to me." She replied.

"So, it is you that hand picks the dragons that fight?" Waylen asked while making sure to remember that she'd referred to something called a *Small Commander*.

“Or rather, you pick from the list given to you?” He had to quickly add.

“Yes, I pick them. I often have to trust the judgement of the Small Commanders, but when I recognize a name, then I know if they are worth the journey.” She replied.

“I have been in your situation a few times. I helped gather men to fight in a jousting competition several years ago. I believe it was when Lord Richard married. I doubt you would remember it, Your Highness.” Landon added, turning to Waylen.

No, he did not recall. Waylen knew who Lord Richard was, and knew he was married, but he would have been a bit too young when it happened for him to have any memory of it.

“No, I do not.” He replied.

The sound of hooves was in the distance, only distinguishable from the noise of hammer falls by their unique pattern. Vienna’s attention had been grabbed by the sound, her head turning, and then tilting in that way Waylen had begun to notice was a very common thing dragons seemed to do. He and Landon both followed the invisible line of her gaze and watched as a small group of soldiers arrived by camel.

All but one of the dragons was a mystery to him. A female dragon hopped off her camel and shoved the reins into the hands of another soldier who’d stepped forward to meet them. Commander Nell Fah Sol’Nu was now approaching them with purpose, quickly being followed by the three other soldiers that had arrived with her.

She and her group stopped a few feet from their own and gave a salute. A salute was returned, Waylen and Landon each offering their own in the Radian tradition.

“Your Highness.” Commander Nell nodded her head respectfully to him, and he returned it with a nod of his own and a quick greeting of her name.

“Have you something to report?” The Princess then asked of the Commander, her head no longer in a tilt but her expression was still of mild curiosity.

Commander Nell replied in Atinan, and then Waylen watched as Her Highness’ brow furled. Princess Vienna replied in kind, both women now speaking their native tongue, and then what followed was a brief conversation of which Waylen and Landon both were too ignorant to understand. All Waylen could grasp was their body language, or what he felt he understood of it. If dragons were alike enough to his own kind, then what he thought he was watching was one woman insisting upon something, this being Commander Nell, and then the other woman being stubborn, that woman being Her Highness.

“Prince Waylen.” The Princess then said to him with a huff, turning to him now that her conversation with the Commander had concluded.

“Yes, Your Highness?” He asked, feeling uncertain now.

“Do you feel you’ve seen enough of the tournament grounds to satisfy your curiosity?” She asked him suddenly.

“I, yes? I believe I have seen enough. Captain Landon?” He asked of his counterpart.

The Captain nodded but chose to say nothing.

“Then I must return you to the Keep, as I am needed there. If there is anything we need of you or your companions, word will be sent, but I trust that everything in the tournament grounds will be to your satisfaction.” She told him, then gestured for the two of them to follow her.

Commander Nell struck a salute, along with her cohort, and gave him a firm nod. He returned it and began to follow the Princess back the way they came until they reached their camels. As they mounted their steeds he stole a glance at Landon, whose brow was furled. Waylen didn’t know why they were suddenly being ushered back towards the Keep, but there must have been a reason. Her Highness did not seem to be in any sort of hurry until the Commander arrived.

Just another reason to learn Atinan, he supposed.

With Edgard's passing, Theo became King, and one day, Yvvie and I will each have to give up our crowns to others, passing on the right to rule to whomever we decide is worthy of it, as we do not yet have children. May never have children.

In Darfell, the man that was once King is long since dead. Yvvie made sure to kill him a long time ago, ending the war between Darfell and Radiah decisively. That King had a son, and now that son is grown into adulthood with the weight of a crown on his own head.

Theo has sent us word, that a son now seeks revenge for his father, and war yet again comes to Radiah's doorstep. Yvvie is already moving, an energy in her step that I haven't seen in a long while. The prospect of violence has stirred her to action. I will leave the war to her, as she has the mind for it. She's already mustered the soldiers she trusts most within the city, and many more are being drawn from the ranks scattered across Atina Nah.

It will be left to me to ensure that Anya Sur is well maintained, and that Atina Nah holds herself together. I am not a mind suited to conflict, at least not in the manner that spills blood. I can only hope that my tongue is sharp enough to quell any dissent in Yvvie's absence.

Anya Sur will be fine. The new wall that Yvvie wants built around the city is already under construction and that will keep everyone occupied for a long time. We are paying a high price to draw fresh Atinan blood from across the tribes to hasten its completion. Construction of this scale will take years to complete.

With such a mighty wall around the City she won't feel the need to have so many soldiers march across the City to keep it safe. The people will breathe easier. Yvvie's fears are too great for her to contain within herself, it taints her every action. The people can feel it as they go about their daily lives, feeling the smothering weight of fear, knowing that their Queen expects war to come to her doorstep at any moment.

Maybe with a big enough wall she will finally rest. The rot is still festering across Atina Nah, but with every skirmish, with every raid, Yvvie executes more of the rot. Sooner or later, she'll have killed them all, as their numbers do not seem to be growing.

I do not know how much of this she attributes to her mastery of violence, and how much she puts to the wealth of bribery I've sunk into the tribes. I've done all I can to drown the people of Atina Nah in the riches of Anya Sur, to show them that being ruled by us is far better than what they lived under before. I can't say myself who I think is more responsible for the change, but I hope that it's me. If I could ask anything of Atina Nah, I would plead with Her to see to it that it was my doing!

