

The Silver Sea, Act 4.

~ A Kingdom of Steel ~

~ 18 ~

Yvvie will return to me soon, as word has just reached us after many weeks of silence. She's been gone for nearly a year, but it feels to me as if it has been far longer. I find that without her presence I am oddly unsettled. She may be gruff and ill-tempered at the best of times, but she brings a special warmth to every room she's in. I don't think she even realizes it. People pay too much attention to her dour expressions and her frowns. She tries too hard to hide a part of herself that used to shine brightly. I wish I had been there to see it myself before violence forced her to hide it.

But she will be back soon, as the war with Darfell has been won. I do not know what state her army will be in when she returns, but from the letters I have been sent, and the most recent one now, things seem to have fared better for her than last time she marched there. Many of those that she brought with her had fought by her side before, and not just when she conquered Anya Sur, but at her side during our first war with Darfell. They all knew the dangers better this time, and there are far fewer dead being brought back home as a result. This is good.

Hopefully this will give us another age of peace. Well, not for Yvvie and I, no. We will live long enough to see another war. Theo will see more peace in his time, and even though I know Atina Nah does not pass Her gaze eastward to lands not Her own, I do hope She spares Radiah Her kindness. Edgard knew war, and now Theo knows it too. Let at least one king of Radiah know true peace. Let them experience the joy that their short lives can bring, short enough to spare them the tragedy of seeing so much blood be spilled one generation after another.

Waylen was seated at the little table in his drawing room having his breakfast. The room was still cool from the night air, but it would warm up quickly within the next hour or so. In anticipation of that heat, he was no longer wearing a tunic as he would have typically worn. Not even his lighter weight tunics were ideal for how hot Anya Sur would get each day. So, no, instead he was dressed in a lightweight pair of fine trousers and good boots, with his chest clad only in a clean linen shirt. It felt strange to wear so little, but it was light and breathed easily. With how cool the air still was, the shirt left him feeling a bit chilly, but that would soon change, and he'd be grateful for it.

But today was the day of the tournament!

He hid his excitement well, eating his breakfast of bacon, eggs, and sugar dusted pastry. It was a hearty meal to help him last all the way until his next one, which he wasn't sure when would come considering the tournament would take up much of his morning and end towards noon. Everyone in his entourage was busy, running about to make sure all their own preparations were ready. Each of them would be traveling down to the parade grounds to be seated next to the arenas, while Waylen would be going up onto the wall to watch everything from above. Oh, he was excited!

Though he didn't fully understand what he should be expecting, he allowed the mystery of it to keep him entertained. He knew there would be a lot of fighting, miniature spectacles, of that he was sure! His mind kept drawing back to that day in the garrison where he was treated to the sight of dragons sparring. It had been more than enough to get his appetite to awaken, although at the time he hadn't been quite aware of it yet. And that had been so tame compared to what his imagination was trying to sell him now!

Also, from what he was being told by Captain Landon, there were a fair many dragons spending time training in the garrison and not necessarily ones that were serving as the Keep's protectors. It appeared to the Captain that many of them were here to participate in the tournament. He wished he could have spent more time watching the dragons fight. Waylen wasn't any sort of warrior, as his mother had made sure of that, but he still held a passion for combat if only as entertainment.

"It is going to be so hot. Will we be able to leave if it gets to be too much?" Marissa could be heard asking.

Waylen savored the last of his meal while Marissa, Shane and the others all moved about his rooms, coming and going with more haste than was probably warranted. There was a lot for them to do, certainly, since more than a dozen people were going to have to be taken out to their special seating. He'd overheard many conversations about how it was being planned, the assurances of ample shade and a plentiful supply of water provided.

It was only after Waylen had finished breakfast that Ser Lyrren arrived. The slender dragon began to work alongside Shane to ensure that everyone was prepared to depart. It would take more time to move so many people to where they needed to be, so they would be leaving ahead of Waylen whose journey would require much less travel.

And Marissa kept checking on him, but he kept assuring her that he was fine and needed nothing. He wanted everyone to focus on their own plans, as his own sounded so simple by comparison. Eventually, it came time for them to leave with Ser Lyrren directing the group to follow the lead of another dragon clad in grey robes. Soon, Waylen was left alone with only Ser Lyrren and a handful of equally reptilian guard.

"It is not quite time to leave, Your Highness, if there is anything else you need to do to prepare." The dragon then told him.

Three dragons in armor were all assembled as his escort, a trio of strange faces that he could now recognize from his weeks of being here. Captain Norra had left with the others to lead them personally to their destination. He couldn't remember the names of these three. One of the other dragons, a woman named Arita, he did remember her name, but she had left to escort the others outside alongside Captain Norra.

"I do not believe there is anything I need to do." He replied, then decided to ask their names.

He pointed at the trio, all of whom were idling quietly near the door leading out.

"May I ask their names? I cannot recall them." He asked.

The slender dragon turned his head to quickly glance at the trio's direction, then spoke briefly in Atinan. Hearing Ser Lyrren switch from one language to another was strange. As foreign as he was, so strange to look at, there was something about him that felt proper when he spoke Radian. He spoke it very well, almost as if it came natural to him, and yet then he would speak his native tongue and just felt so much stronger than the man speaking it. He was too tall and slender, at least the women that served as solders wore armor and carried swords. They could create the illusion of strength that fit their voices better.

The three then straightened their postures and announced their names, all of which were strange. Waylen thanked them, and thanked Ser Lyrren, now repeating their names in his head a few times.

"I am honestly impatient with excitement, Ser Lyrren. Would it offend anyone if we were to leave now?" He asked after a short while, feeling eager to see himself out of his rooms and to where he was much more excited to be.

The dragon stared at him thoughtfully, then nodded.

"No, Your Highness, but you will be the first to arrive before anyone else." The dragon replied.

"If it would be impolite for me to arrive first, then I can wait." Waylen told him.

The dragon then shook his head.

"No, please, Your Highness. We may leave now." The dragon smiled at him.

Waylen rose from his chair, smiling with excitement. He really wanted to go!

It's moments like these that help me understand Yvvie a little better. She hates participating in all of my little schemes, and now here I am participating in one of hers, just by watching. I wouldn't be bothered at all by missing all this, but it's something she's organized, and she works very hard to do it every year. By sitting here on the wall, I get to do nothing but drink unni and eat while I watch as my dear one conducts one mock battle after another. I wish she would trust herself to leave more of the management to other people, as she's trying to be in multiple places at once. She has so many dueling at the same time and yet she tries to witness all of it at once, marching like a strict teacher from child to child.

I'm actually glad I planted the idea in her head to turn her training into something that could be watched by crowds. Draw it out of the garrison and into the open so the people can see! And so many have gathered this year, likely as much as a thousand more than last year. I'm not quite sure what has drawn in so many this time, so I should see if I can find out why after the Festival has concluded. It might be useful to know; something either of us can exploit should it ever matter. Spectacles like these pair well with the Festival, something like the stage plays they have in Radiah. Entertainment for all that love their kingdom, a vessel of time for food and drink.

At least that's something I can smile about, especially with how I can't help but wince when I look at what's happening down there. Even with everyone fighting with blunt weapons and wooden tools, it looks like it hurts. The noise of it doesn't help either. I can't even take pleasure in watching my wife duel! By the time her poor victim reaches the final challenge they'll be so exhausted that it's nothing more than watching her squash an insect. It's honestly not very fair, but Yvvie is convinced in her methods. I won't question her judgement, as this is a field I am ever ignorant of.

I just wish it wasn't so painful to watch. I never had the stomach for it.

“The gathering will be quite small as Her Majesty does not like it to be crowded any more than necessary. Most of the faces you will not recognize, but Princess Iolla will be present, as well as Prince Karo.” Ser Lyrren was telling him as they walked.

He felt like he was going to burst! With every step he took, his heart was beating quickly as the excitement threatened to consume him. Meanwhile, Ser Lyrren continued to lead him down the hall, talking to him about what he should be expecting out of today, but also reminding him of important things he should know for tomorrow's parade. He tried to listen, but he was too busy bouncing from one thought to the next.

Waylen could hardly care about the parade; he was far too interested in the tournament!

“Will there be anyone I can rely upon to explain what I am seeing, once the tournament begins?” He asked, dragging the discussion back towards what Waylen was interested in.

After a moment of thought the dragon replied.

“I believe that may fall upon me to do, Your Highness, although I fear I may be inadequate to the task. It has been many decades since I was last a soldier.” He replied.

That surprised Waylen enough to snap his attention away from the tournament and to the slender dragon walking ahead of him. Ser Lyrren did not look any bit a soldier! He was very tall, but his slender frame did not look like it was built to fight. Especially not in the robe he wore.

“You were a soldier?” He asked, trying to hide the doubt in his voice.

The dragon smiled.

“Yes, once. It’s the reason I found my place here serving Her Majesty in the Keep. It was a long journey.” The dragon continued to smile, then changed the subject by immediately returning to the previous topic.

“I may no longer be a soldier, Your Highness, but I have witnessed many dozens of tournaments in my time. I will do well enough to explain it to you, though if you have any lingering questions, you should direct them to Captain Norra. She’s quite gifted on the matter.” He added.

“I see, thank you. I will be sure to remember that.” He replied.

But Captain Norra wasn’t here. Ser Lyrren was ahead of him to lead the way, and behind them walked a trio of soldiers. Being led around by so many dragons had now become normal, something he barely noticed as it was a daily ritual.

Waylen wasn’t familiar with the route they were taking to reach the wall, but he was led to a staircase similar to the one he’d used weeks before. Once up the narrow stairs he was greeted by the blinding light of the outside world and then treated to a long walk along the parapets. More soldiers were standing guard atop the wall than he remembered from when he was here last, and all of them were wearing full plate steel armor. He couldn’t understand how they could tolerate the heat in armor like that.

Even in his light linen shirt he was sweating from the heat, the only good fortune was that there was a gentle breeze cooling the sweat on his skin.

And ahead of him, in plain view, was a bright red awning sitting on top of the front gate where he would be sitting. He couldn’t stop his smile, not even the heat. His smile remained until his small group reached their destination.

“Your Highness, Her Majesty has not yet arrived, but you are welcome to seek shelter from the sun, please.” The dragon urged him to step under the awning; its white stitched border lined with yellow gold tassel that fluttered gently in the breeze.

The awning was suspended high overhead and held aloft by four sturdy wooden poles. There were more than a dozen chairs atop the wall, stretched out in a long line so that everyone sat shoulder to shoulder, but the awning only covered half the chairs at best. Of those covered chairs, two of them were larger than the rest and sat right in the middle of the arrangement. He immediately knew why.

“This is to be my seat?” Waylen asked, gesturing to one of the large chairs.

“Yes, Your Highness, you will be seated next to Her Majesty. Princess Iolla will be here next to you, as well.” Ser Lyrren explained, stepping behind the row of chairs to find a spot behind the chair meant for Waylen, urging him to take a seat.

He complied, taking a seat, his smile melting under the heat and knowledge that he would spend the next few hours next to Her Majesty and whatever her mood might be. This dour turn lasted only as long as it took for him to look out in front of him. Sprawled out across the parade grounds was a massive spectacle of dragon folk, stretching out for as far as his eyes would allow!

Waylen hopped back up from his seat and approached the parapet ahead of him, looking out and straining his eyes to see everything. The circular arenas down below had all been finished. Now, spread out all along the sidelines were the many little buildings that the gathered warriors would be using as they rested and waited. He tried to find where Marissa and the others would be, but he couldn't see a single person down below that wasn't a dragon.

“Your Highness, please! Not so close to the edge!” Ser Lyrren almost startled him as the dragon hurried around the chairs to approach him.

“I will be careful, Ser Lyrren.” He assured the dragon and continued to watch.

He turned back to look at his chair, then back around at the grounds below him. Waylen retook his seat and felt that he was not high enough to see all of the arenas from his chair, so he hopped back up and approached the edge of the wall.

“I can't see all of the grounds from my chair.” He told the dragon.

“Please, Your Highness, the edge.” Ser Lyrren told him anxiously.

“Would it be possible to raise my chair? Or sit closer to the edge of the wall?” He ignored the dragon's concern and asked about changing his view.

“It may be possible, but that would require permission from Her Majesty. She does not, please sit Your Highness we are very high up.” The dragon interrupted himself.

Waylen sighed and took his seat again.

“Her Majesty has enjoyed this arrangement of chairs for many years so I would advise we wait until she arrives before we make any suggestion to change it.” The dragon then told him.

Waylen sighed again.

“Thank you, Ser Lyrren.” He replied.

As Waylen waited in the heat, Ser Lyrren marched around the array of chairs like he was considering what his options might be to change them. The guards that had accompanied them were standing at attention on the one side from where they'd arrived from. Waylen occupied himself by watching the far-reaching crowd of dragons.

He could easily tell the difference between the dragons that were going to be fighting and the ones that were only bystanders. The people of Anya Sur were all lightly clothed, as best as Waylen could see from atop the wall, and yet the soldiers below were dressed in the brown tunics and leathers he was more familiar with. There were several dozen stalls for merchants that he could see, and no doubt many more that he couldn't. There had to be several thousand people, maybe even more in attendance and Waylen couldn't remember ever seeing so many people gathered in one place in all his years of living in Illian.

Lyrren's demeanor suddenly changed, and he hurried to stand behind Waylen, facing the direction from which they'd come.

"Your Highness, please stand." The dragon told him.

Waylen stood, looking back from where they'd come and could now see a large group of dragons approaching. There at the front was the imposing figure of Her Majesty. Behind her was a pale figure dressed in white, which must have been Princess Iolla. The rest were too distant for him to recognize.

"Should I step forward past my guards to greet her when she arrives?" Waylen asked, deferring to the dragon's judgment.

"To the end of the row, Your Highness." The dragon told him and gestured with his hand as he began to walk, beckoning Waylen to follow.

Waylen followed, stopping at the last chair same as Ser Lyrren had done. They waited.

"You may salute when rest of us do." The dragon whispered for his benefit.

When Her Majesty began to make her final approach the guards that had escorted him, and Ser Lyrren, all lifted their hands to salute. Waylen did the same and he held his fist to his stomach until Her Majesty returned a casual salute to them all before dropping her hand down. Everyone else relaxed, and so did he. He could see now that His Highness Prince Karo had come with them, but the rest of the group appeared to be only guards and soldiers he did not know.

"Good afternoon to you, Your Majesty." Waylen told her as the Queen stepped up to him.

"As to you, Prince Waylen. You are early." She replied, looking then over to Ser Lyrren.

"Yes, we are early, Your Majesty." The dragon replied, nodding submissively.

"I was excited to be on the wall, Your Majesty, so I asked if I could be brought early." Waylen spoke up.

She made a noise in her throat, then stepped past him. He was then greeted warmly by Princess Iolla, who gently urged him to follow along after her mother. He turned and did so, finding that Her Majesty was already taking her seat and knowing that his was the one right next to hers, he sat down.

beside her with the Princess taking the seat on his opposite side. The rest of the dragons in her flock moved beneath the awning and began to take seats for themselves.

His Highness stopped and saluted him, speaking briefly in Atinan. Waylen wanted to stand and greet him properly, but Princess Iolla gestured with her hand for him to keep his seat, quickly translating his greeting, and in return translated Waylen's hasty greeting in reply. The dragon then continued and took a seat on the other side of Her Majesty.

Ser Lyrren then stepped behind the Queen and began to quietly whisper to her. Waylen looked at them, unsure if he was speaking Atinan or Radian with how soft the dragon's voice was in the wind. Her face shifted into a frown and then she looked down at him from her height.

"You are too short to see?" She turned and asked him.

Waylen froze now that he was under her scrutiny.

"It is difficult to see the tournament grounds, Your Majesty." He replied, a part of him was reluctant to simply say that he was in fact too short.

She heaved a sigh, then turned her head back to Lyrren and began to string together a lot of Atinan that Waylen couldn't understand. He watched as Lyrren listened, and when she was finished, he sharply nodded his head. He then immediately departed in a hurry, briskly leaving the same way they'd come.

"We could move everything forward, mother." Princess Iolla then added.

Her Majesty made another noise before rising from her chair. He now felt very awkward, and Her Highness and Her Majesty both began to move their chairs forward, forcing Waylen to hop up and do the same. As the rest of the assembled group drew their chairs forward, he felt even more embarrassed. Her Majesty said something in Atinan and pointed up at the awning. Both the three guards that had escorted Waylen, and those that had come with Her Majesty, all moved to the corners of the awning and began to shift it forward to match the new placement of the chairs. It was such a simple series of changes and yet it all made him feel so awkward for having made the complaint in the first place.

The Queen retook her seat and was soon joined by her daughter. Waylen sat. His view was slightly improved by the adjustment.

"When Lyrren returns you will have a much better view." The Princess assured him, and he thanked her in reply.

He tried to distract himself by watching what he could from his vantage. So far, there did not appear to be any sort of activity happening down below. The people of Anya Sur were mingling of course, and he could now hear the chorus of many voices speaking a great distance away. So many people in one place, and all to watch the spectacle to come. Waylen had seen his small share of duels and competitions, but this would be the largest his eyes had ever seen.

"Your Majesty, I do not recall my father telling me about the tournament. Would he have seen one before?" He asked her.

“Rylan has not. Your grandfather was the last to see it. He attended two when he was younger than your father.” She told him.

“That was a very long time ago.” He told her.

She made a noise in her throat, and then her daughter took her turn to make a noise of her own to draw his attention to her.

“Your Highness, I have never met your grandfather, but I’ve heard much of him. I’m sure you will enjoy yourself as much as he was said to have.” Princess Iolla assured him.

