

# THE ASSAYS OF ATA

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THE CHRONICLES OF ÁITARBITH  
BOOK 1

K. I. S.



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# THE ASSAYS OF ATA

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## A TEMPESTUOUS INTRODUCTION

*I'M NOBODY! WHO ARE YOU?*

*ARE YOU NOBODY TOO?*

EMILY DICKINSON

**T**he fire in the oven jumped and danced wildly in tandem with the howling winds outside, the head cook swearing and sweating as he tried to save the baking delicacies from the consequences of the gales—whether by being burnt or sprinkled with ash swirling around within the massive hearth.

One would think the kitchens ideally warm and cosy, the only such place in a glass-encased palace

currently being battered and bombarded by the elements—but this was sadly not the case. It was true none of the unseasonably cold breezes could rake their frozen claws past the heavy, scarred door, but the sweltering space still fell prey to wafts of sooty ash and debris barrelling down the chimney.

Ata gagged at the overwhelming smell of charred fat but had the good sense to do so behind her hand as she pretended to adjust her headdress. If the head cook caught sight of her actions, the implied disgust would be akin to sacrilege and his reaction would be uncomfortable to bear. It wouldn't be anything serious, but discomfort came in many forms for a lowly servant—think 'lavatory-related' and you'd be getting warm...

She *had* to remember: she was an obedient, hard-working servant girl. A *good* girl, who recited her prayers and catechisms according to the beads hanging from her waistband and the tomes of the Holy Sacrament of the Benevolent Order of the Gods. *At least for now*. Ata privately suppressed a smirk, maintaining her earnest, rather vacant facial expression whilst everyone scurried around in a frenzy. She continued to assiduously chop away at the parsnips, as it behoved a lowly kitchen grunt.

The persona she had assumed was that of Anita: eager to please, somewhat stupid, and easily managed. She tried to maintain a light touch with her character; it

was so easy to overlay the wide-eyed ingénue or the half-witted country bumpkin and lay it on too thickly. She prided herself on her final incarnation—pretty, but vacant; eye-catching, but forgettable. In short: the perfect person to snoop under the auspices of fetching, carrying, and cleaning, whilst also being able to wheedle titbits of information from young and old with mild, if somewhat inept, flirtation. A wolf in petticoats, the perfect spy.

“You! Parsnip girl. Come here and take these capons up to the service area!” the head cook’s crazed glare fell on her as he motioned imperiously. She scurried forward—slightly awkwardly but plenty enthusiastically—this was her greatest wish and pleasure: to serve the Glorious House of Hårbørgen. If she truly *believed* it, then others would too.

He muttered to himself about incompetent lackeys, disdainfully gesturing to the little browned birds artfully displayed on a shining silver plate. “Don’t you dare drop them. And don’t enter the dining area—be sure to hand it over to a senior server,” he threatened as she haphazardly lifted the massive platter to her shoulder; only years of physical training and exertion rendered her arms and shoulders capable of taking the strain.

She didn’t know how a nobody serf from the provinces, as many of the other kitchen and serving maids were, would manage the sheer weight of the plate. That

said, there was sturdy stock from the countryside, so perhaps her assessment was overly pessimistic.

She heaved her load up the steep stone stairs, her momentum rushing her through the narrow servants' passages until she hurtled into the one exactly parallel with the formal dining room. The bustling back and forth of servers made the space congested, but her over-large burden ensured that she barrelled onward and everyone dodged from her path. The wood panelling and carpeted floors muffled their passing, mitigating the cold seeping in from the outdoors along with the body heat generated by the throng of servants in constant motion. Hushed murmurs and quiet footfalls seemed to be at odds with the frantic busyness abounding in the limited space of the narrow corridor.

Ata looked amongst the throng of servers for the rangy frame of her superior—the senior server whose group she had been assigned to here for the past two weeks at Hårbørgen Palace. She had been ordered to stick to her superior's side at all times till instructed otherwise, thereby being able to witness the day-to-day workings as well as receive constant instruction on pleasing the powers that be.