Because if it's Yvvie, then I do not know if there will be a future for us if everything that we've built here sits on a foundation of blood.

“So, you think it's many thousands then?” Shane asked over tea.

Waylen had only water in his glass, as he felt he'd had enough heat for today. They'd only been back in Waylen's rooms for little more than an hour and now they were gathered around his table. He was joined only by Shane and Landon. It was by the Captain's insistence that they gathered so soon, Waylen

feeling that the man was barely holding in his excitement, even though what he was excited about was paltry.

“Easily thousands, possibly several so, but the full number we could not glean. If we had a map of their territory, and could count the tribes and estimate their size, then we may be able to better understand how large her army is. We do know she has five hundred gathered here for the tournament alone, but that is a recent development. It did not seem to me that those five hundred had already gathered when we arrived weeks ago.” The Captain replied.

“And the whole roadway was lined with soldiers. There seemed to be several dozen of them, I could not count them all.” Shane replied.

“Those were soldiers only. According to Her Highness, none of their City Watch were standing guard along the road. I suspect that Anya Sur has more than a thousand troops at the ready at any given time. Between the three garrisons we know about, and whatever their City Watch uses to house their men, I would wager good gold that Her Majesty has a sizeable force here. Thousands here in Anya Sur alone.” The other replied.

“These are not certainties.” Waylen interrupted. The other two seemed excited, but Waylen was concerned.

“No, not certainties, but we know enough to understand that if they were asked to render us aid, they should be able to spare thousands.” Landon replied.

“But how *many* thousands? The last time Her Majesty sent us an army I believe that it was some five thousand strong. Could she do that again, and quickly? Would it take her time to muster so many?” Shane asked.

Waylen sighed. Behind him a door opened, and from the kitchen Christa arrived, and began to ask if any of them wanted more tea. Shane agreed, Landon waved her a no, and Waylen still preferred water. The interruption stopped everyone from talking, and Waylen’s anxiety was gnawing at him uncomfortably, just like how his teeth were chewing at the side of his tongue. Uncomfortable. He knew his father well enough to know that he would ask very specific questions upon their return.

How many soldiers? How soon to muster? How long would it take them to reach Radiah? How well equipped will they be? His father would ask, and then many more after that. His brothers, too, would have questions, and so would all of his advisors.

Shane and Landon were riding high on wings of excitement, and perhaps Waylen should have been, too. He just couldn’t. He was too busy thinking of all the ways he’d disappoint his father when he asked one question after another and was met with one unsatisfying answer after another in return.

His father was nothing like his mother, but they could both be very demanding. Father was less oppressive, but that almost made it worse. When he was younger, Waylen learned of the word apathy, and as soon as he understood its meaning, he came to realize that apathy was what he often felt towards his mother. Upsetting her didn’t make him feel any sort of guilt or regret. She was too difficult to please, so

he just turned to apathy. The less he cared the easier it was for him to wake in the morning and make it through the day.

But if he disappointed his father, he did feel guilt from that. He didn't want to fail him, especially after being trusted to make this journey for something so important.

"We don't know those answers yet." Landon told Shane in reply to his questions, Waylen knowing it was no different for his own unspoken ones.

"Father wants those answers, or else this journey will have been pointless." Waylen replied, a note of bitterness in his voice that quieted the other two men.

"We are not finished here. There is time left yet." Shane reassured him, the Captain shifting in his seat.

"The Festival is soon. In a few days the festivities will begin, and we will have a chance to see the entire city in a flourish of activity. I expect Her Majesty will have a big show of her strength, not just at the tournament, but all throughout the parade, too." The Captain said directly to Waylen for his benefit.

"Your reason for this?" Shane asked him.

He turned to look at the older man.

"When we arrived, she emptied the entire road from the gate to her fortress! She carved a clean path through her city just so we could get to her doorstep faster, and the entire time we were given a big show of her army. She knows we're here, Prince Waylen is her guest of honor, so why wouldn't she consider putting on more of a performance?" Landon replied.

Shane shrugged in agreement.

"Perhaps you are right. We don't know how well she will be guarded during the parade, but if this were His and Her Majesty in Illian, we would have planned to have soldiers placed all along the parade route from Castle Illian and back again." The older man replied.

"I see no reason to think Queen Yvvie would do any different. She puts soldiers and guards everywhere like a tree drops its leaves. When any of us go to the garrison to train that's all we see. More swords here than servants." Landon replied.

"This may only be because I am here, or because the Festival is so near. We don't know what she is like on a normal week, or even month." Waylen told him.

"This is true, but all the more reason then to think she will show off her muscle. That seems to be how her mind works. Put muscle everywhere." He replied back.

Margo came to them from the kitchen, a number of small plates carefully held in her hands. She set them on the table, one for each of them, and produced a small spoon for every plate. There was a substantial dollop of white pudding in the center of each.

“Your Highness, Marissa asks that you all taste the pudding for her. It is another batch of picti mal. We are practicing for the banquet.” She told them quietly before taking a step back from the table.

“I wish it wasn’t the flavor of mint.” Landon replied, having not even touched his spoon.

Waylen tasted it, and it was to his liking. He couldn’t say if it was the same as what had been served to them before by the dragons, but it was a pudding with a flavor of cool mint. He said as much to Margo, and Shane did the same before making Landon taste his. Once all three of them had given their input, Margo retreated back to the kitchen to make her report to Marissa.