“I am certain that I will, thank you.” He told her.

A new commotion began behind them, and Waylen turned to see a small parade of servants coming towards them across the parapet with a large serving cart laden with an assortment of items. Princess Iolla noticed his attention had shifted behind them and so she too turned to look. When she saw who was coming, she began to explain that refreshments were arriving, and that there would be an ample supply to satisfy them until the tournament was finished.

One of the servants approached them and asked what they wished to eat and drink, but it was all in Atinan and Waylen could not understand it. The Princess took over the role of noting what Waylen wanted and conveyed it to the servant. Her Majesty sat silently, watching the grounds below, and Princess Iolla made no attempt to explain what her mother wanted. A servant was already preparing a glass of wine for the Queen along with a plate of gooey, juicy looking dark balls. They did not appear to be the meatballs he was already familiar with.

From the bottom of the serving tray small tables, almost like miniature stools, were removed. They were taken from the cart and placed in front of them where they sat until most of the front row of chairs had one, and upon those tiny knee-high tables a plate was sat, and on that plate is where food and drinks were then placed.

“Mind the table when you take something from it, Your Highness. They do not balance well.” Princess Iolla advised him as she took some of the dark juicy balls from her own plate to eat one.

Waylen had been given a glass of water, and one of wine, and with it a small bowl of the very same juicy balls and another bowl filled with tan rolls. He didn’t know what the juicy looking things were, but he dared to pick one up.

“Fruit, Your Highness. There is a seed in the middle, so be careful when you chew.” The Princess cautioned him.

They were the ugliest, wrinkliest fruits he’d ever seen. It was dark in color, dripping in thick syrup-like juice, and possessed of a warm sweet smell. He bit into it and was relieved that it wasn’t as foul as it looked. Very strong, very sweet, a heavy kind of flavor tinted with some sort of foreign spice like it had been soaked all the way through. Very chewy.

Both the Princess and Her Majesty were casually eating them just fine, and so he continued to eat his until his teeth found the seed. It was hard like a small stone, and he had to pick it from his mouth so he could finish eating the rest of the fruit’s flesh. He wasn’t sure what the etiquette was for discarding a seed, but it did not appear to him that Her Highness was discarding hers.

“You don’t have to eat it.” Her Majesty interrupted his thoughts.

He looked her way.

“Just spit them into the bowl.” She added, before reaching for another piece of fruit.

He dropped the seed into his bowl of fruit, then decided to try a bread roll. The fruit was peculiar, but not bad, but the tan rolls were a certainty. He enjoyed the little bread rolls and the saltiness of them paired well with the sweetness of the fruit.

Princess Iolla began to make small conversation with him, explaining a few things he should expect. Mostly, he was told that Her Majesty would be the one to start the tournament, with Princess Vienna conducting it herself from the ground. The tournament itself would be a long series of competitions until only two fighters remained. Some of this he already knew, but Her Highness tempered his expectations, reminding him that he would be watching many competitions happening all at once and that the most exciting of them would not be until later when the tournament started drawing towards its end.

He nodded along, listening intently as he sipped at his wine and attempted to eat a second piece of fruit.

Another commotion came as a distraction, and when he turned, he saw that it was Ser Lyrren and another dragon returning. Both were hurrying quickly across the parapet carrying something in their arms. Waylen was confused only for a moment until they arrived at the awning. In the dragon’s hands was a cushion for a chair, while the servant held a thick square of wood.

“Your Highness,” Ser Lyrren addressed him, the dragon sounding winded, “We can now fix your seat, if you may rise from your chair.”

Waylen, somewhat bewildered by the items, stood up. He then watched with growing embarrassment as the block of wood was placed inside the seat of the chair upon which the cushion was then sat. He could feel his face flush red as it dawned on him that they were merely lifting him higher in his seat like he was still a child. Saving face, he smiled and thanked the dragon for the courtesy before retaking his seat.

What an incredible day this was becoming, he thought as he tried to make peace with the seat that he had no choice but to enjoy, and all because he complained that he was too short.

“It’s been a very long time since I ever had to sit in a chair like that.” The Princess told him with a smile.

Thankfully, everyone was interrupted for the moment by the sound of a horn being blown. It sounded very distant. Her Majesty stood and approached the edge of the parapet, her hands coming to rest on the stone as she looked out across the parade grounds. Waylen looked to his either side to see if anyone else was standing.

“You can stay seated, Your Highness.” Ser Lyrren whispered to him from behind, the dragon having taken a position right behind his chair.

He relaxed and waited. Several moments passed and another horn was blown, but this one came from somewhere down below them in the grounds.

“Those are the signal horns. They are to let everyone know that the soldiers are ready to begin.” The Princess explained.

He nodded, his excitement returning, his eyes moving to Her Majesty’s looming figure as she stared out at the massive crowd. It seemed like she was surveying everything right below them. When he looked back out, he could count many of the circular arenas, and each of them was surrounded by a crowd of soldiers. He would never be able to recognize a face from this distance, but he could still see them fight! He envied the others, Shane and the rest would all be down there where the view was surely better.

Her Majesty then straightened her back. She drew her fist up, then clapped it over her chest with force.

She shouted; a sound far louder than he could ever have expected from someone’s mouth. Her voice boomed, startling him. Her shouting continued, her voice speaking the harsh and violent Atinan tongue.

Ser Lyrren then leaned down next to him, dipping his head low to Waylen’s ear and began to whisper to him in Radian.

“Welcome all, we gather here today in celebration and in challenge. The warriors assembled in my City are Atina Nah’s finest, gathered from all of the tribes that make us whole. Together, they will prove to me and to themselves that they were worthy of being chosen. For those of you who are only here to bear witness to their struggle, I ask that you to cheer for their victories, to reward them for their courage and wit, and then to jeer them for their failures! This is not just a tournament of games, but a test of our strength, so demand of them that they spare no quarter! My daughter, Princess Vienna Fah Ro’Un stands below, as both judge and final test, to conduct this tournament in my stead. It is now by my hand; do I decree that this tournament shall begin!” The dragon at his side finished translating a moment after Her Majesty did.

She lowered her hand to her side and took a step back, finding her seat and letting herself drop back into it.

Waylen’s heart was left pounding, the Queen’s booming voice, like thunder, was frightening. And to think that once people had to fight her in battle, and here he was left shaken by her voice alone!

“Once, a very long time ago, mother scared me too with how loud she could shout. I do not remember how old I was.” The Princess whispered to him, embarrassing him slightly now that he knew his reaction had not gone unnoticed.

“You were half his age before I let you attend.” Her Majesty interrupted, a glass of wine now back in her hand.

“That is true, mother.” Her daughter replied.

Waylen looked out and could now see that pairs of dragons were starting to enter the arenas. Though his seat was higher and closer than it had been, and despite that he could see so many of the arenas, he wished that he was closer! Stretching up in his chair he tried to find one arena to fix himself upon, wanting to study the fight as well as he could.

“Sit, Waylen.” Her Majesty’s voice rose from his side.

He stopped, relaxing back in his chair.

“Do not try to watch every fight. What is happening now is the wheat being sorted.” She told him before she grunted in irritation. “Is that the proper saying for that? Your great grandfather said it to me only once.”

He gnawed on the side of his tongue for a bit, thinking.

“Wheat from the chaff, Your Majesty?” He replied.

She nodded.

“That. Everyone chosen is now fighting, but not all that are fighting are worth watching. They will all lose and in time only the best will remain. Those are the fights to watch closely.” The Queen revealed, enlightening him slightly.

He picked up another of the ugly fruits and tried to eat it.

“If the tournament is a test of the soldiers below, then are their judges? People down on the ground watching closely?” he asked her.

“Yes. Several. Vienna is leading them; you will see her walking from fight to fight if you look for her.” She told him.

“Will she be in the parade grounds for the entire tournament?” Princess Iolla asked her mother. “Or also in Soldier’s Village?”

“Only here.” The Queen replied.

Waylen resisted the temptation to stretch himself in his seat. Every arena he could see was now engaged in combat. He could see rapidly flurries of strikes in one, body throws in another, combat aplenty in each of them. The noise of thousands was louder, and it sounded both like cheers and boos. It was like the wind, it rose and fell in strength, the sharp cries of many echoing the moment an arena startled the crowd. He couldn’t understand any of the words he heard, probably wouldn’t have understood them even if they were in Radian. The roar of thousands was not something he’d heard very often in his life.

“What is Soldier’s Village?” He asked the Princess.

He’d never heard of that before, but it had soldiers in the name so perhaps it was important to Her Majesty’s army? This would be something his father might wish to know, and it was fortunate that someone mentioned it in passing.

“It is where Vienna snuck you off to visit, days ago.” Her Majesty answered him instead.

Snuck him? He then recalled the place Princess Vienna had taken him to, explaining that more arenas were to be built further away from the Keep. He could not see that far from atop the gate, but further out there past the crowds would be the same place they’d been days ago. So, was that Soldier’s Village? It was a plot of empty land with only new construction when he’d been there to see it.

“Many of our soldiers have homes there, Your Highness.” The Princess explained.

“Your army has a village for itself?” He asked, suddenly taking interest.

She tilted her head, looking to her mother for guidance on her answer.

“No. Once they did, long ago. Now it is just a name, but more soldiers live there than others do, as is tradition.” Her Majesty replied.

Princess Iolla made a small gesture with her hand.

“I should have spoken differently, we do have many soldiers and their families living there, but it as any other place in Anya Sur. Homes for living, and many shops and trades. You will not get to see it during the parade tomorrow, but you will see many other villages in the City that are very similar. That will help you understand better.” The Princess told him.

He nodded.

Waylen tried to relax, but he wanted to watch everything down below. Captain Landon and all of his other guards were no doubt busy watching every little detail. He hoped they had a good spot to see, something closer to the action that gave the best view. He scanned the many arenas in hopes of spotting Princess Vienna, but he wasn’t sure what to look for.

He tried searching for anyone that looked like a woman, but there were so many women! Why were so many women fighting? He tried looking for anyone with white hair, but he quickly realized how silly that was, as they all had white hair! He couldn’t even pick her out by the tone of her skin, and so very many of them had a color similar to hers.

“I cannot find Princess Vienna. Is she somewhere below?” He was forced to ask.

Her Majesty raised her hand and pointed with a finger, but that did little to help him. Princess Iolla leaned forward and pointed with a finger of her own.

“Look there, at the far side of the grounds, see the man with red hue, he has a shield in his left hand.” She directed him.

He searched, squinting, eventually finding a dragon that matched.

“Yes, I do.” He replied.

“Look right of him, the arena where the two are rolling in dirt just now!” She pointed more animatedly.

And he saw them! Now that his eyes were there, he saw the silhouetted figure of the Princess. She was standing by the arena’s edge watching. He’d never have found her on his own in such a sea of dragons.

“I’ve found her, thank you!” He replied.

Now he knew where she was, so he used her as his point of reference. He would just follow her around the grounds as she moved from one area to the next. The Princess appeared calm, even from this distance, moving slowly from circle to circle with her arms clasped behind her back. She looked more

like one of his tutors in Ilian than she did a soldier, like she was studying the warriors on display rather than judging their brawls.

And brawls they were!

He panned his eyes from the Princess to other parts of the grounds. The arenas closest to the wall were the easiest to read, and the soldiers below were fighting with everything they had. The noise of battle was echoing, the clang of metal and the thudding of body blows. Next to him Her Majesty continued to passively watch between sips from her glass.

A fight would end, a soldier being sent flying out of an arena, only for the victor to walk away proudly. Two more fresh fighters would take their place, and a new brawl would begin. Just like he'd been told before, all manner of weapons were being used. He saw swords, spears, shields, and maces. Everything described to him had been true, and no doubt Captain Landon and the others were drinking all of this in.

He knew how exciting it would have been to be so close, so he hoped they remembered their duty to study their strength and not just for the entertainment! More and more, soldiers were losing. Some by leaving the ring, and sometimes he would see what must have been a surrender. Rarely, a dragon would collapse and need to be dragged or carried off from an injury. The danger was real, then! They were truly fighting.

"How does one win the tournament?" He asked, turning to Her Majesty.

"There has never been a winner, only who lasts until the end." She replied without looking.

"Mother means that no one has ever defeated her or Vienna in single combat." Her Highness spoke up from his other side.

He turned to face the Princess.

"Princess Vienna will fight in the tournament? Her Majesty did as well?" He asked in surprise.

He turned back to look at Her Majesty, but she kept her gaze ahead, looking irritated.

"Yes! Ever since the beginning of the tournament, mother was always the last opponent that our soldiers would have to face. See, every time someone loses they are no longer allowed to fight again. One by one they are removed from the tournament until only one is left. That last soldier will have proven themselves after many battles and then gets to test their skill against mother's own. Now that Vienna conducts the tournament, she is now the last opponent anyone must face if they fight in the tournament." Princess Iolla explained it to him.

That was interesting! And neither Her Majesty nor Princess had ever lost?

"So, Princess Vienna only fights at the end; she does not fight any other time?" He asked.

Finally, Her Majesty chose to speak.

"Her job is to watch them fight and learn who is worth their weight in steel. Few are. Whoever lasts until the end will fight her, and she will test them until they break." She told him.

“That does not seem fair. Whoever lasts until the end would be exhausted.” He told her, regretting the words even as they left his mouth.

“War is not fair. A killer will not spare you his knife because you are tired, he will just stab you twice as many times.” She replied, eyes locked onto the grounds.

He nodded in agreement, choosing to say nothing in reply to that. She wasn’t wrong, but the tournament wasn’t a war. It was a test, wasn’t it? A challenge to test the strength of everyone that the commanders all thought deserved the chance. Too much unfairness and even someone good with a sword would lose early, wouldn’t they?

“Would that not mean that talented fighters sometimes lose early in the tournament? If things are meant to be unfair?” He dared to ask Her Majesty.

“Yes. I don’t want it to be fair.” She replied coldly, and he stopped his questions.

Instead, he continued to watch, watching until the crowds began to grow in scale. The number of brawls down below remained the same, but in the far distance the overflow must have begun to run out of combatants, because everything was being drawn the grounds below them. He asked if the tournament was ending soon, and he was told that it was. The number of fighters dwindled until all that remained waited their turns to fight in the shrinking number of arenas.

Waylen watched, the arenas at the edges began to empty, and the mingling soldiers all faded into the crowds, joining the throngs until all that remained was a single open arena right below them in front of the gate, and with a handful of figures standing around it.

One was Princess Vienna, along with four others.

Out in the crowd, dragons were fighting for a better view, soldiers that had once been fighting now held the line and kept the gathered dragons from swarming the grounds to get closer. Waylen could see some small dragons, presumably children, sitting on the shoulders of adults.

Two dragons then stepped into the arena, and Waylen turned his attention to the pair. Next to him, Her Majesty stood, and as if that was the signal everyone had been waiting for, everyone else did as well. Waylen joined them, every dragon on top of the wall was spreading out to find a place at the edge, everyone wanting to find the best view of what would be the last battle.

He reached the edge, hands hungrily gripping the stone as he peered down and around, soaking everything in.

One of the two fighters below appeared to be a stout looking man, taller than his opponent, while the other must have been a woman judging by the shape of her. The woman held a spear in hand while the other held a mace and a shield. He didn’t think that pairing seemed fair, the man was larger and even had a shield! A hand then touched his shoulder, a powerful warmth radiating from their palm.

In surprise he looked to his side, expecting to see that it was Ser Lyrren afraid he’d fall, but it was instead Her Majesty.

“We are very high, Waylen.” She told him without looking.

She made no effort to remove him from the ledge but left her hand to rest over his shoulder. He nodded in reply, then looked back down.

Princess Vienna was pacing around the arena with her arms crossed behind her back. The two warriors were apart, facing one another, and seemed to be restlessly shifting on their feet as the Princess continued to walk a slow circle around them. If there were words being spoken, he could not hear them. Whatever might have been exchanged down there was a mystery, all he could see was the slow brewing heat of action.

She stopped below the gate, her back turned to Waylen and the others. He watched as Her Highness drew a hand up and made a gesture. Both fighters suddenly became alert, shaking their limbs, readying themselves. Waylen didn't need to ask what was next, watching with wide eyes. A sharp whistle sounded from below and both warriors exploded from their places.

The woman struck first, launching her spear like a javelin. Its tip struck the uplifted shield of her opponent before yanking it back. Her hand had caught the end of the spear and now she was withdrawing. Her opponent hid behind his shield, swinging his mace up to clap it against the wood like a taunt. He pressed forward, shield high while his hand spun the mace in a circle. Waylen watched as the male never let his body stop moving, the heavy mace always in motion.

She struck a second time, catching her spear at the end, the tip loudly striking the shield. She did this again, an aggressive flurry of rapid strikes Waylen didn't know was possible with a spear. She kept herself at a safe distance while her opponent could only hold his shield high to block her strikes. He was trying to press her into a corner, to get her feet backed against the edge of the arena, but she was too nimble and kept moving, sliding out from under the pressure.

The male then tucked his mace up to his chest, his hands adjusting the grip on his shield as he defended himself against another strike. The spear glanced off the shield, and she snapped it back in preparation for another strike. The male resumed swinging his mace, a threatening motion as another spear strike landed across his shield.

As the tip touched the wood, he dropped the shield. Waylen thought it might have been knocked from his hand, but no! He'd thrown it down on purpose so that he could snatch the spear by the shaft, his shield arm now gripping the spear tight as his opponent tried to yank it free. He lifted his mace and swung it down on the spear and snapped it in two. He lifted his end of the broken spear and threw it at her, the woman ducking to the side to avoid it.