Famenke had gimlet eyes that missed nothing and a perpetually sour face that matched her disposition in every way. Ata liked her immensely, if for no other reason than she was abominably rude and shockingly blunt—ideal at alienating all those around her through

the sheer awfulness of her personality, thereby offsetting ‘Anita’s’ somewhat dubiously mediocre charms, rendering her significantly more likable and attractive to the others. All of this, with little to no effort expended by Ata.

However, very inconveniently at that moment, Ata could not detect the curly golden-red wisps escaping a sombre-grey head scarf (although, Hanson, the garden-er’s helper called it “carrot frizz”) that denoted ‘Mistress’ Famenke’s managerial presence, even with said girl’s towering height. Another appreciable feature of her current mentor in the art of service was the fact that she was almost a head taller than Ata, who, due to her own notable height (at least in Cinnae) worried about standing out, but could now “hide in plain sight”, avoiding notice in her overseer’s shadow—even literally. Famenke had been a boon to her mission, really, if completely unwittingly.

Ata frantically looked around for any server to take her burden and enter the exclusive sanctum known as the formal dining hall, where a nobody like herself would never so much as set foot without extensive training as a server. Not that she’d actually be in service here that long, but that was beside the point.

The damned birds on her platter were cooling fast and she couldn’t face the inevitable haranguing she would receive as vacantly sweet Anita should she return to the kitchens to have them reheated (or—heaven

forfend—a ducal complaint be received). But none of the currently bustling servers could or would set aside their tasks and deliver the grilled geldings to the royal table and she had no time to wait for another.

Thus, without thinking too much on the possible consequences the lack of protocol of her entrance would elicit, Ata glided through the servers' door into the dining area with a straight back, sure hands, and eyes lowered deferentially.

At the massively ornate dining table, set with a forest of crystal glasses, silver candlesticks, and bouquets of multi-hued blooms, sat the Cinnaen royal family—the self-styled 'Glorious House of Hårbørgen'—and a few important officials. All were stereotypically fair, ranging from bright golds to palest whites, lacklustre straw pates to tow heads.

Even though she kept her eyes downcast, Ata knew to the smallest detail who all attended the dinner. She had, naturally, been briefed on and studied every person of significance, whether peripheral or central, to said dynastic monarchy. She therefore deduced enough about this handful of figures to identify them from a glance alone based on their appearances, mannerisms, seats at the table, or any combination of these elements.

She breathed evenly, shored up her defences, strengthening her facade of a bumbling servant girl out of her depth but trying her darnedest to pass muster. She just needed to carry the gods-heavy platter around

the table while the footman (who had appeared magically at her side gripping a pair of shining silver tongs in his white-gloved fingers) deposited the birds to each individual's plate. Simple.

They approached the table together; she took her lead from the footman on whom to approach and pause next to first—a rotund, middle-aged man with a thinning hairline. *Hjarl Janssen—chief adviser to Queen Nelni*. He was holding forth on some policy or other to the table at large, not even aware of the capon deposited neatly in his plate. They moved one seat on.

*Lord Svensso, general of Cinnae's eastern armies, illegitimate son of the late King Olefso, elder half-brother to the crown prince*. She rolled her eyes inwardly—one would think she'd feel an affinity for one of her kind, but she didn't. Honestly, there were too many of them to feel any kind of situational kinship... His head was bent askance as he appeared to listen respectfully to Hjarl Janssen's soliloquy. He was tall, as even hunched he dwarfed his two neighbours and made the outlandishly ornate chair he sat in seem proportionate. He gave a faint nod of his head in thanks when he was served.

Their next diner was a petite female. *Princess Lenna, only daughter of King Olefso and Queen Nelni, twin sister to the crown prince*. She was only sixteen, Ata knew, and based on her posture, supremely disinterested in the entire dinner and accompanying conversation. Surprisingly, she turned her head and gave a swift smile of

thanks to both her servers, although her eye contact was fleeting.

Next were two minor officials whose names Ata knew, as well as the fact that one had a serious gambling problem and the other a fondness for hunting, doting on his hounds and his horses in equal measure. Neither acknowledged their servers.