“It will be much better with cake.” Shane told Landon.

“We won’t be there to eat it.” Landon grumbled.

Waylen dragged the side of his spoon across the plate to gather more of the pudding. It wasn’t unpleasant, sweetened with sugar, and with how hot it was each day he enjoyed the cool flavor. Perhaps the Captain simply had a distaste for mint, but to Waylen it felt appropriate. It was no shock to him that they even brewed beer with picti, if the result was something that tasted cold.

“Can we acquire a map of Atina Nah? One that shows all of the tribes?” Waylen asked aloud.

“A map of Atina Nah, yes, but will it have every tribe marked?” Shane replied, shrugging in reply to his own question.

“I would not expect the maps we already possess to be of poor quality. How much can the landscape change? Their tribes are presumably very old, like most of our villages and towns. Whatever older maps we have should be accurate to the present day.” Landon replied.

This sounded true to Waylen. Tribes, or villages, do not simply come and go like the wind does.

“I agree, but it might be wise to ask if we could be given a new map. Surely, they have a need for such things, their own cartographers. I cannot recall the last time we have requested a map from them. I know we have in the past, but it would have been a long time ago.” Shane replied.

Waylen sighed.

“We can be fair about it. It would not appear unusual to ask for something new to replace the old. I think I would be more than able to ask Ser Lyrren for one, and do so in a way that makes it clear we would like it for...” The older man continued, pondering for a moment.

“Trade reasons, perhaps. I will think of something suitable before I speak to him.” He finished.

“I don’t see why they would refuse, unless they simply didn’t have a map to spare us.” The Captain agreed.

Waylen nodded.

“You can ask him.” Waylen relented, giving the older man his blessing.

There was a knock on the door and Codi hopped up from his chair near the door and carefully answered it. The young man turned his head towards them, telling them a serving cart had arrived.

“Let them in.” Shane replied.

Codi pulled the door open all the way and a dragon in servant’s garb entered with a heavily laden cart. It was food, but not yet edible. Waylen knew well enough about the plans going on in Marissa’s kitchen, so it was clear to him that the cart was supplying dry and nonperishable ingredients for their meals and likely the upcoming banquet.

Shane rose from his seat and left to the kitchen to inform the women of the new arrival.

“You worry too much, Your Highness.” The Captain said, drawing Waylen’s attention back to him.

He sighed.

“Perhaps I do.” He agreed. Perhaps he did.

My fingertips drip no differently than hers do, just of a different sort. While hers drip with blood, mine drip of honey. If viewed a certain way, the two look much alike.

She's been gone for a few months now and word from Radiah tells me that it may yet be many months before the war is done. They are winning, and from the words on the page it sounds that they are faring far better than the first time Yvvie marched there. I don't know if this is true, as letters don't often carry the full weight of truth. She will tell me how it really went when she returns.

In the meantime, I have been making sure that honey flows, and liberally at that. We are in a measure of debt now, but so far it is nothing that we can't endure. Lots of promises have been made, and in the future, some may come to me and demand a favor be returned in exchange for what I've asked of them these past few weeks and more. All prices to be paid, but I think I much prefer it this way than her way.

But when she comes back, she will want to know everything that has happened in her absence, and what has been done about it, and to know of what has failed to happen. Her mind is sharp, not unlike my own, but we are very different people. She is like a knife, sharpened to excess and on both sides. Effective, and brutally so. What soldiers she did not take with her have been maintaining a spider's web around Atina Nah, stretched taut but holding.

I've helped them all I can, sending luxuries out as gifts, placating the tribes as much as I am able. It seems to be working, my generosity and bribery doing a lot more lifting than what her sword would have done by cutting. She's effective, but I fear it is nothing but short term. An unruly whelp fears their parents' scolds but only when they are angry. As soon as the parent calms or departs, the whelp is unruly yet again.

Bribery isn't good parenting either, but if I can convince enough of the tribes that they are better with us at their head than without, then that might give them pause. If I can inflict a draught onto the rebel forces that try to strangle us from the shadows, then that will be the long-term solution we need if Anya Sur is to survive as the head of this new serpent.

When she returns, I know she will be pleased to see that nothing has gotten worse. I can even show her that things have improved! She won't like that we have many more debts and owe many more favors, but my tongue is as sharp as her sword. I will convince her that my methods are working, and that the struggle will be worth it in the end when the fighting stops, and our people can live in peace for the first time in more than a century.

I must make her understand that the blood we've spilled will rise past our ankles if we are not careful with our course. Bloodshed brought us to this place, and more of it will only keep us here.

Waylen felt much the same way as he would have back home. Being called for so abruptly, and without any warning, was so much like what his own mother would have done, and the end result was never pleasant. He was feeling that same sense of dread as he followed Ser Lyrren down the hall, every footstep drawing him further and further away from the safety of his own rooms and his companions.

Marissa and the others had already begun preparing tonight's dinner for everyone, but now whatever would have been for his plate would go to waste if no one made room to eat it. Her Majesty had

waited until the last moment to send for him. He did not even have time to change into one of his finer tunics.

“Ser Lyrren, did Her Majesty give a reason for tonight’s dinner?” He asked as they walked, as he’d not been told why when he’d been summoned, apart from being told it was dinner.

He was currently surrounded by dragons. The only one not significantly taller than him tonight was Captain Norra, who kept pace with him but a single step behind. Further behind him were another two dragons that had come with Ser Lyrren, and neither were faces he recognized from the group Captain Norra commanded. Waylen presumed they were members of the Queen’s own guard. Both were as tall as Ser Lyrren and were very strong looking males.