He then charged, giving her a big swing with the mace. Waylen held his breath as he watched, the first swing narrowly missing, the second clipping her across her chest. The crowd was shouting, cheering, with both surprise and shock as the pair weaved their feet across the arena. Not one swing of his mace could land, but he came closer and closer with each heavy strike. The woman was nimble; the broken remains of her spear tightly clutched in her hand. She used what was left of her spear to defend herself, striking the mace like a sword, like she was trying to steer the mace away from her.

Then he struck again and she dropped to ground. Waylen rose up on his toes, the hand on his shoulder gripped him tighter so he couldn't lean too far over the edge. But the woman hadn't been struck down like he'd thought, she'd thrown herself to the ground and rolled. As she hopped back up onto her feet, she now held her opponent's discarded shield in hand.

As she tucked both hands behind the shield the next swing of the mace came, and she fought him, catching the mace directly and then rolling it off the shield. Waylen could hear the strike, the sound of

wood cracking. His heart was pounding as the mace was lifted, and another swing was made. The woman rolled with the blow, pivoting on her foot to catch the mace and deflecting it with the shield. She let her body spin on her foot and Waylen watched as the shield became a weapon.

Her pivot ended with her smashing the rim of the shield right into her opponent's face. The dragon staggered backward, streaks of red pouring down his reptilian face. He must have been dazed because he hesitated as she grabbed the shield by both sides, then smashed it over the top of his head. One of his legs buckled, and then she mashed him again as the crowd's shouts and cheers grew into a raucous uproar.

The dragon toppled backwards, and the woman then charged, launching a kick to the center of his chest. It landed, and he was sent sprawling backwards until the back of his head clapped the ground outside of the arena, his horns digging ruts into the earth.

A shrill whistle sounded long and loud, and then the crowd's cheering shifted in tone, celebratory.

The downed male continued to lay on his back as other dragons rushed to his side. Waylen relaxed, his heart pounding. The defeated dragon rose to his feet, but clearly nursing injuries, while the winner lifted both her hands high and held them aloft as the cheering continued.

All around him on the wall the dragons were now talking to each other, and none of it he understood. On his left, the Princess said something to her mother.

"Radian, Iolla." Her Majesty replied.

"It's not often someone wins with a shield." The Princess repeated herself.

Waylen agreed! A shield wasn't something he'd have ever considered as a weapon, but if someone broke the only weapon you had, then a shield would be a better substitute than your fists. He wasn't gifted at fighting, but he at least knew enough to know that hitting with something harder than your fist was probably better than your fist alone.

"The one that lost looks like he was badly hurt." He said, looking to Her Majesty.

"She only split the skin. His wound will heal faster than his pride." She told him.

A dragon further down the row said something in Atinan to Her Majesty, maybe a question. She replied in Atinan to them, but her gaze never left the grounds below them. Waylen looked back down, found Princess Vienna, saw that she was patiently waiting at the edge of the arena as the loser was led away with a cloth held to his face. The winner, she was... She looked anxious. The woman was now pacing back and forth inside the ring, shaking her arms loose and rubbing her hands together.

"When will she fight Princess Vienna?" He asked.

"Soon! I wonder how long she will last?" Princess Iolla was the voice to answer.

"They never win? Not ever?" He asked just to be sure.

"No." Her Majesty replied.

He then felt her hand squeeze at his shoulder.

“Not all battles can be won, Waylen. Everyone loses in the tournament, even those that see it through to its end.” She told him.

He chewed on that for a moment, watching the dragons down below. Every single one of them entered the tournament knowing full well that no matter how well they did, they’d still lose. Someone had to make it to the end, and then they’d have to fight a well-rested Princess Vienna, the Commander of the Armies. That still seemed unfair, but he didn’t want to argue it, nor did he feel it was necessarily wrong either. Maybe this is just how the dragons are? This is how they think, perhaps? It felt very pessimistic.

A sharp whistle sounded from below.

“It starts!” Princess Iolla told him and began to lean forward to watch. Everyone else did the same.

Her Majesty permitted him to join them, her hand never leaving his shoulder.

Below them, Waylen watched as a dragon approached Her Highness, offering her a sword. She took it with one hand then gave it a few simple swings. She continued to swing the blade with one hand until she must have been satisfied with what she’d been given. Now that he was watching, he saw the moment she whistled. The other woman backed away to the opposite side of the arena as the Princess finally took a step to enter it.

He could see she was holding her free hand behind her back, and it looked so casual. Her Highness did not look like she was ready to fight a duel. On the other side two dragons approached the previous winner with weapons in their hands. Waylen watched as the woman eyed her options, then took a sword and shield. She then lifted both high, then clapped her sword across the flat of her shield. Waylen could hear it, then watched as the dragon hunkered down into a crouch, like she was ready to leap and pounce.

Several seconds were allowed to pass, then the Princess let out a sharp whistle.

The fight started immediately, the woman launching forward with a shout. Unlike in the previous fight, she had no spear with which to safely thrust. Now, Waylen saw the dragon hold her shield high in defense while she rushed in with a sharp thrust. Waylen’s breath caught in his throat watching royalty being attacked so openly, but Her Highness just rotated her sword through the air in reply, clapping her blade against her opponent’s and steering it aside.

She then swung in retaliation, but it was such a casual strike, like she wasn’t making any effort. But her opponent’s reaction could have fooled you into thinking Her Highness had tried for a killing blow. She leapt backwards, giving Her Highness a wide berth. The woman backed off, shield clutched high and close, then Her Highness took a step forward, and her opponent took two steps back. The aggression shown in the previous fight was gone, replaced with an abundance of caution.

Her Highness continued to patiently walk, stalking her opponent as the other dragon kept her guard up, seemingly searching for an opening. To Waylen, it looked like there were lots of openings! Her Highness wasn’t doing anything to defend herself. She had one hand tucked tightly behind her back while the other loosely held her weapon at her side.

“She’s not fighting?” Waylen asked.

“Her opponent is a coward.” Her Majesty told him.

For a coward, the woman below still seemed strong considering she’d lasted until the end! She then lashed out to attack, her sword coming in with an over hand swing. Her Highness hopped away, literally hopping backward as if it was something effortless. One moment she was in the path of a sword, then both feet kicked gently, and she was two feet back from where she just was. Her opponent pressed, having found her courage, and then continued to swing. The Princess allowed it, kicking off the ground twice more with her feet while allowing her sword to remain at her side.

The woman then shouted and shook her shield violently. Waylen didn’t know what that meant but then watched as she lifted her shield and tossed it up into the air. She caught it by the rim and did just as she had in her previous fight. She turned it into a weapon, hurling it at Her Highness.

The shield shot across the small arena, but Her Highness removed her hand from behind her back and caught it by the rim. In a reversal of what Waylen had seen in the previous fight, Her Highness then spun her body in a circle and returned the shield from whence it came, throwing it back at her opponent who lifted her sword in defense. Waylen heard the crack of steel against wood, then watched as Her Highness shot forward, her sword now held tight in a two-handed grip. She delivered a downward cut.

The woman tried to block the strike with her own sword, but the hit landed so hard it broke her grip, the tip of the Princess’ weapon tearing through her defenses and down the front of her opponent’s tunic.

“Dead.” Her Majesty said with a sneer.

Before he could give the Queen his attention, Princess Vienna stole it back by pressing her advantage. She threw out a kick, planting her foot into the woman’s middle, doubling her over painfully. And as if that was not painful enough, she then grabbed her by the hair, then landed a second kick that left the woman gasping in pain and clutching her middle. Her Highness let go of the woman’s hair before taking a step back.

It now looked like her opponent was choking, coughing painfully as she clutched her middle with both arms before collapsing over onto her side. Her Highness then let out a sharp whistle, stabbing her sword into the sand at her feet. The crowd erupted in cheers and shouts; the noise was deafening and somewhere much further away there now appeared to be music playing.

“It’s over?” He asked, realizing he was breathless even though he’d done nothing but watch.

“She did not last long, and she angered her enough to be humiliated.” Her Majesty replied.

“She did!” Princess Iolla said on his other side.

He didn’t know what part of the fight would have angered her. Could it have been the shield throw? Perhaps it was the initial cowardice? Maybe it was both, or even more than that that Waylen could not see or understand. He thought back to what Her Majesty had said before the fight was finished.

“What did you mean by *dead*, Your Majesty?” He asked her, his attention caught between the Queen and looking down at the renewed commotion below.

Princess Vienna was back to calmly walking with her hands behind her back, the winner turned loser was being helped to her feet, but she still looked like she was in a great deal of pain. The dragons below were all joyous, full of energy.

“Had Vienna’s sword been sharp that would have been enough to kill.” She replied.

Of course! Her Highness had told him that every weapon would be steel, but with their edges and tips blunted. Being struck across the chest with blunt steel did not sound pleasant, although certainly better than dying.

“She will spend many days healing from today, as will many others!” Princess Iolla then told him.

As will many others. He wondered how many of his own people got injured when they held tournaments. He’d never thought about it before, but surely some did. How could someone fight, even with blunted or wooden tools, and not come away with an injury?

“I would like to know how many were injured, if I can. With so many participants, there must be a lot.” He said to Her Majesty.

The hand finally left his shoulder, the Queen now looking down at him.

“Vienna will take stock of the tournament; she can tell you after she does. It will be a large number.” He was told.

Another whistle sounded below. Waylen looked, and it was the Princess. To his eyes it looked like dragons were moving around to gather in front of her, almost all of them dressed as soldiers. Princess Iolla leaned down to whisper.

“The tournament is done, so Vienna is speaking to those that fought. It’s how we close the tournament every year.” She told him.

Below, Vienna began to speak loudly in Atinan. She was now shouting like she meant to speak to entire crowd that had gathered to watch but only with enough volume to address those gathered right in front of her. Even with it numbering in the hundreds, her voice seemed to carry to all of them as they silently listened. The crowd behind them fell silent or began to move away, as it they seemed to know Her Highness was only speaking to the gathered participants.

“Lyrren.” Her Majesty then called for the slender dragon.

He suddenly appeared behind Waylen.

“The part of the tournament you were excited to see is now over; we will remain here for a time to be visible to the crowd. Lyrren will take you back inside to find shade.” Her Majesty told him.

“Oh, thank you, Your Majesty.” Her replied, his mood suddenly shifted.

Her Majesty cast a look to Ser Lyrren, who accepted it and beckoned Waylen to join him.

He did, first bidding a farewell to Her Majesty and then to Her Highness, then stepped beside Ser Lyrren who began to lead him. Lyrren lifted a hand and made a gesture, the guards that had accompanied

him to the wall fell into their proper places as they all began to walk back towards the doorway leading back inside. There was a lot for him to think about, perhaps too much to sift through right now. He needed to hear from the others what they saw and how they felt about it.

“Did you enjoy yourself, Your Highness?” Ser Lyrren then broke his concentration.

“Yes! I did, although I envy my companions.” He replied.

“Why so?” The dragon asked.

“They were on the ground; I would have liked to have been that close to see the fighting.” He replied.

The dragon nodded, crossing his arms behind his back.

“They certainly would have, Your Highness, but Her Majesty does not like change. She likes sitting on top of the wall.” Ser Lyrren told him.

She does not like change. He remembered that same thing being said about... Commander Tann? Yes, it was that one. It had either been Princess Vienna or even Ser Lyrren that had told him that. Were all dragons this way? Or just the ones that had foul tempers? He didn't know.

She thinks this is a terrible idea, and she doesn't even want to participate! Well, I'd like to try it at least once! Maybe she will be proven wrong.

I don't think it's so bad of an idea, especially if the Radians do it! I know they only seem to do it for their royal weddings, and those are not so common a thing, but I have too many ideas for one of my own to not try it at least once. We can start at the Keep and just journey a big circle through the City until we meet back again. Parades aren't really a thing that we do here in Atina Nah, so no one will know what to expect, let alone even know what a parade is! We don't even have a word for it in Atinan! I'll have to explain it! How would I even go about that?

Everyone will be so confused, so I know most might not show up to watch us. I will have to bribe them, find a way to gather them up like sand in the palm. Perhaps, just like how Radian weddings throw flowers and rice, I can have servants throw something out to the crowds. But no one wants flowers or rice, especially the rice, as you can't even catch something so small.

So, I could have bread be thrown. Perhaps more things? It would need to be something dry and solid so it would survive the throw and reach someone's hand. Everyone likes food! I don't know if they want it to be thrown at them, but we can still try it.

And I've already placed large orders for picti nef, there's dozens of barrels of it ready to be opened and more to come. I know I won't have enough, but if I can feed enough people and get enough of them drunk then I'll be happy. Hopefully it will prove memorable for those that attend, and the gossip will spread of the occasion, and everyone else will regret not having shown up to see it for themselves. If I'm lucky Yvvie may even begrudgingly accept my foolish idea and stop complaining about it.

I know I'll have to bribe her, too. Lots of bread and kisses.

As Waylen emerged out into the sunlight the heat hit him swiftly. Though he was not familiar with the art of cooking, he'd been near an oven while it was lit, and just the same he'd been near a fire as it burned within the hearth. Both were an oppressive and dry heat that cooked you until your skin turned tender. Though he'd been living under the Atinan sun for weeks now, he never quite felt comfortable. Radiah was just far too cool and fair for most of the year; the heat of the desert would never feel natural to him.

"You are not expected to do anything, Your Highness, so can relax until we are underway." Princess Vienna told him as he climbed up the side of the carriage.

Two very high steps brought him level with the carriage, and he slid back under the comfort of shade. The carriage was finely carved and built of sturdy wood. It did not look like any carriage he'd ever seen in Radiah. It was open, much like a wagon, but it had posts erect at each corner to hold aloft a rich red fabric awning. The wind was gentle, so the awning hardly moved, but it was durable and wide and offered plenty of shade.

The seating was a pair of benches that face forward towards the team of horses that would draw it. There were four of them, fine animals, but the carriage did not look so heavy that it would have needed four to pull it.

Princess Iolla stepped up and joined him in the carriage. Today she was not wearing a white dress as he'd so often seen her wear. She wore red, much like the awning above them, but it was a large comfortable looking shawl that wrapped around her shoulders and draped low down her sides. A skirt accompanied it, but it was shorter than all the dresses he'd seen her wear, and appeared to be much easier to walk in, which was perhaps why she'd chosen it for their outing.

"Mother will likely want you to sit in front with her." She told him.

There were only two benches in the carriage, each easily sitting three people abreast. One was built into the back of the carriage while the second was set just ahead of center. Waylen had already seated himself in the back but now he doubted if he should remain.

"I can sit here until she joins us." He suggested.

Princess Vienna had wandered away and was now speaking to a dragon on camelback. Everyone who was to be a part of the parade was gathered here in the courtyard just inside the Keep's walls. There would be a total of ten carriages in the parade, but not all of them were built like Waylen's. Only three seemed to have awnings, the rest were more like traditional wagons, each open to the sky.

And the courtyard was swarming with soldiers, both dragon and his own Radian guard. Camels and horses were being drawn out of their stables with good saddles and bridles fitted to them. Every one of them would be mounted by a soldier and they would ride alongside the parade as it wove through the city, adding to the procession's length. Marissa and the others were already gathered in one of the other carriages with an awning, and they'd been given large wicker baskets of bread rolls to toss to the crowds, as well as the salty sticks he'd been given to taste during his tour of Soldier's village.

The parade was sounding very much like a great and festive affair, with servants manning each wagon and carriage to throw simple foods to the crowds. Waylen had been told that even more food and drink were being set up all throughout the city, so much so that it really felt like today was one grand party that would consume the entire city! He hardly believed such a thing could be possible; the city was huge! And to think that much of it was being freely given, such an expense!

"She is late!" Princess Iolla said, stretching in her seat to pivot her gaze around.

He joined her in looking, unable to find her as well.

Somewhere behind him the sound of instruments began to rise, a turn of his head doing little to reveal its source apart from it being somewhere further back in the line of carriages. It wasn't really music, but more the tuning of instruments for the music that was soon to come.

"There will be music?" He asked.

“Oh, yes! Two of the carriages behind us will have musicians with flutes and drums. You’ll hear even more as we ride through the city.” The Princess told him.

He turned around to look ahead, then all around him. Everything he’d come here for was finally happening, the tournament was yesterday, and now the parade! He sighed, strangely feeling relieved despite all his own worries.

At least yesterday had gone well. He might not have been at ground level to enjoy it, but Landon and all of his guards were very pleased by the fighting. It had come as good news to hear that Captain Norra had directed some of her guards to allow Landon and two others to move closer into the crowd so that they could watch some of the fights more closely. Everyone who had gone down there had had a lot to say about the tournament, and there will be much more to learn in the coming days as Waylen heard more of their accounts. It seemed to him that his own guards were putting their thoughts together still, Captain Landon especially. That brought Waylen no shortage of relief.

Now, they were all busy preparing to ride alongside Her Majesty’s soldiers. All of the guards that Waylen had brought with him were trained riders, and there were fortunately plenty of horses for his men to use. They could have ridden camels, but those beasts did not possess the same temperament.

There was a sharp shrill whistle, and Waylen noticed the immediate shift in the soldiers all around him. Even Her Highness next to him turned her attention towards the source. When he followed everyone’s gaze, he found Her Majesty. She was distant but approaching on foot with several soldiers in tow. He couldn’t see well, but he imagined she was inspecting the carriages herself before the parade began.

Princess Vienna was now walking towards her mother and eventually the two met and began to speak. Waylen couldn’t hear any of it.