Strangely enough, it hadn't been Ata's entry into the serving class that made her take note of the lack of basic courtesy shown to the lower echelons; her childhood as a half-caste bastard had seen to that. The fact that she was of royal heritage only meant she was able to experience the full range of discrimination first hand, as well as through a lifetime of observation of "the greats" and their "lessers". Thus, it had become the standard measure by which she judged all men and women; a watershed tally. It had not steered her wrong thus far.

The next seat, immediately to the left of the head of the table, was occupied by a tall man with a sense of calm and control, his eyes constantly gauging those around him but never appearing to do so. *Lord Haaviso, Duke of Delftnör, first cousin of and chief adviser to the crown prince. Co-regent.*

His stiff gesture with long fingers indicated he declined this particular dish, so they passed him by and moved on to the head of the table, occupied by a beautiful but sullen boy of sixteen. *Prince Tensso, eldest son of King Olefso and Queen Nelni, crown prince of Cinnae and*

*heir to the throne.* He accepted the bird onto his plate, at which he was staring moodily apparently unaware of the servers' presence, never mind acknowledging them.

To his right sat a woman whose golden loveliness did not accurately represent her age nor her character—*Queen Nelni, mother of Prince Tensso, Princess Lenna, Prince Jansso, and Prince Elsso, co-regent of Cinnae.* She was supremely unaware and uncaring of the servers as they filled her plate.

Two more lords and a lady followed, none of them of particular interest to Ata (she had their vices memorized and catalogued already); she was unsurprised when none of them expressed thanks for their dinner service. Last to be served was an interesting figure whom Ata realized with a start she had misjudged earlier. She had thought him another lord, but he was not known to her—a disconcerting experience, and one she tried to mask her face from revealing while taking in as much evidence as she could about him to dissect later.

He was a slight man with a head of silver hair styled in an elegant bowl-cut (if such a thing existed). She surmised he was not naturally of small stature but had probably been robust in his earlier life and then withered due to old age—attested to by his soft, wrinkled skin and slight jowl. His eyes, however, were a bright, jewel-blue with a crystal-like quality. And they were peering back at her with as much earnest interest as she was hiding on her part. Highly disconcerting to be

viewed so minutely at close range, so she fought to maintain her slightly ditzy but well-meaning facade, half-smiling at him vacantly as he thanked her in a bygone accent with a high inflection mid-phrase and a low-toned ending. A genuine surprise, his obvious wit and intelligence brimming over in this minuscule interaction with an invisible servant.

Ata dipped a slight curtsey in response, desperately averting her eyes when they alighted upon the diner exactly opposite them... General Svensso was looking straight at her, having observed her and the old man's passing interaction with undue interest. Worse—his sharply perceptive look seemed to cleave through all her layers of subterfuge, and she sensed he could truly *see* her, for recognition appeared to flair in his gaze. She panicked, snapped her eyes downward, pretending obeisance, then beating a hasty retreat from the table of power, her covert mission potentially compromised.

Once on the other side of the wood-lined wall, she sagged against its sturdy support and breathed deeply. Even in her semi-hysterical abstraction, she considered her cover and how it would appear perfectly right for the little provincial nobody, Anita, to be completely overwhelmed emotionally and physically by the daunting act of serving Cinnaen royals. Thus, her pathetic, panting interlude against the wall would make perfect sense to the other servers in the vicinity. The

entire service had lasted all of 10 minutes, if that, but Ata had lived a dozen lives in that short time.

Hopefully, she hadn't compromised her character and by extension her mission with this little fiasco. Her mind skipped back to the dining hall. The policy that had been assiduously discussed throughout their serving turn was about a new taxation law—Ata snorted silently at the stupidity. These people dined in style, in a blizzard-encased glass palace that could not truly withstand the cold nor gales, debating arcane laws related to an insignificant tax portion while the continent was quietly being overrun by armies of dark creatures... A house of cards about to crash down, the inhabitants blithely and wilfully ignorant of the imminent collapse.