“No, Your Highness, she did not.” The dragon replied.

Was he lying or telling the truth? Waylen didn’t know the answer, but he would have liked to. He’d only met Her Majesty twice in all the time he’d been here. She was a distant, but heavy presence. He knew she was here, somewhere, but always aloof and unwilling to engage with him. Perhaps if things were different, had been different, these past several years she would be much more cordial. The others were probably back in his room discussing why he might have been summoned at such short notice.

He was worried, his fear of asking too many questions was rising high within him now. It was only the previous day that he’d been taken to see the tournament grounds. Perhaps there was more to that conversation between Commander Nell and Her Highness? Waylen had to control his habit of overthinking; he didn’t speak their language! They could have spoken of any number of things and not one of them would have been about Her Majesty.

“I see. I hope she is not displeased with me in any way.” He replied.

Waylen almost regretted having said anything of sort as soon as it left his lips. He had yet to be given a single reason to believe that the dragons were wise to why he had been sent to Anya Sur. Upon hearing him, the Ser Lyrren then quickly pivoted his head to look at him, and for a brief moment Waylen thought he’d seen an expression of surprise on the dragon’s narrow face. It was gone as soon as it had arrived, so who’s to say if it was real or imagined.

“No, Your Highness. Her Majesty merely wishes that you join her for dinner.” The dragon told him.

He nodded in reply, but he wasn’t feeling any better. He’d invited her to dinner himself not so long ago and had been refused. Now, suddenly, she’s reversing her course? Was she drawing him in as an apology, perhaps? Had his dinner with her daughter changed her tune? Or perhaps it was his visit outside the city, that conversation between the Commander and the Princess. Waylen drew in a quiet breath and tried to relax himself. He would not know anything until he was in her towering presence.

Ser Lyrren then led him to the part of the Keep where Her Majesty and her daughters kept their rooms. Despite every hallway looking nearly the same as any other, at least this area had a large intersection that helped it to stand out from the rest. Waylen could remember his first time here and being

led down the left path towards the dining room, and so when the dragon guiding him walked straight through the intersection instead of turning, Waylen was confused.

This was not the way to the dining room.

“Are we not going to the dining room?” He asked.

“No, Your Highness. Her Majesty rarely uses that room. The two of you will be having dinner in her drawing room instead.” The dragon explained it to him.

He was being taken to her private rooms, so much like his own mother. How many times had he stood in mother’s sunroom while she drank tea in between her many lectures? He’d lost count. Waylen bit down lightly on the end of his tongue, like a warning. He was not in Illian and Her Majesty was not his mother. The Queen was a lot of difficult to understand things, but if she was inviting him to have dinner then he should be taking it at its face value and not searching for secret messages in her actions.

They passed by Princess Vienna’s doorway, Waylen wondering if she and her husband were there, and then not too much later they stopped at an unassuming door guarded by four dragons. Ser Lyrren approached one of the guards, spoke with him briefly in Atinan, and then the guard began to speak to one of his peers who then reached out a hand and knocked on the door rhythmically. It was not a normal knock, but instead two quick raps of the knuckles followed by a pause, then single solid knock with only the base of the palm.

He thought that was odd, but before he could invest any more time to consider it, a sharp whistle sounded from the other side of the door. Ser Lyrren approached the door and opened it while the guard he’d spoken to resumed his post.

“Your Highness.” He was welcomed inside, and he cautiously entered.

He then found himself standing in a simple, modestly sized drawing room. It was square in shape with carved stone walls. The ceiling was higher than most others in the Keep and hanging in the middle was a simple, but sturdy-looking metal chandelier that supported five lanterns from its hooks. Between the lanterns and the light color of the stone walls, the room was quite well lit and very warm.

But Her Majesty was not here, and every door was shut, save the one he’d just entered from. Ser Lyrren followed him inside and stepped around him to approach the room’s centerpiece. A round wooden table sat beneath the lantern light, and it was furnished with only two chairs. The table itself was bare of any silverware or setting.

“Your Highness, Her Majesty is most likely very busy so she will join you soon, please you may sit.” The dragon said while withdrawing one of the chairs from the table for him.

Waylen thanked him but replied that he would like to wait until Her Majesty had joined him before he took a seat. The dragon nodded, pushing the chair back into place.

“Since Her Majesty must be preoccupied, you are welcome to wait for her here until she arrives. I do not know what progress has been made on tonight’s dinner, so I will leave you in her care until I return.” Ser Lyrren then told him.

“I’m to wait alone?” He asked then, suddenly feeling vulnerable.

“Yes, but the wait should not be a long one. If she asks, please tell her I intend to return soon with dinner.” The dragon told him, then excused himself.

The dragon made a quick exit, shutting the door quietly behind himself. Waylen was now alone in a silent room. He stood still at first, listening for the noises of life, but found none. Whatever Her Majesty was doing was either in a room very far away or she was just being very quiet. The seconds then became a minute, and as the second minute approached Waylen finally moved from his spot and approached the table.

He touched a hand to the back of the chair and considered sitting but then stopped himself. It would be more polite to remain standing until she joined him, and then they could sit together. Without knowing how long he would have to wait, he began to examine the rest of the room, moving his eyes around the walls. The only furniture apart from the table and chairs were bookshelves. They were made of wood, but the construction did not look Radian. Neither did the table nor chairs for that matter.