“When mother thinks everything is ready, she will join us. Should be soon now, Your Highness.” The dragon next to him said.

“Does the Queen always personally inspect the parade?” He asked.

“Yes. She likes putting her fingers to things.” She replied using an unusual saying, but he understood it all the same.

He tried to relax by settling into his seat to be patient, letting himself listen to the musicians as they tested and practiced their instruments. Lots of flutes and drums like Her Highness had said, but not one string that he could find. Most of the music he’d grown up listening to was often with strings and flutes. There were drums, but he mostly recalled those being used outdoors, for parades just like this one or for marches. He knew there were traditions being followed for all the music he’d grown up listening to, but he wasn’t gifted in knowing what those traditions were for.

So he trusted there were likely traditions being followed here, too. Maybe they did have strings, just not for the parade.

“Your Highness, Princess Waylen.” A familiar voice then drew his attention.

Her Highness Princess Vienna was now at the carriage's side. Behind her was her mother.

Waylen quickly drew a salute and stood, remembering that Princess Iolla had told him that the Queen expected him to sit in the front of the carriage with her.

"Your Highness, Your Majesty. I am very happy to join you all today." He told them both and moved to the front of the carriage as Her Highness gripped the side of the carriage to pull herself up its steps.

"As am I, Prince Waylen." Her Highness replied and took the seat next to her sister.

Her Majesty then pulled herself into the carriage and Waylen moved to the other side of the bench so that she could occupy the space next to him.

"Are you ready? The parade will last until noon or later." Her Majesty asked him.

"Yes, I am!" He replied with confidence he hoped he wouldn't come to regret.

She nodded, then twisted in her seat to look at her daughters.

"What are we waiting for?" The Queen asked.

"The parade staff. Should not be long, mother." It was Princess Vienna that answered.

Her Majesty then turned back around and crossed her arms. She looked impatient, and all around them soldiers were now mounted onto their various steeds. Waylen could see his own men in the mix. He didn't know who organized the arrangement of troops, but there was an order to it with the small group of his own men split up into pairs. The musicians behind him stopped after a few minutes more of practice, and all he could hear were the distant noises of... Even more music.

Waylen tried to listen more closely, but it was too distant. Music was being played far away from him, and there were notes of people far too numerous to make out. It was a mess of noise without harmony.

"Will there be a lot of people watching the parade?" He asked.

"Yes." The Queen replied.

"Very many! It will be like the tournament but spread all throughout the city." Princess Iolla elaborated on her mother's answer.

"You will see it soon." Her Majesty assured him.

He was feeling impatient, but he felt his emotions were far different than Her Majesty's. He wanted to finally experience it, but he could tell that she wished it was already over. A whistle sounded

from behind them, and then another whistle from the front. It seemed many soldiers were all now signaling to each other with uplifted hands and signals he couldn't decipher.

One lone rider approached the carriage on his camel. He spoke to Her Majesty in Atinan very briefly, and then she nodded. She lifted her hand and then sharply whistled for all to hear. He stifled the instinct to flinch, and then the long procession of carriages began to move. A group of six riders moved to the front of the parade, acting now as the head of the line, leading them forward.

Still inside the walls of the Keep, he waited anxiously as they neared the large open gates. The nearer they got the louder the noises grew, and then another whistle sounded from behind. The musicians behind him began to play in earnest, a cheerful and thumping tune with a quick and joyous rhythm. He felt a smile form as the carriage turned and rode through the gates. His heart was pounding, feeling the music behind him as even more waves of it came from the front.

A large crowd of onlookers stood at a distance, a wave of cheers and shouting echoing across the parade grounds. He could see dragons, so many dragons, all the way down the main road until his eyes could no longer make out one blur from another.

"When we reach the edge of the parade grounds, we will begin to follow the roads through the city until we return here." Her Majesty told him.

"On the left is Soldier's Village, but you will not see much of it." Princess Iolla told him from behind, the dragon leaning forward to direct his attention to his left side.

"But we will see other villages?" He asked, turning to her.

"Yes! Many! This year we ride almost through all of the western side of the city." She told him.

"So, it not the same path each year?" He asked.

"No." The Queen answered.

They reached the edge of the parade grounds, the power of four horses pulling them along without struggle. The road was open, rows of soldiers lining both sides at even intervals. They all wore full armor, despite the sun and heat, and each glimmered with polish. This was a special day, and it looked like every member of the Queen's army and city guard were dressed for the best presentation. Just like when he'd first arrived in the city, it seemed Her Majesty was putting on a show, her military on display in a grand fashion. Even on the rooftops of buildings Waylen could see soldiers standing guard, heavy looking bows and crossbows at their sides.

His head was like an owl's turning and looking in all directions, he didn't know where to look with so much to see. For so long his view of Anya Sur had been limited, restricted to what he could see from atop a wall or from a window or balcony. Now, he was right here moving through it. His one excursion into Soldier's Village had done little to satisfy his curiosity.

The procession began to make a right turn down a new roadway, which was just as crowded on the sides as the previous, and just as well guarded. There seemed to be no end to people, and now that the

parade grounds had been left behind, Waylen was treated to the sight of the true face of Anya Sur. Permanent stalls for merchants were everywhere, and they were nothing like the quickly erected wooden ones he'd seen at the parade grounds.

These were made of stone, thick and white with colorful images painted on their surfaces and with words he couldn't read. He was surrounded by the Atinan language, its voices, and the fingerprints of a people he barely understood. Behind the merchant stalls were more buildings, not all of the same color, but each built mostly of painted stonework. Fabric awnings, curtained windows.

This was so much like the peasantry back home, and yet hardly a scrap of wood. Everything was made of earth instead of forest.

And the dragons all gathered around at the roadside watching them and watching him in particular. Every direction Waylen turned, he cast his eyes into the crowd and was met with the gazes of strange faces all staring back at him. The clothing they wore was minimal, light weight with too much skin revealed. Brightly colored fabrics were common on their bodies, and the occasional glint of a piece of steel on a wrist or neck. He was both excited and frightened by them. He was the centerpiece, and in a way he'd never expected. Never was he so forward in a crowd, always in a shadow behind his father or his brothers.

The music was constant. He twisted in his seat, looking behind their carriage until he saw food flying through the air. He couldn't contain his smile; everything was such a wonder that even the sight of bread rolls being tossed was enough to spark his excitement. Princess Iolla watched him, then turned around to watch behind them too, and he was left a little embarrassed.

All of this was something they experienced every year, but for him it was something so new and exciting. He turned back to face the front and continued to watch the crowd, scanning the city around him and drinking in the details.

"Your Highness," Princess Vienna said from behind. "Does Radiah have parades like this?"

He was confused for a moment, the city and sights such a distraction it dulled his mind until he could finally think of the proper answer. He turned and nodded.

"Yes, well, not so great like yours. When there are weddings for my family, there is a short parade from the chapel to the castle. I'm only old enough to remember my eldest brother's wedding, and that of my sister's." He answered her.

"Weddings are worthy of celebration, but perhaps not a proper time for a crowd to gather." Her Highness replied.

"It is different in Radiah, Vienna." Her Majesty then interrupted her.

The Queen didn't turn to look at them but kept her eyes ahead as she crossed her arms and watched the road in front of her.

"Yes, mother." Her daughter replied, and there seemed to be an air of awkwardness now.

Her Majesty was very good at upsetting the air, but even with the interruption the parade continued without missing a step. The music was still full of energy and cheer, and the crowds were none the wiser. Waylen regained his own mood, hardly daunted by the Queen beside him.

“Should we wave, or do something for the crowd? What is the custom?” He asked, feeling like he should be doing something.

“We do nothing, our presence is enough.” Her Majesty replied.

That didn’t seem right to him, he remembered everyone waving even if it was only a little, back when Lynn had married. He thought he remembered people greeting the crowds when Nyle married too, but he was a bit younger then and honestly, he couldn’t remember all of the details. Nyle’s wedding was a bit of a fog to him, except for that night’s feast and the first sip of mead he’d ever been allowed to have.

“In Radiah, we would greet the crowd with smiles and waves. We did that when my siblings married.” He volunteered to say.

“Would it be rude if I did the same here, as it is a custom of my own people?” He asked, looking to the Queen for permission.

She glanced at him, watching him with a quiet sneer. He was convinced he must have offended her just by asking, and yet she exhaled with a sigh, breaking one hand free of the other before lifting it.

“No.” She told him and offer the crowd a pitiful wave of her own.

But that was permission enough for him, and he turned to the crowd, the carriage rolling along as the innumerable dragons all watched. He felt more at ease as he lifted a hand and gave the crowd a wave, his smile still broad. Her Majesty had lowered her own hand to resume her stoic stance. She might not be enjoying herself, but he would! He made eye contact with the dragons, perhaps not all, but as many as he could. He was the first Prince of Radiah to come to Anya Sur in a very long time, and as he’d long come to learn, no one in this city knew he was the last in line, the least important.

No, to them he was a *powerful* and *important* person! And he was here to visit them all, and so he would smile and wave and enjoy himself the same as everyone else!

Far ahead of them there was a large stone building, larger than the rest and shaped round like a bowl. As they rode along, the building came into clearer focus, its vertical walls smooth and painted white with blue symbols that might have been Atinan writing. Dragons were standing on its roof, but they did not look to be soldiers. They seemed to be moving about as another crowd of dragons stood around the base of the building, looking up to watch them from below.

He didn’t ask what the commotion was, his attention drifting from the building to the crowd around it, and back again. It was only when he realized the rooftop figures were dancing that he devoted his full attention to them.

His eyes widened at first, thinking the dancers were naked, but surely, they were only just barely clothed. There were three of them, each dancing alone on their part of the roof, but wearing so little he couldn't be certain of what they were wearing. It was so bizarre to see from a distance. They skipped and spun, like a cheerful frolic, but it was unlike any of the dances he'd seen in Radiah. They were too far away to see more clearly, and the parade route was now shifting, continuing down a new road that drew them away from the large building with its unusual dancers.

"Were those dancers on the roof of that building?" He asked, but for the sake of the crowd he kept smiling and looking at them all.

He did not want to seem like he was ignoring them. He remembered how Nyle would tell him servants would forgive you for a bit of mischief if they liked you, and there was some truth to that too with the peasantry. Popular nobles were always spoken highly of; those ones that made kind gestures or acts of generosity to the people living beneath them. Waylen had no generosity to give except for his attention, and so he would try to do his best. Perhaps today would be memorable for those dragons who had come to the parade and seen him.

"Yes. Fire dances are performed at all of the city's cisterns." Her Majesty replied.

Cistern? Like for water?

"Those buildings are cisterns?" He asked her.

"Yes." She replied, prompting Princess Iolla to speak up on her mother's behalf.

"Mother means that they are used to store water. It is where everyone goes to collect water when they need it. Many of the cisterns also have pools for bathing, and that's why we have the fire dances there. Should something catch fire there will be water close by to douse it." Princess Iolla explained.

"I see! That does make sense, with how little water is. We saw so little of it on the road to Anya Sur." Waylen remarked, which drew Princess Vienna's attention now.

"There is water, but Atina Nah has hidden it deep underground where it's difficult to reach. We've tried digging wells like you do in Radiah, but they are often barren. Dinas Sur is the only one that found water." Princess Vienna replied to him.

"What is Dinas Sur?" He then asked.

The Queen interrupted.

"A pond, we dug it long ago during Theo's last year with us." She told him.

King Theo? He's been gone for a very long time, the son of King Edgard. So, they only have one very old well in all of Anya Sur, and yet they have so many people living in such a dry place. The lake he could see from the Keep was quite large, so maybe that was more than enough water for the city to survive, even with all the crops they grew. He wondered if he'd get to see either of those before he had to leave.

“May I ask what exactly is a fire dance?” He asked, uncertain of who he was even asking.

The carriage continued to move ahead at a steady pace, and the world around him changed little. The city of Anya Sur was made of so much stone, polished smooth and painted pale. Bright colored awnings all, and now he could spot the occasional wooden framed porch or framed windows. No two buildings were alike, as if each were handcrafted by a unique set of hands. In Ilian, many of the homes looked similar. As he’d ride through his homeland, so many homesteads and buildings had very similar shapes and styles to them. You could confuse one for another easily, but as Waylen watched the city of dragons, he did not feel that was the case here.

One building had two stories to it, then another had only one, some had no windows, others had many. Nowhere did he look were two homes alike enough to be fooled for the other. It was chaotic, almost messy, but vibrant and exciting.

“Iolla.” Her Majesty spoke up.

“A fire dance is our way of speaking to Atina Nah and Sanna Lita during times of celebration, or when we must honor rites. Everyone you see atop the cisterns is dancing to celebrate the founding of the Kingdom. It is a way for us to give thanks to Atina Nah for Her kindness, and to Sanna Lita for His guidance. We do this every year.” She explained.

Speak to Atina Nah? Speak to the desert? And this was the first he’d heard of a Sanna Lita, a name he was very ignorant of. They spoke of giving thanks, and of celebrations and rites, but he was left confused. There was more to fire dancing than he had thought. He guessed it wasn’t just a normal dance like any other as he’d assumed, but something the dragons all felt was very important. And what of the fire?

“But why is it called a fire dance?” He asked.

There was a pause from all three of them, he turned to look. Her Highness was looking back at him.

“For there is flame, Your Highness. It could not be a fire dance otherwise.” Her Highness told him, and he nodded like he understood.

But he did not understand. That did not answer his question, but he suspected that they were confused as to why he’d even have to ask. He looked out across the crowds of dragons and searched the buildings for another cistern. After a few minutes of him focusing on greeting the crowd, he did finally see what might have been a cistern.

On top of the building were two tiny figures, the distance far too great for him to see them clearly from the road they were on. The pair were far apart and dancing energetically, but he could not see any sign of flame. It just looked to him like they were dancing.

Waylen chose not to press the issue, at least for now. If he had the time he could ask someone else, like Ser Lyrren. He was always helpful.

In the meantime, he would choose to enjoy the moment, the parade now well underway and with him being thoroughly surrounded by sights and sounds no one from his family had experienced in decades. He took pleasure in knowing that this was his privilege to enjoy and hoped that he could recount it well enough to others to share it as best as he could.

In Radiah they like saying to tread lightly, and although I do not understand why they say it that way, the meaning behind the words still fits my purpose. Lightly is how I must tread. I want to bring to Anya Sur as many of Atina Nah's Eldests as I can muster, have them attend the Festival. It's hard enough to bargain with them, harder still to bend them to my will, but all of that is when they know I want something. The older we get the more childish we become, isn't that funny? We get stubborn with age like a whelp who refuses to let go of a toy, or one that won't let you take from his mouth something that's not meant to be eaten.

But if I invite them to join us for a celebration and bribe them with a grand feast like they serve in Radiah, then maybe their greed will cost them. Atina Nah does not like greed. She likes to punish those who can't control it. Though I gamble, treading lightly, perhaps She will punish them for their greed if they agree to come to Anya Sur. Punishing them by giving me what I want instead for our kingdom.

I only have to be wise with who I choose. The news that I'm inviting Eldests will travel fast, the gossip will gallop like a horse. They'll all know I want something from them, and so their instinct will be to refuse like a child fighting sleep, but the gossip will be what gets them to come. I've seen this in Radiah, Theo spoke of it, as have others. They would pit their people against each other with the power of jealousy, or with their pride.

I will have to speak to those Eldests within my reach, the ones who will freely give me their ear. If I choose wisely in who I wish to attend the Festival the gossip will spread and then the jealousy will move the unmovable for me. We get stubborn as we grow old, but if there is one weakness any Eldest possesses it's that they grow fat off the respect their age begets them. I don't have to invite them all, just some of them. Let them get jealous, then send more invitations to those I didn't the first time. Let the gossip do its job, they'll all show up.

But I must tread lightly, as the Radians say. Be careful, lest I actually cause offense that ruins any chance of getting what I want. I do not wish to invite Atina Nah's wrath upon me for my own greed. A successful hunt is owed to the skill and patience of the hunter. Ah, that must be why the Radians say it, isn't it? Hunting. Yvvie would have understood it instantly.

Codi had just finished helping tie his laces when a knock arrived at his bedroom door. He was now dressed in a fresh pair of clothing, quite possibly the finest he'd ever worn and certainly the best that had been packed to be brought with him to Atina Nah. Tonight was the last of it, he knew. Once the banquet was behind him his time in Atina Nah would be drawn to a close and he'd begin the long journey home. He wished he could stay longer, as he still did not feel comfortable with what he'd learned. His father would likely be disappointed, but Waylen didn't know what else to do.

"You can answer the door." He told Codi, who stood up and began to hurry towards the door.

The small box that held the brooch gifted to him by Her Majesty was on his nightstand, and he carefully retrieved it, feeling the heavy piece of steel rest in his palm just as Codi opened the door a small crack. Waylen was nearly as ready as he could be for tonight, he just needed to pin the

brooch on his lapel. Shane's voice could be heard, and with brooch still in hand Waylen approached the doorway himself and allowed Codi to open it for him.

"Your Highness, Eldest Thalla and Ser Lyrren have arrived." The old man told him.

He nodded and made his exit.

Eldest Thalla stood tall just inside the doorway that led outside, and at her side was Ser Lyrren. Waylen did not often get to see the Eldest, but her height was always something of a shock to see. Lyrren was a very tall dragon himself, but she was even taller than him like a giant.

The blue dragon nodded graciously to him, bowing slightly while Ser Lyrren followed in his wake with a polite bow of his own.