“What. Did. You. *Do*?” a nasally voice whisper-hissed next to Ata, so she immediately shelved her inner turmoil to deal with its manifestation in the shape of a gangly, glaring gorgon. It seemed she had found Famenke—or more accurately, Famenke had found her. Now she was in for a monumental scolding, so she affixed a wide-eyed look of vacant consternation on her face and proceeded to breathlessly (and witlessly) defend her breach of decorum.

The footman who had wielded the tongs came in at one point, passed them, winking flirtatiously at her behind Famenke's back. She widened her eyes slightly in mock plea and he laughed soundlessly at her predicament before hurrying off. His name was Henkel, if she

remembered correctly; she would keep his taunting overture in mind for future use.

Thus far, she had only half-befriended the scrawny Hanson who minded the kitchen gardens as well as cementing a love-hate relationship with Famenke (the “love” was all on her side, but she was in no doubt of the loathing with which the other woman regarded her very existence). More servant allies—or pawns—would be welcome here; ideal sources of gossip and conduits of rumour.

Everything she had gathered thus far as well as engineered had been through sheer luck and by playing the hapless, pretty thing who didn’t guard her words amongst strangers. It was getting tiring not being able to launch focused assaults with direct and anticipatable paths of influence; randomly casting lures and heckles into the ether and hoping they’d eventually have the desired effect had never been Ata’s way. She had always been direct and unconstrained in her actions and thoughts, knocking down childhood bullies without preamble, speaking unvarnished (and usually unpalatable) truths in public, generally making herself the clear target of courtiers at her uncle’s court throughout her youth. Until Lord Danai had taken her “under his wing” as he put it, but more accurately had honed her bluntness into a sharp tool—a talon he could wield in court intrigues.

“You are too direct, Lady Atiyah,” he had lectured, “It

is in nature's subtleties that life can be found. And death. A well-placed needle can wreak as much damage on a body as a hammer—with the added benefit of allowing the possibility of subterfuge by the killer, and escape. Use your skills as a needle and do not be a dull object easily wielded by others.”

This said after she had beaten up three stable boys in a rage, having been manipulated by one of the older stable hands through innuendo and mockery. It had cost her weeks of banishment from her uncle's presence; a lonely existence without weekly visits with her uncle and cousin. It was during that time the king's retired adviser had come to her and offered to tutor her. Although he had always been a shadowy presence at court since she could remember, he was never at the forefront nor had her uncle, King Addai, ever shown him any particular favour in public. But there he had been, offering an opportunity to a ten-year-old royal bastard.

She had accepted with reservations she kept to herself and was initially very wary of him and his motives. She soon came to the realisation that his wiles and intrigues were his gifts, but that he was not an evil or even a bad man. He always thanked the help, she noted, and had shown kindness to the lesser citizens of the keep in a variety of small ways. And so, she had eventually learned to trust and rely on this energetic old man, his bushy iron-grey beard full of secrets and plots.

He was compassionate and witty, but he did not indulge her or allow her to feel sorry for herself.

Everything with that man was affectation—even the name he had bestowed on her, ‘Atiyah’, was not her real name, nor the title of ‘Lady’ valid, but his manipulation of others to see her as more than the unwanted, misbegotten shame of the princess. To view her as titled and respected royal offspring, wanted and valuable.

His machinations were legion and sinuous, along with his insistence that she cast off her simplistic view of right and wrong, good and bad, and wield her powers (such as they were) to play the game of politics. She was still learning, but it took effort for her to employ subterfuge—her nature was inherently direct. Still, she did enjoy the complexities and intricate planning involved, as well as the triumph of a con pulled off successfully.

As her best friend, Kaimam, had once observed: she was unscrupulously manipulative, but she was a detail-oriented monster who liked to plan everything to the nth degree and watch her chips fall as she orchestrated. She dealt with enough uncertainty as it was and therefore wanted to take charge of all she was able through subtle prediction and manoeuvring.