The shelves stole his attention, each one adorned with an assortment of items. He approached one of the shelves and found a variety of small cloth-wrapped parcels of differing sizes and shapes, each tied shut with threads or ribbons. There were small wooden boxes, too, each with their own unique size and shape. Waylen dared not touch a single thing, but as he studied each item with his eyes, he found that most of what was on the shelf was wrapped in cloth or inside a box.

There was a single sheathed dagger on one shelf, neither wrapped nor boxed. He left that bookshelf to study another, finding more parcels, spying then a Radian hourglass, its top covered in a thick layer of dust. Looking back to the other items he saw that they, too, had a layer of dust over them. Waylen pivoted to look at the opposite wall and the bookshelves that were there. More parcels wrapped or boxed, and then the occasional personal item mixed in with them.

He thought he had it all figured out now. These bookshelves were the place where gifts went to die. They had to have been gifts, things given to her over the years, and she just sat them on the shelf without bothering to open most of them. The items standing out on their own like the dagger or the hourglass probably hadn’t come in a box or a wrapper when she’d received them.

Waylen didn’t want to touch anything, but out of all the things on the bookshelves, his curiosity was drawn most tightly to the only items in the room that were actually books. In the corner of the room, on a single shelf, sat a baker’s dozen of books. The leather of their bindings looked very old with the spines so worn that it looked as if Her Majesty had read them many dozens of times. He could not see any titles written on the spines, so his curiosity finally bested him. He reached out, gliding a finger from one book to another until he settled on one that was especially well worn.

He carefully slid it from the shelf, gently blowing away a thin layer of dust. He saw no title on the front cover, but after flipping it open, he found that it was a Radian work. It was very old. Waylen had

seen books with bindings like this before, but they were in the castle library, and he was seldom allowed to touch them. Everything he'd been given to read was bound differently and in much better repair than this.

He turned the first of its yellow pages and found the title. It was a playbook for *The Shepherd of Old Wood*. It'd been a *long* time since he'd last seen that play. The door next to him suddenly began to open and he snapped the book shut in surprise.

He quickly pivoted on his heel to face the doorway as Her Majesty stepped into the room, dressed fully in a brown and red tunic, but no armor that he could see. It was very similar to what Princess Vienna wore the few times he'd met with her.

Waylen was in an awkward spot, partially obscured by the door as the Queen held it open. There was a look of confusion on her face before she noticed him standing behind the door. She swung the door shut, and while he still held the book in his hand, he brought his other up to offer her a salute.

"Good evening, Your Majesty." He told her with a bow of his head.

He watched her eyes as they met his own before darting down to the book in his hand, and her look of irritation grew. Without saying a word, she approached him, her great height looming over him like a predator. She snatched the book from his hand, a sharp chill running up his spine as she lifted the book high and pushed it back into place on the bookshelf.

"You are *not* a child, do not touch everything just because it's there." She told him sharply, then pivoted herself on a heel and started moving towards the table. His heart was now pounding in his ears, and his skin felt cold.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I thought I had recognized what the book was, and I only wanted to see if it was true." He lied, his voice wavering with weakness despite his best effort to hide it. It was enough that she turned back to look at him, and her look of irritation held for a moment before she exhaled, then relaxed.

"Those are Myunn's, and they are very old. Sit." She told him before pulling out a chair for herself.

He approached the table to join her, feeling like his body was now made out of heavy wood. He withdrew his seat and sat down in it.

"Thank you for inviting me to dinner, Your Majesty." Waylen told her.

She stared at him for a moment, then nodded.

"Lyrren brought you?" She asked him.

"Yes, Your Majesty, I was escorted here by Ser Lyrren and Captain Norra, and two guards I did not know." He replied, and then she leaned back in her chair, the wood creaking under her weight as she did. She was back to staring at him and it was making him uncomfortable.

“And he left you by yourself?” She asked, and Waylen explained that Ser Lyrren had left to check on dinner and would be returning with it shortly.

“They are cooking slowly today.” She then said with irritation before pushing herself back up and out of her chair.

Waylen didn't know if he was expected to join her, but she was already gesturing with her hand for him to remain where he was. She left the room through a different door, and he turned his head to see where she'd gone. The adjacent room she'd stepped into was... Completely furnished in Radian. He couldn't see much from the table, but there were a lot of wooden items that looked like they were of Radian construction.

Her Majesty was making a lot of noise in the room, like she was searching for something, the clinking of glass coming through the doorway. When she emerged, she was holding a bottle of wine in one hand and two empty glasses in the other. She returned to her seat and put the glasses on the table, pushing one towards Waylen.

She then surprised him by removing the cork with her fingernails, and then she began to liberally pour herself a glass of wine. The bottle was Radian, though he could not see the vintage.

“You did not drink much wine at dinner on your first day. Water will be brought with dinner for you if you grow sick of wine.” She told him once her glass was overfilled, and then she began to fill his own. He did not need to tell her when to stop as he had feared. She stopped just short of giving him half of a glass.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” He replied and reached for his glass, hating that he could feel his hand trembling despite trying to stay calm. He hoped that she did not notice.

He took a sip to be polite and was grateful it tasted good. It was the first pleasant thing he'd experienced since leaving his room, and then he noticed she was staring at him again. He didn't know if there was something wrong, so he was forced to ask her.

“Your Maj-“ He tried to begin, but she curtly cut him off.