"Eldest Thalla Fah Kah'Seh, welcome." Waylen replied with a smile, almost turning his head to acknowledge Ser Lyrren to be polite.

"Your Highness, thank you. I apologize for the abruptness of our meeting, but I have come to discuss the banquet with you." She told him, now very quickly addressing the point of her visit.

Waylen nodded and welcomed her to it. She made a polite gesture towards his small table and together they went to sit. Ser Lyrren continued to stand by the Eldest's side while the pair sat down.

"Is there something I have yet to learn about the banquet?" He asked her.

"Yes, in a way. The number of guests in attendance tonight will be quite large, more than in past years. Your presence has provoked many requests for attendance, and a great many had to be rejected out of a lack of space." She began to tell him.

He felt a little proud hearing that, as it was nice being in a position of such importance! It was very rare, and he would miss it when he returned home.

"But, with all that will be attending, I have grown concerned. This is a very important dinner, and not just for Her Majesty, but for you as well. As the representative for the Kingdom of Radiah, it is important that the banquet goes well. I have decided that there are a few things we must explain to you to help make sure that proper etiquette is followed. Many of those in attendance are very unfamiliar with Radiah and her customs. I hope you understand." She explained herself.

He nodded, knowing that it was again time to be educated. But he smiled, making sure that she knew that he did understand.

"I am not here to embarrass myself or Her Majesty." He assured her.

She paused, seeming to measure her words.

"Perhaps not embarrass. A harsh way to say it, but you are young and everyone at the banquet will be very curious of you." She replied, then tilted her head to Ser Lyrren.

The slender dragon spoke up then.

“Your Highness, several merchants will be present, none of whom speak Radian or have much knowledge of your kingdom, but they are responsible for much of the trade that flows between Radiah and Atina Nah. Additionally, many Eldests will be in attendance, some from Anya Sur and others from across Atina Nah. Unlike Eldest Thalla, many of them will be ignorant to Radian but they are some of the most important Atinans you will be meeting tonight.” He began to say.

The Eldest raised her hand to stop him.

“Every one of them will introduce themselves to you, which is why we will have you arrive at the banquet hall first before anyone else can arrive. We expect every guest will want a piece of your time, but that would cause a measure of chaos if so many tried to grab your attention at once. By arriving early, we hope we can move you through the guests at a better pace. Ser Lyrren will be at your side the entire time to translate for you. We have also made sure that every guest knows that you do not speak our tongue.” She added.

“Will there be anyone in attendance that does speak Radian?” He then asked.

She tilted her head to Ser Lyrren.

“Several, but most you have already met, Your Highness. Should the need arise, you can speak through me to anyone that cannot speak Radian.” He replied.

Waylen nodded.

“Though he may speak for you, you are still responsible for your actions. We understand that in formal settings Radians will extend a hand to one another in greeting, but please do not do this at the banquet. Should there be a single Atinan who extends their hand to you, you are welcome to return it, but we do not expect anyone to understand your customs well enough to offer the gesture.” The Eldest took over then.

He nodded. Again they bring up the rule about never touching, as confusing as it was, especially with how even Her Majesty has broken that rule to touch him like she had on the shoulder the day before.

“You will be surrounded by some faces you will recognize, so you will not be alone to deal with so many of us that are strangers to you. Lyrren can be trusted to translate everything spoken, and you will be guarded by Atinans who should be familiar to you now. The guards you brought with you will be treated to a feast along with your servants, of course, but it will be Captain Norra and her guards that will be at your side for the banquet.” She reminded him.

“When does the banquet begin, if I am to be arriving so much earlier than other guests?” He interrupted.

“Once every guest has arrived there will be several minutes granted for everyone to mingle. It is not often so many gather in one place, so they are allowed to speak for a time. Her Majesty,

Princesses Vienna and Iolla, and a few others will all arrive last. *This* will be when the banquet officially begins. You will be given a seat next to Her Majesty. Your table will be occupied by the Royal Family, and some of the most important guests that are visiting us tonight.” She told him.

“Are there table manners I should be aware of?” He asked.

The Eldest turned her head again to Ser Lyrren.

“I do not believe there is anything he should be warned of. His table manners are different from Atinan, but nothing offensive. Your Highness, you should feel comfortable eating and drinking as you feel comfortable.” The dragon assured him.

This seemed to satisfy the Eldest.

“After the dinner concludes, which will be when Her Majesty decides it, everyone will depart to the large balcony. Since the banquet is a feast celebrating the founding of Atina Nah, it is tradition for there to be a fire dance performed. It will be different from the ones you would have seen during the parade.” The Eldest added.

That piqued his interest, as all the dances he’d seen earlier had been far away and he still had questions about them.

“Princess Iolla explained what a fire dance was to me during the parade. What will be different about the one performed at the banquet?” He asked.

“I do not know what Her Highness would have told you, but the dance tonight will feature two dancers instead of one. It will be a very old dance performed by a married couple, so that there may be a woman to stand in place of Atina Nah, and a man to stand in place of Sanna Lita.” She told him, making this the second time he’d heard the name Sanna Lita.

“Will this be a kind of ceremony, or rite?” He asked, quoting Princess Iolla.

“It is in a way, yes. You will only need to witness it, same as every other guest. Its purpose is symbolic; it represents a wish for good fortune for all of Atina Nah.” She explained to him.

He nodded.

“So when should I expect to be taken to the banquet hall?” He then asked.

“Within the next one to two hours. Final preparations are being made in the kitchen, and I believe the cooks on your staff are still working on their dessert. We will not want to retrieve you until we are certain the arrangements in the hall are complete.” The Eldest explained.

He nodded again.

Ser Lyrren then addressed the Eldest and spoke briefly in Atinan to her. Waylen watched as she turned her head to listen. Her face briefly flashed an expression before suppressing it, she did

not look pleased. A moment passed, then she replied in Atinan, speaking briefly. Ser Lyrren then nodded and remained silent.

“Your Highness, of all the guests that will be in attendance, I will describe one. The rest can be revealed to you when they introduce themselves, but to the north of Atina Nah are the Clans of Ulta. Are you aware of them?” She asked.

Waylen had to consider that for a moment, since he was not very well versed on any kingdom that did not neighbor Radiah or in some way trade with her.

“I am aware that Ulta is a place on a map, Eldest.” He confessed.

She sighed, looking uncomfortable.

“Ulta is a kingdom to our north, I do not believe they trade much if at all with Radiah or beyond, but we trade with them regularly. Radian goods pass through us to reach Ulta. Many years before your birth, we received an ambassador from Ulta. His name is Preveer Ahn Shallot. If you are only aware of Ulta as a place on a map, then you will need to know that Ultans are much more like we Atinans than they are Radian. They are not of your kind, but like ours. He and his small group of companions will look strange to you.” She explained in detail.

Waylen carefully listened as she spoke, now quite curious. Radiah had many ambassadors; it was often a very important role to play in his father’s court.

“I understand, is there a proper way to address him? So that I may not offend him.” He asked.

She continued to look uncomfortable, which in turn was making him uncomfortable.

“Her Majesty does not like the Ultan ambassador, Your Highness, so you will only be speaking with him very briefly if at all. The ambassador has his own rooms in the Keep, much like you do, but he keeps to himself unless needed. We are only explaining this to you so that you are not left confused by his presence or by any other happenings during the banquet.” She told him.

“I see, thank you, Eldest. Might I ask why Her Majesty does not like him; I am under the impression that being the ambassador to Atina Nah would be very important. Such a role is often a respected one in Radiah.” He pressed her, really just out of curiosity, but with him knowing so little about the Clans of Ulta perhaps this would be something useful to know, if only to prove to his father that he’d learned something from this long journey to Atina Nah and back.

There was a long pause while the Eldest stared at him. She did not seem angry or upset with him, but her whole demeanor was off.

“I can only explain it as a personal disagreement from many years prior. Her Majesty does not change her opinions of people very easily or very quickly, and the ambassador was not wise in his past dealings with her on behalf of Ulta. If this results in a moment of awkwardness at the banquet, we apologize.” She finally told him.

“I understand, thank you for letting me know.” He replied.

He did not fully understand, but this was clearly a glimpse of politics that did not concern Radiah, it seemed. There were plenty of disputes between his kingdom and others, many of them very old. Few concerned Atina Nah, save the greatest of them with Darfell.

“If there is anything left for you to prepare for, I would suggest you do it now.” The Eldest told him, then began to rise from her seat.

He rose with her and when she excused herself, he thanked her again for coming to speak with him. Once the formalities were finished, Ser Lyrren remained behind just long enough to remind them that as soon as it was certain when the banquet would begin, that he would return to collect him. He then excused himself and departed. Shane then approached now that all of the dragons had left.

“I’ve never heard of anyone named Preveer Ahn Shallot, though everyone in Ilian is aware Ulta exists. I do not think we do any real trade with them, as she said.” Shane told him.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone speak of them.” He added.

“Do you feel you are ready, Your Highness? Or is there more you wish to be done?” The old man asked.

He looked down at the brooch that was still resting in his palm. Offering it, Shane took charge of pinning the brooch to his lapel, and all Waylen could do was wait until the next step was taken.

And it was only after an hour had passed them by before Ser Lyrren returned.

Along with him there were several servants. They all had serving carts in tow. Most of them were being directed to his guard’s rooms, but two were brought into Waylen’s quarters. Each cart was full of water, alcohol, and bread. The dragon informed them that hot courses would come to them within the next hour, but that this was to be the start of their evening’s feast. Waylen’s servants and guard’s evening, at least. They would all be feasting here in his rooms and the guard rooms.

“I am ready to leave whenever you think it is acceptable.” He told the dragon as they watched the servants distribute food and drink to the breakfast table while Shane helped provide directions.

The dragon nodded, then stepped aside to give instructions to the numerous servants, making sure the carts were where they belonged. When he returned to Waylen’s side, he’d dragged Captain Norra with him and another female dragon whose name he was confident he remembered.

“Your Highness, it would be safe to depart now if you will allow me to lead you.” Ser Lyrren told him at last, the two women following into his wake.

“Captain Norra and Sol Arita will be my guards?” He asked, testing his memory to see if he was correct on the latter’s name.

The dragon nodded, confirming to Waylen that his memory was sound. He then agreed to be led off to the banquet hall, and they departed.

It was not a long walk, but Ser Lyrren was moving a bit too briskly for his liking. Behind them were the women. He’d seen Sol Arita several times as she stood guard, but Captain Norra was the only one he’d ever really spoken to, as rare as it was. She seemed to interact more with Landon and the others, being that they were all soldiers.

When they reached the banquet hall, he remembered it well from his first week in Anya Sur. Now, however, the decorations were complete! The hall was properly furnished with chairs at every table. Red tablecloths were set, and the table settings were assembled but in the incorrect arrangement he’d now grown accustomed to. There was no food or drink yet, but he could see where it would soon be placed.

“We are perhaps too early.” Ser Lyrren lamented.

Several servants began to push serving carts into the banquet hall, and Ser Lyrren beckoned him to stand close to an empty wall. Dragons were piling in now, pushing carts or carrying platters. Food and drink were now being unleashed, Waylen having only arrived a few minutes too early. With great speed and care everything was being put into their proper places. Every table with chairs had its own assortment of empty glasses and jugs, bottles of alcohol, many great baskets of bread. There were slender tables in other parts of the hall that were being loaded with meats, stews, and several other things whose identity he couldn’t determine.

“Will we be feeding ourselves from these tables?” He asked, pointing to the skinny tables.

“That is how the banquet begins, but once everyone is seated food will be brought to your seat. If there is anything you want, please allow it to be fetched for you.” He replied, then turned to say something in Atinan to Captain Norra.

After a brief exchange, Ser Lyrren turned back to him.

“Arita will gather anything you would like to eat or drink until everyone is seated at the table.” He was told.

Waylen nodded, scanning the room again. Seeing that one table had a pair of large chairs sitting on one side, he pointed at the pair and asked for the dragon’s attention.

“Is this where I will be sitting, next to Her Majesty?” He asked.

The dragon followed the path of his finger, then nodded and agreed that this was correct. Two chairs larger than the rest, this was something he’d seen more than once.

“The chair I will be using, is that where His Majesty would have once sat?” He asked then.

After a long pause, the dragon nodded.

“Yes. Do not make mention of this in front of Her Majesty, Your Highness.” The dragon reminded him.

“I remember. I won’t.” He assured the dragon.

He’d found himself sitting next to Her Majesty many times, and always in a seat reserved for the King. Waylen wondered how she felt about that, not understanding it himself. He didn’t know how he’d feel if his position was similar, not that it would ever be. Two chairs like that would never belong to him, for they were already reserved for his brother and his wife. Waylen would always be sitting near to him, but several chairs away.

One of the serving carts, he then noticed, was unloaded onto a table filled with a growing supply of desserts. It was not a wide variety of options, but there was a lot of picti mal pudding, and he smiled when he saw the servants begin to distribute the little cakes Marissa and the girls had made. He was impressed by the number that they were able to make, considering they were afraid they wouldn’t have enough chocolate.

“If I am to wait, I would enjoy something to drink.” He spoke up.

Ser Lyrren nodded, then quickly said something to Sol Arita. The dragon then quickly paced away, speaking to some of the servants. Waylen watched as a glass of wine was poured. Sol Arita then returned with both a filled glass and the bottle it had been sourced from. Ser Lyrren gestured for the bottle and stole it from the soldier’s grip, cradling the bottle carefully into the crook of his elbow for safe keeping.

The glass was offered to him, and he took it. Waylen gave the glass a sniff, then a sip. Radian, but he couldn’t determine the year, but it was good.

“Should you need more I have the bottle, Your Highness.” The dragon told him.

Waylen thanked him, and very carefully sipped at his wine. He didn’t want to consume too much of anything before the banquet had a chance to begin.

To pass the time, he began to ask Ser Lyrren if there were any guests coming to the banquet that he should greet differently than the others. He was hoping to learn something useful, perhaps a way to please Her Majesty. If there were guests that the Queen valued more than others, then it would probably be a good idea to court their approval more than anyone else’s. Favoritism in a royal court was something he knew well, and he doubted it was any different here considering how many guests were trying to attend.

The dragon answered, giving him name after name of several important people. Waylen tried to pin him down for identifying traits that he could recognize, but even with the dragon’s expert grasp of Radian some of his descriptions were confusing.

What color was rusted auburn? Weren’t those two things the same color? Or what is rich stone? Stone can be many colors! What kind of stone? Apparently, it was a shade of pale gold, but

would it not have been better to describe it as yellow? Is yellow not a flavor of gold hue? Lyrren attempted to also describe dragons by the shape of their horns, using words he could not understand, but apparently different shapes and curves of horns all had their own names. In the end Waylen resorted to asked Lyrren to simply speak up when any of these important guests came to introduce themselves. He would leave it to the dragon to find his own way to discretely signal the importance of a guest.

And when the first of what would become many guests arrived, it was a whole pack of them. The doors on one side of the room swung open and were then kept that way by a pair of guards. Waylen watched, counted, until a total of nine dragons entered. He drew in a silent breath before setting it free. He could see they were all very very tall even from this many paces away.

He took a sip, savored the warmth of the wine as it rolled across his tongue.

“None of them are important, Your Highness.” He heard Ser Lyrren whisper from behind.

The group of dragons were all casting glances at him, but they seemed to be pretending that they were not interested in him. Their attention was poorly divided between Waylen and the tables of food and drink. He’d never been in a situation like this before where so many people actively tried to steal glances at him. The nine of them were conversing quietly amongst themselves, taking cups from servants that had been filled with something from a jug. Probably not wine but rather one of the local alcohols the dragon’s all liked to drink, picti or unni more than likely.

“I recognize seven of them, Your Highness. They are all merchants that do business between the tribes. They are afraid to approach you.” The dragon whispered to him.

Ser Lyrren had taken up a post a footstep behind Waylen and on his righthand side. Just out of view but within whispering distance. Sol Norra was visible on his lefthand side, looking bored and patient at once. Sol Arita was somewhere further behind him than that, and likely just as bored.

Waylen would have been bored too had he not felt the overwhelming weight of expectation sitting on his shoulders. Even with so little happening he couldn’t be bored if he tried. He was nervous.

Another group of dragons entered from the same door, a total of five now stepping in. Two of them were very tall! He quietly sighed, followed by a whisper from behind that told him the two tallest dragons in the group were Eldests, and that they were very important. Maybe it would not be so difficult for Lyrren to signal to him after all. Waylen eyed them both, then scanned the other three shorter ones. They were still likely taller than Waylen. Everyone in this room would likely be his senior in age if what he’d been told about height was true. Princess Vienna had said that a dragon’s age was shown in their height or at least it could be assumed from it.

“I will be the youngest person attending the banquet, won’t I?” He asked quietly.

“Yes, Your Highness. Children do not attend the banquet except for when the Princess Vienna and Iolla were both young.” The dragon replied.

Sol Norra on his left tilted her head to look his way, but her eyes were not looking at him, but past him to where Waylen believed Ser Lyrren to be standing.

“You will be the youngest *adult* in attendance this year.” The dragon then corrected himself.

He breathed out another quiet sigh, as if he needed a reminder of where he stood.

The two Eldests approached the table with their small group. An exchange of greetings and conversation began with the nine that had arrived before. Only when everyone had a glass or cup in their hand did the pair of Eldests turn their attention to Waylen. This was the first time either of them acknowledged his presence, unlike the three they’d entered with who’d all stolen glances at him.

As they began to approach Waylen, he inhaled quietly and let the air out slowly, hoping to steel himself.

“Warmly.” Ser Lyrren whispered from behind.