“A woman is a house of many rooms with a pretty façade to distract from the complexity of the structure. You are a godsdamned twisted maze covered in a blanket of gold leaf to blind the eye and dazzle the

mind.” She had gotten him back for his backhanded compliment-insult, but she had to acknowledge the accuracy of at least *some* of what the oaf had stated. If only he knew, she had constructed those labyrinthine passages brick by brick from a bare room—easily seen in its entirety. To change her approach to life, her very nature, into a more complex and convoluted one had taken sheer grit and will. And she still struggled with it, even as she was now ensconced in the bosom of her kingdom’s greatest rivals.

For the rest of the evening, Ata’s duties were exclusively in and around the ash-laden kitchens; Famenke considered this a valid shaming after Ata’s imposition. She still swelled with suppressed indignation whenever her eye fell on the new addition to their ranks, but Ata just smiled at her dreamily and Famenke would stomp off to another part of the palace. When the kitchens had finally been scrubbed down to the head cook’s exacting standards, Ata staggered up the stairs to her chamber. She often fantasised about assassinating the little head cook with some of the powdered poisons she was given to be used in case of emergency. She was quite sure none of the other staff would condemn her for the act; in fact, she was relatively certain most would commend her for removing the tiny tyrant from their sphere permanently.

As she dragged her aching carcass up the narrow and uneven stone stairs, she gratefully thought of her

good luck in being lodged in her own room. Maybe ‘room’ was a bit of a stretch of the imagination—‘broom closet’ would have been more accurate, but the fact remained: she was hired at a time when the staff rooming situation was precarious and the shared dormitory-style chambers occupied by the other servants were at capacity. Naturally, the more senior maids were offered the broom closet first, but all declined as they were friends and enjoyed their social (not to mentioned relatively heated) sleeping chambers.

The broom closet, forming part of the outer wall of the palace, was a tiny ice box. Ata resented the cold but had trained herself over years to completely ignore physical and mental discomfort to the point that debilitating conditions merely registered as vaguely unpleasant. The privacy afforded her in the freezing cupboard space was well worth the shivering aches.

She entered the dark little room with her small candle and as much enthusiasm as a 16-hour shift completed could allow, but her training still overrode her weariness. She shut and locked the door immediately and then proceeded to carefully rifle through all her belongings—checking all the traps and ploys she had set to indicate if the space had been searched. None of them had been triggered; the individual grains of rice, salt crystals, and even eyelashes were still in the pleats of papers and dresses, and the strange folds and positions of various items remained exactly as she had left

them. Her space had not been invaded nor searched during the day. It would seem she was still undiscovered—unsuspected. She heaved a sigh of relief, watching her breath fog the air before her eyes, then started bustling around to get ready for bed. She had her half day tomorrow, so she would need to write and send her weekly report to Lord Danai then. She would do so very early, as the entire process of construction and conveyance left her physically drained. Then she would be able to sleep afterwards and feign having slept in for her entire half day when Famenke predictably came looking for her before her shift started in the afternoon. She smiled ruefully at the thought of the supervisor's deep-seated dislike of pretty, mindless Anita.

Once Ata had done a brisk but basic wash using the jug of heated water she had brought up with her, she donned the ugly, heavy cotton night dress that virtuous Anita would have chosen, then added a pair of her own leggings and thick woollen socks, as well as a voluminous woollen shawl. She had brought the hot brick she regularly snuck from deep inside the kitchen hearth, wrapped it in some flannel and placed it in the bed to warm the faded and frayed linens while the tempest raged outside.

On the little cabinet upon which her jug and basin rested, she had a small, round mirror. It was warped and hazy, but still did its job admirably. She looked at herself as she started to carefully unwrap the ugly dark grey

headdress she wore daily. It matched her thick woollen grey servant's dress; though she resented the ugly things and their coarse weaves, the protection they afforded her could not be overstated.

Luckily, the Cinnaens believed in head coverings for women; "a decent woman neither glories in vanity, nor her body's attractions. She keeps her hair covered for modesty's sake" the scriptures intoned, and of all the kingdoms on the continent of Áitarbith, Cinnae still kept to the old ways. Naturally, the upper classes tended to wear gauzy veils and delicate netting over their curled and styled tresses, whilst the moralising middle classes and the moralised-at working classes veered towards austere greys, browns, and blacks, with wrapped headdresses that kept all but the veriest tendrils from the public eye.