“Yvvie.” She said, her eyes glued on him still.

He paused, uncertain of what to say, he was confused.

“*Yeh Vee*. We are in private, Waylen, you need not honor me here with my title. You can speak my name.” She told him.

He nodded slowly, feeling unsure of everything.

“Yes, Yvvie. I will.” He relented, doing as he was told.

“Do you do the same to Lyrren? Norra or my daughters, or your guards?” She asked, her voice stern.

“I did not know. I am sorry.” He replied.

She snorted, then lifted her glass and tossed it back, draining a good portion of it in two gulps. When she lowered it back to the table she sighed.

“It has been a long time since your father visited, but I had assumed he still knew enough to teach you simple courtesy.” She then said.

“I am very sorry, Yvvie.” He stammered, and then it must have become clear to her how uncomfortable he was.

“I am not trying to frighten you, Waylen. Everything you do comes to my ear, and the longer you are here the more I learn how little your father prepared you. He sent you to me without having even told you not to go around touching people as if you were in Radiah! You are fortunate you had done that to Thalla in your rooms and not elsewhere, few in the Keep can keep secrets without me threatening to have them skinned.” She continued, and Waylen didn’t know what to say.

He sat in his chair, the room feeling hot and stuffy, suddenly claustrophobic. Her words were echoing those of his own, and of Shane’s, laying it out for all to see and hear that Radiah had truly fallen in the years since their two kingdoms had signed the Treaty of Five Kings.

Her Majesty stared at him for a moment longer, then looked away, exhaling hard before lifting her glass again to down the rest of its contents. She had emptied her glass in only two swallows, and then she told him to remain seated as she herself began to push herself out of her chair. She stood, lifted the bottle and refilled her glass, then sat the bottle back down before walking around the table to leave for the adjacent room a second time.

Waylen drew in a deep breath before harshly exhaling, feeling like he was struggling just to breathe. Even when his mother was at her worst he never felt so threatened. Her Majesty was a towering figure, frightening in scale and with power he’d heard so much about. When she returned, he jumped in his seat when the door shut loudly behind him.

She moved around the table to retake to her seat, placing a fresh bottle of wine right next to the first, before sitting down again. In her hand was a small wooden box, which she sat down on the table before picking it up again. Waylen didn’t know what to say to her now, he felt trapped. She was now staring at the box in her hand, then after a long moment she opened it, looked inside, then snapped it shut again like she didn’t know what to do with it.

“My husband is better with words than me. I will do my best to give this to you as he would have done, as he did for your siblings.” She finally said after a long moment of staring at the box. She stood up again and walked around the table before asking him to join her.

He felt heavy, but managed to rise from his seat with the dragon in front of him, towering over him like Anya Sur did the entire city. She lifted the box and opened its lid, then reached inside to remove a piece of metal. She held it in her palm for a moment, then sat the box down on the table next to them.

“This is a gift to you, Waylen. It is a brooch that Myunn had made for you when we first learned of your birth. It should have been given to you as a baby, but I was too impatient and insisted that we leave to visit Radiah before it could be finished by the jeweler. Your brothers and sister each have one, and now this one is yours.” She told him before offering the brooch.

He hesitated, but then found the courage to lift his hand, and she dropped it into his palm. The brooch was heavy, made of solid steel. It was ornate, its design resembling his family’s crest. The head of Radiah’s double-sided axe was in the center, and wrapped around it like a wreath were two oak boughs. Whoever made this was talented, the steel shaped expertly to capture the detail of the axe head, and the boughs were intricate with their bark and the small tufts of leaves that gave it life.

Waylen had seen his brothers wear heavy metal brooches like this before on their tunics, but he did not know where they’d come from. Now he knew.

“Thank you, Yvvie.” He told her, looking up the long distance to her face. She nodded once to him, then took a step back.

She then seemed to retreat back around the table to resume her seat, gesturing for him to do the same. He sat, still holding the brooch in his hands.

“You can put it back in the box, you don’t have to wear it now.” She told him, then grabbed her glass and took another large drink.

Waylen picked up the box, wooden with a red felt lining on the inside, and sat the brooch down within it before closing it shut and returning it to the table.

“What did you think the book was, if it compelled you to pull it off of his shelf?” She asked him then. For a moment he struggled to get his thoughts together, caught off guard again and scrambling to remember what books even were until he succeeded.

“I thought it might be a playbook.” He lied again; he had no idea what the book was of. It’s just the one he decided to grab because it was so well worn. “It’s The Shepherd of Old Wood.”

“He read all of those books when he was learning to speak Radian. He made me read them after he was done, and then our daughters. He could recite some of them from memory if he wanted.” She explained to him, revealing at the same time why some of the books were so worn-looking. They’d been repeatedly read for many years.

“The Shepherd of Old Wood is a good play. I haven’t read it as a book, but I saw it performed when I was younger.” He told her.

“I only know it as written on the page. Edgard made me endure a play once, but it was for a different story. A woman fell in love with her dead husband’s horse before taking her own life after the horse dies.” She continued.

He knew the play, but he was shocked to hear her speak so much and so openly. Waylen wasn’t sure he was prepared to hold a real conversation with the Queen of Atina Nah.

“I’ve seen that play, too.” He replied.