Waylen only nodded, warm being a very vague way of describing how to greet someone important, but he’d spent years in his father’s court. He felt confident he understood how to smile and be gracious to an honored guest.

The pair arrived in front of him, stopping a handful of feet away from him. Now that they were so close to him, Waylen had to look up at them no differently than he did with Eldest Thalla. These two were just as tall as her! Both were male, one in a shade of dark grey skin while the other was a pale orange hue. They were not dressed in tunics and trousers, but in what must have been traditional formal attire for a dragon. Colorful skirts around their waists with the grey dragon wearing a shawl wrapped around both shoulders. The orange one wore a similar shawl, but it hung down his right side lower than the left. Both were heavily adorned with thick bands of metal jewelry around their wrists, ankles, and necks.

The grey one spoke first, his voice as deep as it was foreign. The words were in Atinan, so Waylen could only maintain a warm smile and look the dragon in the eyes as he listened, seeing the intensity of their color. Then, he felt a gentle warmth appear next to him as Ser Lyrren began to speak quietly over his shoulder, the tip of his snout inches from his ear.

“I welcome you to Anya Sur. I am Eldest Vann Er Ret’Gil. It is good we are given a chance to meet, as the last time I have set eyes on your royalty was near forty years ago.” Ser Lyrren translated.

The grey one, Eldest Vann, then gestured to his companion.

“Welcome, as well. I am Eldest Freet Er Hun’Vet. I have traveled from very far away to attend this year’s Festival, and I am glad that you did so as well so that we might meet.” The translation ended, but Waylen could not see if Lyrren had also translated the polite bow of the head that had been given to him by the orange dragon, which was Eldest Freet.

“Your Highness.” Ser Lyrren whispered quietly.

“I thank you both. I am Prince Waylen Sundile, and I am grateful to be able to attend this year’s Festival with the two of you. It has been too long since my family has come to visit Atina Nah, but I am happy that my father; King Rylan, chose me for the honor.” Waylen replied carefully, not speaking too slowly or too quickly.

Ser Lyrren then repeated everything he just said but in Atinan. Only his father’s name and his own were left untouched by the aggressive tongue of the dragon. He’d tried to say what needed saying in a gracious way but hearing it all repeated back with such a strong tone made him fear that the message might not make it.

But both Eldests seemed to receive it well, drawing very casual salutes across their chests, which Waylen reciprocated. Both of them then turned and gestured with nods to their three companions, who all began to introduce themselves. And so, it was beginning. The nine others that had watched him from afar were now meandering their way over to him now that the pair of Eldests had gone before them. Afraid of being first, maybe?

The names and introductions began to flow off one reptilian tongue after another. So many strange names, he feared he’d never remember them all. At least most of the greetings were brief, and once a dragon said their small piece they retreated. Sideways glances were always being cast in his direction, if not outright staring. Waylen surely must have looked every part the spectacle.

More dragons began to arrive, more important people, more important Eldests with incredible height. Every dragon in the room was taller than him by several inches to a foot or more. There might have been one servant close to Waylen’s height, but only by an inch or so.

He took another sip and found his glass was empty. Did he dare?

He didn’t need to ask, as Ser Lyrren was already stepped in to refill it.

“I would like something to eat. Just a few bread rolls, the tan.” He said.

Sol Norra took over, speaking in Atinan to someone behind him. Sol Arita then hurried away and quickly returned with a small silver plate with four tan on it. When he saw the plate up close, he found it wasn’t actually silver, but steel. Same as every other piece of metal he ever seemed to see.

“How often do guests as important as me attend the banquet?” He decided to ask.

“Every Eldest you have spoken to is of great importance, as much as you are. Three that you have met live in Anya Sur with the rest coming from the tribes.” Ser Lyrren explained.

He nodded and gladly ate a roll.

Even though every dragon that had introduced themselves had retreated to one of the many small groups that mingled in the hall, Waylen was not allowed to feel alone. He was no doubt the center of everyone’s attention. The noise in the hall had grown quite loud, the voices of thick Atinan accents and their aggressive tongue was something he’d likely never forget the sound of.

“Are they all talking about me? Or am I only imagining it.” He quietly asked.

“They are. Everyone knows you cannot speak Atinan.” Lyrren replied bluntly. “Would you like me to translate what I hear?”

Did he? He could almost laugh. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to hear all of the gossip.

“No. I only hope I have inspired good conversation.” He decided to say.

“It is difficult to say, with so many talking at once, but many do not seem to appreciate the color of your tunic.” The dragon replied.

That made him frown, enough that he glanced down his chest and at the green livery of his clothing. Green was a fine color!

He let it go, ate another roll, sipped at his wine. As the dragons all watched him, he watched them in return. He cast his eyes around the room slowly, watching faces. Committing a few to memory if he could. He knew he might want to remember some of the most important people. Every Eldest, since they were apparently very important to Her Majesty. There were two merchants Lyrren had been careful to mention, as they dealt with a lot of trade with Radiah. He wondered if any of his father’s advisors knew the names of those two? He didn’t know enough about how trade deals were handled between the two kingdoms, but he was interested in knowing it now.

From the doorway a familiar face appeared, tall with sapphire eyes set within a blue face. Eldest Thalla entered along with a shorter dark grey skinned male. She was wearing another white dress, both arms dripping with metal bracelets. Her companion was dressed much the same as the other men who’d arrive, skirt and a shawl. Another trio of dragons entered behind them, a mix of earthen tones just like most of the rest.

The Eldest smiled at him from across the room and seemed to whisper something to the dragon next to her. The male nodded with a smile and the pair began to glide across the hall toward Waylen.

“Warmly, of course.” Ser Lyrren whispered, making Waylen smile.

“Your Highness.” Eldest Thalla spoke in Radian. “Welcome, I am happy that you are here.”

The dragon told him this as if she was just another guest, maybe just for the sake of formality in such a circumstance. Before Waylen could make the decision to reply, she was already gesturing to the dragon standing next to her. That one began to speak, thick accent, pure Atinan.

“I welcome you as well. I am Erram Er Nu’Vot, and I have heard much about you, Your Highness.” Came the translation from Ser Lyrren.

“Thank you, I am Prince Waylen Sundile, and I am very happy to be here to meet you both.” Waylen replied just as formally while Ser Lyrren repeated a translation soon after.

“Waylen, Erram is my husband who is also one of Anya Sur’s master glass smiths. He has brought shape to glass for many decades with many of his pieces traveling far to Radiah.” Eldest Thalla added, and Waylen smiled.

He hadn’t known she had a husband, but it didn’t seem that anyone was upset at him for it this time! It was strange that married couples did not seem to share the same surname. Princess Vienna did not appear to wear Prince Karo’s name, at least that’s how it seemed when Waylen was introduced to them both.

Before anything further could be said, Eldest Thalla beckoned the other three dragons with a hand and a nod, and the trio each took their own turn to introduce themselves. He treated them all extra warmly even though Lyrren hadn’t told him to. He was just erring on the side of caution, especially with Eldest Thalla standing right there. When they were done, the Eldest politely excused herself along with her husband, Waylen watching the pair move through the room towards one of the tables with drink, greeting other dragons along the way.

“Were any of the others I’ve met also married? Should I have greeted them differently?” Waylen then asked, finally turning to look at the dragon behind him.

“Most are married, that I know of, but very few brought their wives or husbands with them tonight. There is not enough seating in the banquet hall to allow everyone to bring their spouse.” The dragon explained.

“I was not rude for not saying something special to a married couple?” Waylen asked.

“No, Your Highness, you were not rude. We do not tell strangers if we are married. It is too personal a thing to share.” Ser Lyrren replied.

“Then I am happy knowing Eldest Thalla does not think of me as a stranger.” He replied.

The dragon didn’t have a reply to that, which was uncomfortable. But now there was so much commotion in the hall that he had plenty to distract himself with. No one else was trying to draw his attention, and yet everyone had his attention. The noise of conversation likely focused on him, and Waylen had to process what it felt like. He’d always been in the shadow of someone else, multiple someones, but now he was catching more eyes than he ever thought would be interested.

“Has everyone arrived?” He asked after a while of watching the dragons intermingle.

“No, Preveer Ahn Shallot has not arrived with his companions. They always arrive after everyone else.” He was told.

Waylen nodded, remembering that name. He wondered if there would be an awkward standoff between him and Her Majesty, or if they would pretend to be polite to one another. What sort of court mischief gets on in Anya Sur, he wondered then. All sorts of things happened in Illian whenever his parents had parties with many invited guests. There’s always spats and feuds brewing somewhere if the castle gossip was to be believed.

He finished all of his tan rolls, and the plate disappeared along with Sol Arita.

“With most having arrived, Her Majesty should be coming soon.” Ser Lyrren spoke up.

“That’s good. I have met a lot of people today.” He replied.

“You did well, Your Highness. It is an honor to be greeted so warmly by so many of our wisest. You’ve now met eight Eldests of Atina Nah, something very rare for someone your age.” The dragon continued.

Waylen nodded.

“Are young dragons not allowed to meet an Eldest?” Waylen asked, now curious.

“It is not that they are not allowed. I do not know how best to say it. An Eldest is not someone anyone meets easily. They are very important. Only those that rival their own importance can meet with them by arrangement. Close family would be an exception, of course. Eldest Thalla often meets with her family.” The dragon tried to explain.

So Eldests weren’t just old. They were both old, apparently wise, and very important to their people. Not quite nobility, but maybe that’s what they really were? It couldn’t be, if they only needed to be really old. That didn’t sound like how a noble house would form. Waylen would have to ask about this before he returned home.

Behind him a door knocked, loudly and almost with violence. It was enough to make him spin around to look. Everyone else was looking, too.

“She comes.” Lyrren whispered, the dragon quickly stepping around him to assume a new position that was behind Waylen so that he may face the new door, Sol Norra and Arita also doing the same.

A set of doors opposite the first were quickly opened by just a crack, just enough to let a guard slip inside. The dragon gestured silently to other nearby guards and then there was a moment of rapid chaos as guards all shifted positions to stand on either side of the doorway while two servants stood in front with their hands on the handles.

The room had also fallen deathly silent, giving Waylen a chill that was just as quiet.

There was another knock on the door, softer, but it prompted both servants to swing open the doors. Every soldier snapped a salute, including Sol Norra and Arita. Waylen lifted his fist and clapped it over his stomach as he saw Her Majesty enter the banquet hall. Unsurprisingly, she looked irritated.

She stepped into the room, dressed in a deep red tunic and trousers. She wore partial armor, polished steel on her shins and forearms, and for the first time he saw she was wearing jewelry. A thick band of steel was around her neck and two more around both her wrists. Behind her were Princesses Vienna and Iolla, along with Prince Karo and another male dragon who was dressed like a soldier. Karo was wearing a skirt and shawl like Waylen had seen him wear on previous occasions.

“Your Highness.” Lyrren whispered, gesturing with his hand towards Her Majesty.

The new arrivals were waiting for him, the room still very quiet. The walk to meet them was short but the pressure he felt was smothering. When he arrived, he bowed deeply to Her Majesty.

“Good evening, Your Majesty.” He told her.

She nodded.

“As to you, Prince Waylen.” She replied.

Princess Vienna stepped forward and greeted him warmly, followed by Prince Karo in his native tongue. Princess Iolla introduced herself formally while Her Majesty seemed impatient at the ongoing formality. The last to introduce himself was the unknown male, who Princess Iolla explained was her et’nol, a dragon by the name of Thine Er Ket’Vas. He was taller than Karo, but his skin was a darker reddish orange hue.

“Enough. We sit.” The Queen then interrupted them all.

The room remained quiet as Her Majesty began to walk briskly to the pair of large chairs that would be hers and Waylen’s while the rest of their small group followed. Ser Lyrren lagged behind along with Sol Norra and Arita.

The Queen lifted her hand and made a gesture with her fingers, brief but unmistakable. The many servants in the room all leapt into action, moving about the room to guide everyone in attendance to their seats. Everyone obeyed, making their way to what must have been planned seating. It was an orderly affair, but no one was taking a seat yet. Her Majesty looked at him, and gestured to the chair next to her own, the one he knew would have belonged to His late Majesty. He patiently stood behind the chair same as everyone else was doing.

It was not so unusual of an arrangement, though it differed slightly from what he was accustomed to. Princess Iolla was to his right, and her fiancé next to her. Princess Vienna and Prince Karo were to be seated on Her Majesty’s left. Every Eldest he’d been introduced to was given a seat at the same table where Waylen and Her Majesty stood with Eldest Thalla to be seated across from him. He was trying to pay attention to the arrangement, since if these seats were planned, then that would tell him who was in her favor and who wasn’t.

The far door that had let the guests in opened again, and a small group of newcomers entered. As Waylen watched, he resisted the urge to squint. It wasn’t that he couldn’t see that far, but that he felt the urge to stare extra hard to make certain he knew he was looking correctly. The whole group of them were... Short. And very different looking dragons at that! A pair of servants led this group to one of the far tables, as if they were being purposely placed as distant to Her Majesty as possible.

They were shorter than the rest of the dragons in the room, enough that Waylen was probably equal to them all in height. Each was broad of shoulder, very barrel chested with only a single pair of short horns sitting atop their heads, and no hair that he could see. No smooth skin

either, they seemed almost coarse to the touch like some lizards he'd seen scurrying about the courtyard back home.

Was this Preveer Ahn Shallot and his companions? Who else could it be?

Waylen stole a sideways glance at Her Majesty, and she was staring at the newcomers with a barely hidden scowl. It was Preveer Ahn Shallot, it had to have been if this is the face she chose to wear when looking at him.

Once everyone was standing behind their chairs, Her Majesty raised both her hands and clapped them once. She was no longer looking at who Waylen believed to be Preveer and was now surveying the entire room of gathered guests. It was then that everyone began to step back and withdraw their own chairs. Waylen quickly, as gracefully as he could, did the same. His chair was as large and heavy as Her Majesty's, but he slid it back the same as any other chair despite its weight.

Everyone was now taking their seat and Waylen joined them while Her Majesty continued to stand. He tried to slide his own chair forward, but now the size and weight was too much now that his own was added to it. The Queen's hand then fell behind him to land on the back of the chair. He was suddenly pushed forward by several inches with little effort of his own.

The room was falling silent, the noise of moving chairs and people sitting coming to a close until all that was left was Her Majesty's presence. Waylen did not see anyone giving out directions, so much of this must have already been understood or explained beforehand. It certainly hadn't been explained to him! No one had thought to describe how everyone would sit, and why would he have ever thought to even ask? Her Majesty then lifted her hands up in a sweeping motion, gesturing to everyone in the room, and she began to speak in her native tongue.

A grey face appeared next to his own, Ser Lyrren surprising him with his suddenly arrival at his side. Nearly kneeling, the dragon was crouching next to him with his voice a soft whisper as he began to whisper a translation.

"Welcome, I extend to you my thanks for joining me, knowing that many of you have traveled so far from home. Today marks another year passed, and Atina Nah has blessed us with a fine celebration. For those of you that attended the tournament yesterday, I hope that you were entertained, and for those that saw the parade earlier today, I hope that it brought you joy." Lyrren repeated quietly, the tone of his voice so different from the force and power of Her Majesty's own.

"Though we are not always worthy of Her kindness, nor that of His guidance, we were permitted to gather on this day to celebrate the founding of our Kingdom." She finished speaking before Lyrren could do the same, Her Majesty's attention falling down to him, as did her hand.

With a gesture, she drew the room's full attention to Waylen before resuming.

"We are also joined by Prince Waylen Sundile, son to King Rylan Sundile of the Kingdom of Radiah whom we will always owe thanks. Today's Festival, and all those that came before it, would not have been possible had his forebears not given us their aid so long ago. It has been many years since Radiah has come to visit us, and many more since they have come to share in this day's joy. I,

as well as all that are gathered here, thank you Prince Waylen for your coming.” She drew her fist over her chest in salute and bowed her head respectfully to him, and all before Ser Lyrren could finish translating.

He didn’t know if he was meant to speak, his hand rising to offer a salute in return. Lyrren quickly whispered to him he should say nothing.

“Now, please allow me to bestow the gift of food and drink so that we may all continue this great day’s celebration.” She finished, as did Lyrren, drawing her own chair back before sitting without any further ceremony.

He expected applause, but none came. Instead, a great gathering of dragons all decades older than him, some more than a century, all bowing their heads respectfully in silence before an army of servants descended upon the tables. Each servant came with plates, laden with food. For the first time in his stay in Anya Sur he felt part of a proper feast. Every plate shouldered a heavy burden of food, if only of a single type. Plates loaded with the familiar bread rolls, others piled high with the meatballs he most enjoyed, and countless others that he couldn’t recognize.

“Your Highness, your plate.” Princess Iolla caught his attention, her hand gesturing to the empty plate in front of him now that a servant had arrived with food. The servant lowered the plate to his level, revealing it was full of meatballs, the meatballs.

The Princess reached out a hand and began to pluck meatballs from the pile with her fingers, and then he reluctantly volunteered to do the same. He stole four from the plate as quickly as he could, and then awkwardly gestured with his hand to signal he had what he needed. The servant departed, and was quickly replaced by another, and then another.

Every empty plate on the table rapidly filled with food, a little of everything. This was the only time a meal felt like home, except for perhaps the one that he’d treated Princess Vienna and her husband to.

He didn’t exactly know what was on his plate, as he’d been grabbing things more out of politeness than anything else. A servant carefully placed an open bottle of wine between him and Her Majesty, whose own plate was now covered in food.