Many of the younger generation were casting aside these constraints, but employed women were usually required to wear some form of covering, no matter how sparse, to satisfy the more conservative amongst the clergy. This was a windfall for Ata in her role as a local servant. Though her eyes were not remarkable amongst the Cinnaens who were known for their light eyes, fair skin, and pale hair, her hair she had inherited from her mother and was stereotypically Pandial. So darkly brown as to appear black, her thick mane was her one vanity (ironic, really, considering the tomes promoting female modesty and humility used hair as the symbol of

feminine pride), so having to dye it for this mission would have been challenging.

As it was, she could pin the heavy lengths tightly out of the way and cover up with a very conservative head-dress. She liberally powdered the front of her hair and the nape of her neck, making the hair that did escape during her hectic workdays appear mousy brown, but light enough to avoid suspicion.

Ata completed her ablutions, only pausing to look intently at her face in the mirror again. It had become a ritual of sorts, since she could remember. When she was about three or four, she had stumbled upon a painting of a beautiful Pandial lady in the royal portrait gallery of her uncle's keep. The lady had been mesmerising, looking straight at the viewer in (what Ata now knew) was a provocative and playful manner. Her obsidian eyes laughed, her full red mouth smirked, and her thick black hair hung in flowing curtains over her bare golden shoulders.

Ata had been gripped by the beautiful woman, taking to haunting the gallery every day just to visit her lady. She did not think that anyone noticed her—both the arrogance and the nonchalance of extreme youth assume that one is always alone and unobserved in the world when you yourself are not aware of others, making no allowance for their awareness of you. But it seemed someone had been watching, because she remembered hearing the woman who sometimes acted

as her caretaker loudly whisper to her uncle the night of one of his frequent visits to her nursery. As usual, she had already been abed by the time he came, but not fully asleep and therefore able to eavesdrop on the exchange.

“Has the child been well?” King Addai’s husky tenor inquired.

“Yes, Your Majesty. She is healthy, if somewhat boisterous for a girl... I feel I ought to mention that the child has been going to the portrait gallery. Every day, Your Majesty. Every day. To see the portrait of Her Highness, the Princess Annaia.” This was followed by silence—her uncle never felt the need to fill the empty spaces in conversations; awkward silences simply did not exist, for he was a king and all silences were therefore significant.

The woman continued: “I worry... that is, I do not think it is healthy for the child to become fixated upon the likeness of a... person... parent she will never know. One of the servants must have told her the portrait is of her mother, and I fear it will result in an unnatural obsession with the picture itself. She is already so unsocial...” the woman trailed off meaningfully. Ata’s uncle had sighed wearily.

“Say no more. Do as you see fit in this case; I have enough to be contending with without my sister’s by-blow adding unnecessarily to my burdens.” Even though his words were harsh and careless, he had entered his niece’s room afterward as he had done

countless times throughout her life, and proceeded to sit quietly by her bed. Just watching her. Sometimes stroking Ata's hand or hair softly, he would leave before anyone could know he spent so much of his precious finite time with his sister's bastard he was not meant to love.

The following day, the portrait had been gone—an empty space on the wall and in her heart. But she had understood who her beautiful lady had been and had started staring at herself in her mirror at night—hair down, shoulders bare. When very young and not understanding the subtleties of her mother's pose and expression, she had tried to imitate them. To recreate it. But as she had grown older, she had been happy merely to look at herself and try to find the resemblance. Eventually, even that had faded; she had just looked at herself as she was. Acknowledging her features. Contemplating who she was. Deciding who she would be. She did this now.

*She was Pandial.*

*She was a spy.*

*She would enable the fall of Cinnae.*

And then the candle flickered wildly in the mirror beside her reflection before abruptly going out. Two calloused hands gripped her mouth and neck in a fierce stranglehold and hauled her back out of the chair.