He’d seen it twice, but he didn’t like it either time he saw it performed. The first time was when he was very small and he didn’t understand it, and the second time was a few years after that, and he still didn’t understand it. Now that he’d come of age and had read so many other plays and seen more performed, he thought he now understood the point. The main character’s husband died suddenly, but she still had his horse, and since the horse was all she had left of her husband she became very attached to it. The horse then fell ill and died, and after having lost both her husband and the last thing of his that reminded her of him, she killed herself in her grief. Understanding it did not increase his enjoyment of it.

“We do not have plays here, even though he tried. He thought that he could transport plays the same way he could wood and steel, and that the people would enjoy them.” She continued, then drank more.

“King Edgard did?” Waylen asked, thinking of his ancestor.

She scoffed, drank again from her glass, then resumed talking.

“No, Edgard did not care for plays. Those were for Heron. She liked them. Myunn wanted plays to be popular here, but Atinans do not like plays. We do not need a stage to tell each other our stories, unless it is for a fire dance.” She answered.

For the first time since he arrived, he felt like Her Majesty was revealing herself to be a real person, speaking so informally with him. He dared not let down his guard, but his fear had been quieted somewhat, his calm returning.

“Queen Heron liked plays?” He asked her then.

“Yes, all the women in your family liked plays. Your men, save a few, did not. They enjoyed our fire dances more, though it was rare that any of them got to see one.” She told him.

King Edgard and Queen Heron were so long since dead that he didn’t know very much about them. He knew their names, where they each sat in his family tree, and the history attached to them, but they weren’t people he knew like his own parents. Did Her Majesty really remember people from so long ago?

“You remember them well?” He asked her.

“Your...” She said, then heaved a sigh while shutting her eyes.

“You say it in your tongue like this, don’t you? Great *great* grandparents?” She said the last part slowly.

He nodded to her that they did. She made a quiet noise in her throat.

“Yes, I remember them. I remember everyone I meet if I’ve met them more than once.” She told him.

There was a knock on her door, and Her Majesty sharply whistled without warning, making him jump in his seat. Did dragons always whistle like this, it was so loud! The door opened and Ser Lyrren, or just *Lyrren*, stepped inside first, and then silently urged a pair of younger servants into the room. One pushed a serving cart while the other carried a large metal plate covered in what looked like table settings.

“Your Majesty, dinner is ready.” Lyrren bowed to her, and she nodded with irritation and gestured impatiently with her hand to serve it.

She continued to look impatient as all three dragons quickly set the table for them. Waylen and Her Majesty were each presented with a small plate and a pair of utensils, just a knife and a fork. A large metal bowl was placed between them in the center of the table, and the lid was removed. It was meelish, the meatball dish from his first dinner! He hoped they tasted the same as before. A pitcher of water was produced, and then a wicker bowl was then taken from the cart, which was laden heavily with small bread rolls. *Tan*, if Waylen recalled their name correctly.

When the trio were done Lyrren removed another bottle of wine from the cart and asked if Her Majesty needed anything else.

“No. You may wait outside.” She told him curtly, and he bowed and ushered the other two dragons out of the room along with the serving cart. The bottle of wine had been left on the table. There were now three bottles that Waylen could see, and he had no idea if Her Majesty had any more hiding in the other room.

“You looked like you enjoyed meelish when we ate together last, so I had that prepared for tonight.” She told him, not hesitating to grab two meatballs at a time with her fingers before dropping them onto her own small plate.

He did the same, but with his fork instead, using his knife to knock the meatball off the fork and onto his plate before reaching for another. His method was not as quick as Her Majesty’s, but it left his fingers clean.

“I did enjoy the meelish, but I liked everything I tried that night.” He lied, thinking of the camel meat he’d been told was used for the valli.

“You do not need to lie. You wear too much of your grandfather’s face when you eat something you don’t like. Was it the camel meat?” She asked him, like she had the power to peer into his own thoughts.

He froze in place, holding his knife halfway through cutting one of the meelish on his plate to make it smaller. What did she mean that he wore his grandfather's face, and how did she know that he didn't like the camel? Had he not hidden that as well as he thought he had?

"The camel meat surprised me." He finally said after a moment.

She grunted, a noise deep in her throat. Her Majesty popped a meatball into her mouth and chewed. Only after she swallowed did she reply with words.

"I should have lied when you asked what meat was in the valli." She told him, then reached for the opened bottle of wine to refresh her glass. He'd hardly touched his own wine, so he joined her by taking a drink.

"I did not think that it tasted bad, it's just that camels are ugly and have a bad smell to them. I much prefer horses." He told her, deciding to let himself be candid with her if she was doing so with him.

She made another noise in her throat, almost like she was holding herself back from chuckling.

"Should I have served you horse instead? It can be arranged." Her Majesty offered, and then her mouth twisted into a toothy smile while his own expression went slack at the suggestion that she'd slaughter and serve him a horse.

"I would prefer camel." He confessed, preferring to spare the horse and punish the camel if those were to be his only choices.

"You are not the first to complain of camel, and not the last. I can have the big kitchen slaughter one of our pigs the next time valli is served. Any large animal will do." She told him.

He thanked her.

Afterwards, Her Majesty focused on her meal and her wine. Waylen was unsure if he should provoke conversation or simply enjoy his own meal the same as she was doing. The meelish was good, and so was the bread and wine. He had to admit to himself that the simplicity of Atinan meals was better for him than the meals at home. At least here, he could trust that everything he was being served, simple as it was, was something he would enjoy eating. That was not always the case at home when the servants brought out course after course.