As the food and drink flowed, so did the conversation. He couldn’t understand any of it, but the room was now alight with the speech of foreign tongues. He wished he could speak their language, but with so many voices he doubted he could have made much sense of the noise. Even back in Radiah, a room like this would be so full of people chattering that he’d be left dizzy if he tried to follow it all. It was easier to tune it out.

“Your Highness, did you enjoy yesterday’s tournament?” Eldest Thalla asked him from across the table.

She and her husband sat together with many more Eldests seated to the left and right. Every so often a dragon that was shorter, younger, was seated between them. This was very much like the table he’d sit at whenever his father would host a gathering. There was always at least one table where his mother and father would sit, and with them their children and many of the most honored

guests. However, Waylen was always the youngest, and so he was often pushed to the end of the table so that the more powerful voices of influence were closer to his father's ear.

"Yes, I did. I have never seen anything like it before, but I very much enjoyed it." He told her earnestly.

She was not a dragon he met often, having only been in her presence a handful of times. He didn't know what her duties were in the Keep, and he'd never made it a point to ask. He wasn't certain of how a casual dinner conversation with her would go. It reminded him of the many times a guest in Ilia would greet him, an adult speaking down to a child, and he was always left confused as to how to speak or what to say. Now that he was older, he knew that nothing was expected of him, the guests were just being polite and currying favor by treating the young prince with some measure of politeness.

"I have attended the tournament in years past, but I was unable to this year." She replied to him.

Her husband then said something to her in Atinan, drawing the Eldest's attention to her side. Waylen wondered if her husband was an Eldest, as they were married. Was he not as old as her? He was the shorter of the two.

Then Waylen picked up the voice of Princess Vienna from the other side of Her Majesty's seat, but she was also speaking Atinan. He was pleased with himself that he quickly recognized her voice even when she wasn't speaking Radian. He hadn't had as many opportunities to meet with her either. Ser Lyrren was the only dragon whose voice he'd heard regularly. The slender dragon spoke to him or within earshot daily, and in both languages. Atinan was nothing like Radian, but at least it did not leave one's voice sounding unrecognizable.

The Eldest's husband replied, Erram was his name, he needed to remember that. Waylen watched as his head turned toward where the Princess would be. Waylen was surrounded by voices he couldn't understand, the Eldest was listening to her husband. Princess Vienna then replied in kind.

On the Eldest's opposite side was another Eldest whose name escaped him. Waylen focused on his food, trying to remember that one's name, but couldn't. He glanced further down the table and tried to remind himself of the other names. He recalled a few but he was certain he did not have their surnames correct. On the other side he was proud to at least remember Eldest Vann. That one was fortunate enough to be the first that had greeted him, so he was the easiest to remember. The others, further down the table, were a struggle to remember. He was not remembering these names anywhere near as good as he should.

More voices came and went in Atinan, so he just focused on his food. Princess Iolla beside him added to it. He was feeling quite left out, he hated that he could not participate. If his father had thought to have him learn Atinan, he could have at least spoken it as well as Shane, but if what the old man said was true then maybe that level of skill would not be enough. How could he convey to his father that they needed to be better at speaking their language?

Surely his family had spoken it better in the past, far better than Shane could, as good as the dragons could speak Radian.

“They do not speak of anything that would interest you.” The Queen then told him quietly.

He turned his head to her, and she was back to eating. She’d not contributed to any of the surrounding discussions and seemed to only be concerned with the food on her plate.

Waylen nodded and looked back down at his own plate.

The conversations continued, and Waylen participated whenever he was able, but the topics were not always about him or about anything he understood. He began to think that it would be better to listen even if most of it was something he couldn’t understand. Their language was powerful, aggressive, but as he passed his eyes around the room and watched the dragons speak, he could see that they weren’t angry. The noise of it was deceptive.

Many smiled or laughed between strange bursts of foreign words. He wanted to accept it as normal, despite the barrier that prevented him from understanding them.

A grey hand appeared at his right side, brandishing a small plate with an assortment of desserts. It was Ser Lyrren, placing the plate next to him before vanishing behind him. With his dinner plate cleaned of food, Waylen enjoyed the dessert. On the plate were several things; two of the wrinkled sweet fruits he’d eaten during the tournament, one of the small cakes that Marissa and the others had made. It was paired with a large spoonful of picti mal, and then a short stack of what looked like square wafers.

He ate it all between sips of his wine. Her Majesty was largely silent the entire time, seemingly listening to everyone the same as he was. A servant appeared behind the Queen after several long minutes had passed, long enough for Waylen to have largely finished his desserts. He listened as the servant whispered something to Her Majesty, but it was in Atinan so he couldn’t understand it. She gave a curt reply, then lifted her glass and drained its contents before dropping it back to the table.

“Waylen.” She then said his name as she began to stand.

She didn’t say anything more, but now that she was rising from her chair, so too were several others. Suddenly then, everyone was beginning to stand and Waylen hurried to join them.

Loudly, Her Majesty said something in Atinan, lifting her hand to gather everyone’s attention. She spoke for a moment more, then lowered her hand, and looked down at him.

“We are leaving now for the fire dance.” She told him, then turned and began to walk.

Princess Iolla was then right by his side and gesturing for him to follow along, and then very soon a procession was formed. The hall began to empty one by one as everyone was led out a doorway and towards their next destination, Her Majesty at the front and flanked by several of her guards.

Honestly, I wasn't sure what to do with all the dancing. A part of me thought that perhaps it was a bit greedy to allow so many to be performed, but what could anyone do about it? The people will dance on their own even if I or anyone else tried to stop them. Perhaps it doesn't matter, there are so many people in the city now. A single dance, nor even a dozen, would be enough for everyone to celebrate. We've grown too large.

Atina Nah surely will not mind, dancing is one of the things She loves most, and certainly Sanna Lita would soothe Her if She felt differently. I worry too much these days, the stress of all the planning is wearing me so thin. For once I think I envy Yvvie. All I see her doing is give orders to her soldiers, and then her soldiers do the labor. I sit here at a table, and then another table, and then another so that I can meet with one set of people, and then another! It's like standing beneath the sun and looking for shade. If you can find it, it certainly isn't where you're standing! I've spent so much time organizing so many things.

Yvvie offers to help, but I dare not let her touch some things. She's sharp as a sword for all the good and the bad reasons. What if she cuts the wrong way? Oh, this is a frustrating thing I've saddled myself with! She even told me all this Festival planning was pointless and going too far! I did not listen, and now I am my own flavor of stubborn, just as she is stubborn.

Maybe we've been together for so long we are turning into one another. I just can't stop the Festivals now, they are a part of life in Anya Sur, and so many people come to visit from the tribes to experience it. Yvvie has grown so skilled in knowing who she can trust and with what task. I need to lean on that strength of hers and wield it myself. For too long I've shouldered so many burdens even though I'm surrounded by people of merit!

But then I'll worry about them doing it in a way I wouldn't have done it myself. I really am turning into Yvvie! Have I not told her many times to let go so that others could take responsibility for things that needed doing? What good is advice is you can't follow it yourself?

I'll just have to keep going. Fine, what does it matter? We can have another dance after dinner, and if something bad happens then I'll just not do it next year.

Waylen's mental map of the Keep was not so clear as he'd thought now that they had left the banquet hall behind them. The walk from the hall was not a long one, but it did lead the procession to places he hadn't been to yet. When they arrived at their destination, it was a balcony that he'd not seen before, and the view was wonderful! He could see the sun had begun to set, the sky now turning a rich red. It was still very warm, but without the harsh sun it wasn't so terrible to be outside like it had been during the parade.

And it was such a large balcony! Arrangements had already been made for seating, with more than a dozen wooden chairs set up in a curious arrangement. They were not set up in neat rows but rather arranged in a large circle with many feet between each of them. Every chair was turned to face the center of the circular, and in the middle was a curious sight. A large ring of pale stones had been assembled, and in the middle was a thick bed of much smaller stones, each blacker than soot.

Her Majesty led the way with Waylen following along behind her until he was told to do otherwise. The dragons all around him were spreading out across the balcony without being directed to. Waylen seemed to be the only person confused or lost. Her Majesty led him past many chairs until she reached the one furthest from the doorway. He looked around, counting, and saw that there were fewer chairs than there were people. Every dragon that was moving to take a seat was one of the Eldests, all of them in fact! Everyone else must be meant to stand. Well, there were more chairs than there were Eldests. The other chairs were being claimed by others, many of whom he could not recall their name, but he did recognize their faces.

He tried to remember names as best he could, but with so many he could only manage a scant few. The most prominent were Eldest Thalla who was now taking a seat with her husband standing at her side. Another was Eldest Vann. Also, he couldn't forget Preveer Ahn Shallot. The strange stocky dragon was sitting in a chair of his own along with his companions, all sticking out like they didn't belong with how different they looked. That wasn't a polite thing to think, and he quickly understood the irony. He stood out just as much if not more so, being the only Radian in attendance.

The Queen then placed her hand on the back of the chair and gestured for him to sit.

Of everyone on the balcony deserving of a seat it would certainly have been her, not him!

"Your Majesty, I am able to stand if this seat was meant for you." He replied, hoping his politeness would not count as an act of defiance.

If the Queen would have normally taken this seat, he did not mind her keeping it, especially with so many other important people present.

"You are my guest, Waylen. Sit." She told him firmly, but in a low voice.

Feeling the pressure of her gaze settle over his shoulders, he sat. He should have grown accustomed to that feeling by now, but with Her Majesty now standing behind him he didn't know if that was possible.

The balcony was now full, the many honored guests having all taken their seats, Waylen included. The rest were standing in their own small groups, often next to their seated companion if they had one. Both Princesses were quietly idling at their mother's side while he surveyed the room.

He looked again at the ring of stones in the middle, trying to make sense of them. It was not so different from the arenas they had set up for the tournament, but this was of course not a pit of dirt or sand, and the barrier containing them was not made of planks of wood but of stone. It actually looked a lot like a bonfire, but there was no wood to be lit. It was quite a large circle, several feet across. He knew that he was expecting to see a fire dance, and he knew there would be fire, but he wasn't sure how all of that would come together. Unfortunately, he'd not caught a strong enough look of either fire or dancing during the parade.

A pair of servants then stepped past the crowd and approached the circle, each carrying an armful of straw bundles. It surprised him when the first servant took a bundle, thick like an ear of

corn, and held it to his mouth. Waylen's eyes widened at the sight of the dragon opening his mouth and exhaling, sparks and embers escaping his jaws and igniting the end of the bundle. The other dragon began to do the same. Both shook the bundle in the air, the rush of wind stoking the embers into flames.

How could something like this not be common knowledge in Radiah? That the dragons could exhale and put thatch to flame? Is this not something his ancestors would have worthy of remembering?

He watched in awe as the pair ignited their bundles one by one, shoving the lit straw deep into the black stones. As they worked, the stones began to crackle and glow, revealing that they were coal. The dragons moved quickly, igniting all of the straw bundles before embedding them into the coals, arranging them and mixing them until the circle of stone was filled with the crackling flames and embers of a low burning fire. Waylen did not know what they could have been using for coal to burn so quickly, as every bonfire he'd seen at home required a lot more effort than this to coax into a blaze.

Waylen could feel the heat of it brush against his cheek even with him sitting so far away. The warmth was so strong on his left side that he turned toward it and found that Her Majesty had leaned down to draw her face near to his own. He was surprised both by her presence, and by the heat he could feel from her body.

"When the dancers come out, they will be naked. Do not embarrass yourself like your great grandfather." She whispered to him, then stood back up.

He slowly nodded, left feeling both confused and alarmed.

The servants finished preparing the circle of stones and made a quick exit. Everyone else seemed to be aware of what was going on, but Waylen was bewildered now. During the parade, he'd seen the fire dances at a distance, and he could clearly see that they were not wearing much of any clothing. He wanted to believe he'd remain stoic in the face of something alarming. Now, he sat worried that something so new and unknown to him would come along that he'd surprise even himself.

A new pair of dragons entered from the doorway, the gathered crowd was nodding and smiling at the two of them as they approached the circle. Waylen smiled along with them, but his smile was tight. As he'd been warned, both dragons were naked with one a man and the other a woman. Waylen was now so afraid of embarrassing himself that he tightened his lips to say nothing and held himself still as a statue. What had his great grandfather done to make Her Majesty worry that he'd do the same?

The two stepped around the circle, and faced Waylen, and both bowed deeply to him. He hoped they were bowing to Her Majesty instead, because the attention of two naked dragons wasn't something he was prepared to receive. He didn't know if it was more rude to look away or to stare, so his eyes darted from shoulder to face, to the wall far behind them. He dared not let his gaze stray.

Behind him, the Queen said something in Atinan, and then the pair of dragons stood up before turning to face each other. The relief he felt was palpable, his fear of causing offense lessening as the pair were no longer aiming their attention at him.

They reached for each other, clasping their hands together, and then walked into the circle of burning coals without fear. Waylen flinched with surprise as the embers erupted around their feet, the coals crunching under their every foot fall, sparks floating into the air around them like fireflies. With wide eyes he was no longer distracted by their nudity, but by the sight of them stepping into open and cooking coals!

Did the fire not hurt them at all? He watched in shock, drawing his feet under the chair in sympathy as the pair stepped easily through the fire. As the two held tight to each other, Waylen realized it was something he'd so seldomly seen. It was so rare that he ever saw dragons touch each other, so many rules about not touching, rules about horns and tails and every other part of the body. They were so strict he'd quickly learned to just keep his own hands behind his back and firmly at his sides, less he somehow commit an offense, and yet these two held to each other so openly.

And then they began to dance.

It was slow at first, moving in a circle with their hands clasped tightly together, each footstep sending sparks up around their feet. With each new step they moved faster, and then faster still until one pair of hands separated. Still clinging to each other with the remaining hand, they began to prance in a circle, feet lifting off the coals before landing with a stomp, sending embers flying high around them.

Then they let go, both spinning on a single foot so that they could catch each other with their opposite hand. Faster and faster, they moved, the flames stoking hotter until they licked up their legs, the embers scattered around them, flowing about them like glittering starlight, their bare bodies unbroken by the coals and unscathed by the flames. Their tails, long and smooth, flowed like ribbons behind their gliding bodies.

As their feet continued to fall to the coals, Waylen hardly noticed the music that began to play. Slowly at first, just like the dance, but it reached a volume that could not be mistaken. Servants were on the balcony, all around the room, pelting small drums with their hands and fists to the beat of the dance. Waylen could not tell who guided who, the tempo of the dancers or the beat of the drums.

The pair continued as the music rose, their movements quick and joyous. There was a rhythm to their movement, their spins in sync with each other, their timing perfect in its harmony. There was a flow to the dance that was so well practiced Waylen was convinced he'd never seen anyone dance properly before. There was no misstep, nor faulty clasp of the hand, not one mistimed leap nor spin.

And all around him the dragons watched politely, many with smiles, all of them fixated on the dance with quite a few nodding silently with what looked like approval.

The dancing pair broke their hands apart, each leaping high until they seemed to float for a brief moment amidst the glittering embers, then clapped their hands together before landing, sending more sparks skyward, their dance continued.

The dancers did not slow down, only quickening in their pace as they continued to leap, spin, and frolic in the coals. Clasp hands, locking their arms together at the elbows, tails arcing through the air. With every second, with every step, the dance grew in intensity like it was building up to something powerful. All of the aggression and power he had come to see as natural to the Atinan people seemed to vanish, all he saw was joy as the pair rejoiced in their dance, clasp both sets of hands together as they leapt and kicked, flames and embers rolling across their bodies until at last they came to an abrupt halt, their hands together between them, their eyes locked onto each other's.

When it was over Waylen let out a breath he'd not known he'd held, drawing in fresh air as he relaxed. The two dancers calmed down, their chests slowly rising and falling from their effort. When their hands parted for the final time, they each extended their hands, palms up, and began to bow to everyone who had watched them perform. They finished by facing Waylen and Her Majesty, bowing even more deeply until they were each taking a knee in the coals.

His hands wanted to rise, he wanted to clap, the performance deserved it, but he was afraid that clapping was not something dragons would do. No one else was clapping, so he just clasped them quietly in his lap instead.

"I've never seen anything like this, it was such a beautiful dance, I'd like them to know it." He said aloud, his voice a whisper.

Her Majesty moved out from behind him and stood at his side and began to speak. Her words were soft, for her, and she spoke at length. First, to the two dancers, and then after extending her own hands to the crowd she seemed to speak to everyone gathered. All of it was in Atinan, and when she was finished everyone that was seated rose from their chairs.

He made to rise as well, but the Queen touched him on the shoulder and pressed him back down so he would remain there.

Everyone else offered a salute, except for that one named Preveer, who seemed to make a different gesture with both hands in front of his stomach. When that was done the dancers stepped from the circle and began to depart, as did everyone else. Servants and guards were now acting as guides and escorts to help everyone leave the room while Her Majesty continued to stand at his side with her hand firmly planted on his shoulder.

Waylen did not know what to do, and why was she holding her hand over his shoulder? His heart was racing, the warmth from her hand was no different than it had been during the tournament, much like Eldest Thalla's from what he could remember of it. It was so warm he could feel it through his clothing. Once the guests were gone, all that remained was Ser Lyrren and several soldiers. Her hand finally left his shoulder.

"I told them what you thought of their dance, they will rightly feel proud." She told him, then lifted her hand and began to make silent gestures to her guards.

Many began to move, Ser Lyrren approaching him and gesturing for him to stand.

“The Festival is done, Prince Waylen. Today has been long, so you should rest well.” She told him as he rose from his seat.