"I was told you were taken to see where the tournament is to be held. What did you think of it?" She suddenly asked him.

He had to swallow first, which gave him a brief moment to think of his reply.

"I left me feeling very excited for the tournament." He replied, pausing for a moment before deciding not to use her daughter's title, since they were still in private. "Vienna showed me a great deal. From what I have been told, it is the tournament that I am most interested in seeing."

She grunted in reply.

“I had not been made aware that she planned for you to see the grounds, but it is good that you are excited. A great deal of effort goes into preparing the city for the Festival.” She then told him.

Waylen then thought back to the conversation between Her Highness and Commander Nell. Without the ability to speak Atinan, he would never know for certain, but now he thought he understood the nature of it. Her Majesty had not known that he was being taken outside the Keep yesterday.

“Vienna did explain that a lot of effort was spent each year for the Festival. I cannot imagine how difficult it must be to bring it all together properly. Though, she only told me about the work done for the tournament. I understand that a lot of cooking must be done for the banquet, as my own cooks will be preparing a dessert, but I have not been told much about the parade.” Waylen replied.

“The banquet is the easiest to sort. Everyone is expected to arrive when they are told to, and then dinner will be served. There will be a fire dance for entertainment.” She told him, mentioning *fire dance* again, something he didn’t know anything about.

After another large swallow from her glass, she continued.

“The parade is the most difficult, as we must work with the entire city to plan it. I cannot simply command them as I would my army, so the work of it is slow. We will start at the courtyard in front of the Keep and travel through most of the city. You will see my people gather to watch while they eat and drink. There will be fire dances at all the cisterns, much singing. It’s been a very long time since one of you have come to see it.” She finished, then immediately took another drink.

“I am very glad that father chose me to come, Yvvie. The longer I am here the more I wish I knew about Anya Sur.” Waylen told her earnestly.

She made a noise, nodded, then resumed eating. He was a bit taken aback, as he’d expected more of a response than that from her.

“What is a fire dance, if I may ask?” Waylen asked her, hoping to spur some additional conversation. He did want to know what those were, since she kept mentioning them.

She exhaled, then ignored him for a long moment while she continued to eat.

“Will be easier for you to see it, than for me to explain it. Or ask Lyrren, he will tell you.” She replied.

Waylen quietly shrugged; this moment reminding him of his mother. She would talk, talk, and talk *at* him during one of her lectures, but if he ever asked for an explanation, she would sometimes get angry at him for asking, or tell him to learn it from someone else. She wanted to be *listened* to more than she wanted anything else. Waylen found himself missing the forthcoming nature of Her Majesty’s daughter, Princess Vienna, seemed much keener to educate than her mother was.

He nodded, thanking her, but certainly not for refusing him an answer.

After that she was not much for conversation. She ate until all she seemed content to do was refresh her glass of wine and drink it until dry. He lost track of how much she'd drunk, but it was more than he'd seen anyone else in his life. Did dragons not get drunk? He couldn't tell, but as he finished his own meal it seemed like she was becoming more sluggish with every drink she took from her glass.

"Are you done?" She asked him once he'd joined her with an empty plate and only a glass of wine left to enjoy.

"Yes, Yvvie. It was very good, thank you for inviting to dinner." He told her.

She nodded, then sharply whistled, startling him again.

"Goodnight, Waylen. I have much to do." She told him as the door opened, Ser Lyrren appearing within the frame.

It was clear he was being dismissed, and so he stood up from his chair, remembering to pick up the wooden box with the brooch inside. He offered Her Majesty a salute before turning to leave. Once he stepped out into the hall, the door was shut behind him, Ser Lyrren turning to greet him.

"Dinner went well, Your Highness?" The slender dragon asked him.

"Yes, dinner went well. Thank you." He replied.

The dragon then straightened his back, looking relieved.

"Very good. Now, let us return you back to your rooms." The dragon replied and began to lead him back the way they'd come.

Captain Norra and the two guards from before fell back into place within their wake, leaving Her Majesty to return to doing whatever it was she was busy doing, which to Waylen's eyes appeared to be nothing but drink. Waylen shifted the box in his hands as they walked until he opened it to look inside. Within the center of the red velvet lining sat the brooch, shaped into the image of his family crest. After staring at it for a moment, he closed the box.

~ Receiving Providence ~

Appendix

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>
Feon Fah Lu'Ran	<i>Fee-On Fah Loo-Ran</i>	<i>Wife to Lyrren and a cook assigned to the big kitchen within the Keep of Anya Sur.</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>

Location	Pronunciation	Description
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>
Anya Betine	<i>Ahn-Yah Beh-Teen</i>	<i>“The Great Road” in Radian. It is the main road that runs straight from the southern gate of Anya Sur to The Keep.</i>
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>
Illian	<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>
Yik	<i>Yick</i>	<i>A salty bread stick with a hard texture. Similar to a pretzel stick, but as thick as a pencil. Can be eaten alone or with honey (as a dip).</i>

Term	Pronunciation	Definition
Et'nol	<i>Et-Nole</i>	<i>Atinan word for "fiancé".</i>
Er	<i>Err</i>	<i>Would loosely translate to "of", in specific relation to ones lineage. "Er" is the masculine form of the word used exclusive for male Atinans.</i>
Fah	<i>Fah</i>	<i>Would loosely translate to "of", in specific relation to ones lineage. "Fah" is the feminine form of the word used exclusive for female Atinans.</i>