“I enjoyed every moment of it, Your Majesty. I am happy I was allowed to come to see it.” He told her.

She looked at him, Waylen staring up into her eyes and watching for the little flickers of red like embers. After a moment she nodded.

“We can discuss more, after we have rested. Lyrren.” She said, turning to Ser Lyrren, making another of her hand gestures at him.

She then began to walk away with a number of her guards falling into formation around her. Ser Lyrren then gestured for him to follow. Waylen breathed a sigh, feeling both overwhelmed by the day, and underwhelmed by Her Majesty’s conclusion of it. He followed the dragon, more of the gathered soldiers falling in with them to act as his escort.

“Was this year’s Festival a success?” He asked the slender dragon ahead of him, once they were well on their way.

The dragon turned his head and nodded.

“I would say so, Your Highness. Nulla and Certi danced wonderfully tonight. Everyone was very pleased.” He replied, revealing more to Waylen than he could have understood himself.

Such a dance would have earned more fanfare and certainly applause in Radiah. It was hard to know what dragons were thinking, at least ones that were strangers to him, certainly.

“Nulla and Certi are their names?” He asked, repeating their names carefully.

“Yes, this is their third time dancing for the banquet. They’ve improved much, I’m proud of them.” The dragon smiled in reply.

“I hope Her Majesty told them I thought their dance was beautiful.” He said aloud.

“She did, but in her own manner. If there is more you wish for them to know I can make sure that it reaches them. As Her Majesty told you, they will be very proud to hear it.” The dragon told him.

“Once I have had more time to think, I would like to write a message for them. Thank you.” Waylen told him.

The dragon nodded and continued to lead him through the Keep until he was returned back to the safety of his rooms. His companions were waiting for him, and he had no idea where to even begin.

She hides it well, but she's asleep now. I think without the burden of leadership she actually finds exhaustion faster than she does when she shoulders it. I carry most of the burden inside these walls, managing the affairs I don't dare trust her with. On days like these, she's the child following along behind a parent, and sometimes even acting as petulant as one. But another year has run its course, and yesterday's parade was a success. I'm not quite happy with the route I chose to take this year, we spent too much time riding alongside the outer wall. I'll sit and draw out something better for next year, but I don't need worry with that for a long while yet.

Now I can begin writing letters of thanks. As much as I enjoy them, they are so cumbersome to write. Each of the recipients are so different, and I need to adjust my words for all of them. Stubborn children all, each with their little quirks that I have to be careful to remember. It's a challenge to do this every year, but it must be done. Careful words to manipulate them all in a manner that leads them to the waters of Anya Sur.

Yvvie sleeps while I lay by her side and wonder. There are times where I wish she was more like me. She's not ignorant. I listen to her speak at length about matters of military, of our defense, at how she would strike an opponent to lay them low. She reveals much of her intelligence when discussing war and then she reveals so much more than that whenever I pry from her an opinion on anything that's on my mind. She has the mind to do what I do, it's not for a lack of talent.

She just hates it, anything that isn't conflict that she can lay her hands upon and crush with certainty. My world to her is one of shadows and smoke, things she can't wrap her hands around and squeeze. I think it frightens her.

I do not know what she was like before, as few are alive who would remember, but I know that she could not have always been this way. She's too sharp when the day is calm, too alert when the night is quiet. Whenever I touch her, I can feel the tension in her skin, a firmness running deep through the muscle and to her bones. She's always tense, her jaw set. Her beauty is marred by it, wrapped tight in the fabric of aggression. She hides behind it even when we're alone.

It's only when she's asleep that I can see her face as it was meant to be, that part of her that used to shine brightly before it was stolen from her.

Yvvie Fah Ro'Sah dipped her quill back into the well, then returned it to the page and continued to write. She wore a permanent scowl as she wrote, pausing just long enough for her eyes to glance at the original before returning them back to the page to resume her writing. The original was a letter of thanks that would be sent to everyone who had attended this year's banquet. The contents had been carefully thought out by her daughter Iolla with the assistance of several others. Myunn would have normally done this, since it was his idea. Ever since they had started doing the banquets and inviting as many important Atinans from the tribes as could be managed, Myunn always said it was important to show them as much appreciation and gratitude as was possible.

And Yvvie hated the letters. She'd copied this one several times now, each copy to be sent to every single Atinan who'd come, and she had many more to go.

She stopped, stared at the page for a long moment as she skimmed its contents, then huffed. She touched her fingertips to the page and slid it across the table to her side where it was then collected by Rikka, one of her young servants. Rikka's job was to take each finished letter, gently blow on it so the ink dried faster, then fold it twice before tucking it into an envelope that Yvvie would have to later seal with wax.

As Rikka began to blow on the page, Yvvie grabbed a blank page from the stack of them at her side and then took another look at the original in front of her. She looked at her quill, dipped it again, then began writing the next letter. Rikka began to fold the previous one, folded it a second time, and then gently tucked it into an envelope before placing it with the others in a neat pile on the table. The stack of letters would only grow.

And when she was done, she could not even say she was done, as her daughter had not finished crafting the letter for Radiah yet. It had been decided by the more eloquent of her peers that a special letter needed to be written for them. Yvvie agreed with them, but she would have liked it more if they had already figured out what they wanted it to say. When Yvvie finished copying the last letter for her own people, she would have preferred to *immediately* write the one for Radiah so that she could be done with this frustrating task.

This was something Myunn enjoyed doing, but not her.

She paused, then reached for her glass of wine, took an audible swallow, then resumed writing.

"Would you like more, Yvvie?" Rikka asked her as she patiently waited for the next letter to be finished.

She nodded, and the young woman quickly hopped up from her chair to walk the short distance to the other end of the table where a handful of refreshments had been left. Rikka took up the open bottle and used it to refresh her glass.

For the first time in the last several days she was having a quiet moment. Several years ago, she had finally twisted the yearly tradition enough so that she could have a day of rest after the parade and banquet. It would only last a day, but at least apart from the letters she could keep to herself and be at a distance from the rest of the Keep's nonsense. Everyone else would still be busy, much too busy to bother her.

It took time to prepare for the Festival, and it took time to clean up after. Guests would be leaving; the Keep's guard would begin to return to their normal posts from before the Festival. The only thing that wouldn't change is Waylen's guard, as they would keep their present station until after he left, which would be soon now. They had not given her a date for their departure, and she had not asked for one, but she knew that they would not linger long. Rylan would no doubt want his son back.

She stopped, dipped her quill again, then returned to her writing. The contents of the letter were long-winded, fitting far too many words into it for anyone to believe that she'd written it herself. Anyone that had any sense would know that *Yvvie Fah Ro 'Sah* would never write an entire page's worth of script just to tell someone *thank you for coming*.

That was something Myunn would do, but not her.

Yvvie stopped again, took a drink from her glass, then stared at the page while she swished the wine in her mouth. This was a good bottle, the same year as the ones served at last night's banquet. Those were all good bottles, so she had several pulled from the cellar to be brought to her chambers. She sat her glass back down and finished writing the last of the letter before sliding it to Rikka so she could do her part.

Reaching for another blank page, she dipped her quill, then stared at its empty surface. She took another drink while Rikka carefully blew across the previous letter so the ink wouldn't smear when she started folding.

Yvvie needed to know when Waylen would be leaving, she wanted to invite him to dinner before he left.

She started writing again.

Ever since Yvvie had refused Waylen's dinner invitation, Vienna had become quietly antagonistic towards her. It didn't matter that Yvvie had brought him to her chambers for dinner to make up for her behavior. Her daughter still felt the need to tell her that the dinner she'd refused to attend had not been overly long, that the meal had been delicious, and that it had not been wasteful. Whether or not she was lying, Yvvie did not know. The dessert the Radian cooks had prepared for the banquet had apparently been first served at that dinner with Vienna and Karo. All these small details were being dropped like sand across the stone tile. Yvvie couldn't take a step without feeling the grains grind beneath her feet.

Myunn would want to have dinner with Waylen before he returned home. This would be the last chance for it in a long while, as the Radians didn't visit very often.

The quill began to run dry again, so she dipped it. As she withdrew the quill from the well, she continued to think, and then she continued to write. With every fresh word on the page, she spent more effort than necessary thinking about dinner plans. He liked meelish and tan and he was a drinker of wine. Yvvie couldn't recall if he ever tried any Atinan alcohols in her presence. She would need to tell the big kitchen to slaughter another of their pigs for fresh pork, as the boy didn't like camel. Lyrren was around him almost daily, so she could just tell him to plan the meal as he'd know better what Waylen liked.

These are all things that Myunn normally took care of, but now they were things that fell upon her to do. She stared down at the page and sneered. Would she need to start this page over? Her last sentence looked sloppy. She sighed, dropping the quill into the well before crumpling the page and tossing it to the small pile of other failed letters on the floor. Every letter needed to be perfect, and her penmanship was not as good as her husband's.

"You've been writing for a long while. A rest would let your hand grow more steady." Rikka told her softly.

The girl had been told to tell Yvvie to rest if her writing began to sour on the page. She didn't argue with her, just leaned back in her chair and picked up her glass and drank. Her hand didn't hurt. It never did from writing.

She just grew frustrated, impatient. Nothing can be well written with that mood. Rikka offered to refill her glass and Yvvie allowed it.

Myunn would arrange the dinner to be in the formal dining room, same as when Waylen had first arrived, but she didn't want to put up with that. She would just have their meal prepared and sent to her rooms right here, no different than she'd done the last time they'd shared a meal. It didn't matter where they ate so long as it happened before he returned to Radiah.

There was then a single sharp knock on the door, and before she could listen for the follow-up knock that would reveal what her guard was trying to tell her, it swung open. Yvvie immediately frowned at this break in tradition, but then she heard the commotion outside before she even saw the guard's face, and by the time he was in view she was already rising from her chair.

"Majesty, many voices are shouting for help." He quickly told her.

She was already on the other side of the table now and reaching for the sword she had tucked next to the doorway.

"What are they saying?" She heard herself ask, but she was already stepping past him, her hand now carrying her sword by the sheath.

"I think we're under attack." He told her, his voice low, body tense.

His counterpart stood outside, just as tense, his hand resting on the handle of his sword. She stared down the corridor and found more of her guards with hands on their weapons, all now looking back at her and searching for guidance. Her heart was pounding fiercely in her chest.

"Rikka, stay!" She barked, then slammed the door shut to leave the girl behind.

"Jora, stay by the door, grab Rikka if violence comes." She told the guard who'd first opened the door.

She began to march down the hall, stabbing a finger in the air at Jora's counterpart and gesturing with her hand for him to fall in behind her. She was running by the time she reached the next set of guards.

"Follow!" She shouted at them, her heart still pounding, her pulse beating in her ears as she pivoted on her heel to sprint down the hallway.

Now, there was the distant sound of screaming, that of men and women alike. It echoed through the halls. All her guards were at their posts, guarding every corner and intersection with weapons drawn as she sprinted, Yvvie shouting at every face she crossed to follow her. She thought of her daughters, not knowing where they were, only knowing that they would be working to bring closure to this year's

Festival. She couldn't recognize all of the screaming voices, shouts of violence echoing across the stone. She pivoted again in the next intersection, leaving the royal chambers behind her as she dragged more of her guards into her wake, sprinting now with nine soldiers at her back.

As she slid her sword from its sheath she thought of Preveer, drawing a path in her mind from where she ran to where his chambers were, knowing how impossible it would be to sink a sword through his chest! She would need to grab a crossbow if she was to kill him. Yvvie skidded to a halt when she rounded the next corner and found herself in a hallway stained with fresh trails of blood scattered across the floor.

"Bretta!" Behind her, one of her guards shouted in dismay, the body of a guard lying crumpled on the floor halfway down the hall.

She kept running, ran past the limp body and didn't stop, followed the direction of the trail of bloody footprints that Bretta had left behind in her wake before she collapsed. Yvvie's throat began to burn, she rounded another corner and found herself listening to the sound of battle, the violence drawing nearer with her every thunderous footstep as her boots clapped violently across the stone.

Her hand gripped her sword, following the sound that was now drawing her away from Preveer's chambers and towards the guest rooms. The burning in her throat felt like she'd swallowed a lump of coal, glowing red, threatening to choke her. She stopped, again skidding to a halt while two of her guards ran past her, then a third and a fourth until only two remained at her sides as she stared down the bloodied hallway. Pools of blood were smeared across the floor, streaks of it sprayed across the walls, and a half dozen of her soldiers lying dead at her feet.

Her guards continued to sprint down the hall, rushing to Myunn's side. One dropped to his knees and checked for signs of life, but he was limp. She saw he wasn't moving, and so her legs moved for him, forcing herself to move with a wooden gait, to take one footstep at a time as that hot coal threatened to burn a hole through her throat as she watched in horror as her husband refused to move.

Captain Norra was further down the hall, lying on her side, struggling to rise to her feet with one arm bent backwards at the elbow. She was covered in blood from her face down to her belt. Yvvie continued to walk, stepping over the corpses of one of her own, her steps carrying her closer to his body as he lay surrounded now by her guard. They looked to her for guidance, expressions of fear and panic spreading across their faces the nearer she drew to them.

Myunn still wasn't moving. He was covered in blood; it started at his chest and soaked through his clothes all the way down to his feet. She then snapped, started shouting at her guards to stop him from bleeding. Behind her, someone grabbed her by the arm, but she ripped herself free and continued, now running to be at her husband's side, the hole in her throat was burning so hot that her eyes were burning with it.

"Your Majesty, we must get help, he's badly injured!" One of her guards shouted at her but she didn't stop, she dropped to her knees beside him, shoving aside the kneeling guard and staring down at his little broken body, hot tears began to flow down her cheeks as she saw a dozen angry red wounds across his chest, blood pooling beneath him until it reached her knees.

She reached out to him, took him by the shoulders and shook him, but her husband refused to wake.

“No.” She whimpered, her heart pounding in her chest faster and faster like a drum.

People around her were shouting, but she wasn’t listening. Fresh footsteps came, loud and angry. Her eyes burned hotter, she shook him again as her guards began to panic and back away from her.

“Mother, stop!” Her daughter’s voice shouted at her from behind.

“No!” Yvvie finally screamed, as her body began to burn.

She tried to shake her husband awake. He wasn’t moving, his eyes unfocused and glazed, the smell of burning cloth and leather filling her nose the hotter she burned.

“You must stop! You have to stop!” Vienna was now screaming at her, taking her roughly by the shoulders.

When that didn’t work, Vienna dropped by her side, grabbed her by the wrist and tried to yank her hands off of him.

“Mother! You have to stop!” Vienna screamed at her again as she felt the fire grow hotter.

She refused to let him go; hot tears fell from her cheeks and hissed as they fell upon the growing pool of blood. She tried to draw him to her, pulling him close as she doubled over in grief.

“He’s not dead, Your Majesty, the Prince still breathes!” Someone else shouted, a guard dropping to a crouch beside her, trying to grab him under his shoulders to pull him away from her.

But she couldn’t let him, her hands gripped tight to his tunic, the fabric burning black beneath her scorching touch.

“No!” Yvvie wailed, the fire in her heart wouldn’t let her let him go.

Then, a hand gripped her tightly by a horn, twisting her head painfully to the side with her daughter’s face now inches from her own.

“You are burning him! Stop!” Vienna screamed, her daughter’s face a mirror of her own, carved into an image of rage.

Her daughter raised her fist, then struck Yvvie across the face so hard it rattled her. The coal in her throat continued to burn, but as Vienna took her by the horns with both hands, physically pulling her away from his body, her daughter screamed at her again.

“You will not do this again! He is not dead! Let him go!” Her daughter screamed, then struck her face a second time, leaving Yvvie stunned.

Her fingers finally burned through his tunic, and her grip on him was broken. Her guards leapt on him, grabbing and dragging his limp body away as Yvvie recoiled from another blow of her daughter's fist. Her own tunic began to burn, the smell of smoke filling her nostrils as the fire burned across her body.

"We will not do this again, mother!" Vienna struck her across the face again.

She collapsed, rattled at last. Her daughter finally let go of her horn, her hand now visibly burned across her fingers and palm.

Yvvie twisted her head back, saw Waylen being dragged away from her, a river of blood left in his wake as her guards struggled to extinguish the fire that her touch had lit upon his clothes. Her daughter left her side and began to shout orders at her guards, ordering them to lift the Prince into their arms to carry him away. She thought of Myunn, the memory of his death living in her mind as fresh as the day it'd happened, her tunic now in blackened tatters. They did it again! Tears began to hiss down her cheeks. As her daughter took control, Yvvie remained where she was. When she finally rose to her feet, there were few guards left to remain at her side.

She looked down at her feet, then at the three crumpled bodies on the floor, and then at Captain Norra who had now pulled herself the wall to stand, cradling her broken arm. Her grief faded, melted into rage. Yvvie screamed as loud as she could, her cry echoing through the Keep as the Prince's blood began to pop and sizzle at her feet, her armor glowing hot against her skin.

~ On a Foundation of Blood ~

*My body is on fire, and my soul is lit ablaze.
There's a burning in my throat, a pain I cannot swallow.
And every time I choke, my tears are quick to follow.
So naked do I stand, my feet upon this pyre.
With neither cloth to resist the flames,
Nor steel that can withstand the blaze.
I'm a tyrant is what they say, so my words, they will not matter.
So now I step off of my pyre, setting my foot upon the path,
And listen with my feet as the earth quakes and shatters.
I've endured far too much, and my body is on fire.
I've suffered far too long, and my soul is lit ablaze.
If I'm a tyrant as they say, then without mercy, I shall rage.*
