

## ALAYNE

As the rising sun came streaming through the windows, Alayne sat up in bed and stretched. Gretchel heard her stir and rose at once to fetch her bedrobe. The rooms had grown chilly during the night. *It will be worse when winter has us in its grip*, she thought. *Winter will make this place as cold as any tomb*. Alayne slipped into the robe and belted it about her waist. “The fire’s almost out,” she observed. “Put another log on, if you would.”

“As my lady wishes,” the old woman said.

Alayne’s apartments in the Maiden’s Tower were larger and more lavish than the little bedchamber where she’d been kept when Lady Lysa was alive. She had a dressing room and a privy of her own now, and a balcony of carved white stone that looked off across the Vale. While Gretchel was tending to the fire, Alayne padded barefoot across the room and slipped outside. The stone was cold beneath her feet, and the wind was blowing fiercely, as it always did up here, but the view made her forget all that for half a heartbeat. Maiden’s was the easternmost of the Eyrie’s seven slender towers, so she had the Vale before her, its forests and rivers and fields all hazy in the morning light. The way the sun was hitting the mountains made them look like solid gold.

*So lovely*. The snow-clad summit of the Giant’s Lance loomed above her, an immensity of stone and ice that dwarfed the castle perched upon its shoulder. Icicles twenty feet long draped the lip of the precipice where Alyssa’s Tears fell in summer. A falcon soared above the frozen waterfall, blue wings spread wide against the morning sky. *Would that I had wings as well*.

She rested her hands on the carved stone balustrade and made herself peer over the edge. She could see Sky six hundred feet below, and the stone steps carved into the mountain, the winding way that led past Snow and Stone all the way down to the valley floor. She could see the towers and keeps of the Gates of the Moon, as small as a child’s toys. Around the walls the hosts of Lords Declarant were stirring, emerging from their tents like

ants from an anthill. *If only they were truly ants*, she thought, *we could step on them and crush them*.

Young Lord Hunter and his levies had joined the others two days past. Nestor Royce had closed the Gates against them, but he had fewer than three hundred men in his garrison. Each of the Lords Declarant had brought a thousand, and there were six of them. Alayne knew their names as well as her own. Benedar Belmore, Lord of Strongsong. Symond Templeton, the Knight of Ninestars. Horton Redfort, Lord of Redfort. Anya Waynwood, Lady of Ironoaks. Gilwood Hunter, called Young Lord Hunter by all and sundry, Lord of Longbow Hall. And Yohn Royce, mightiest of them all, the redoubtable Bronze Yohn, Lord of Runestone, Nestor's cousin and the chief of the senior branch of House Royce. The six had gathered at Runestone after Lysa Arryn's fall, and there made a pact together, vowing to defend Lord Robert, the Vale, and one another. Their declaration made no mention of the Lord Protector, but spoke of "misrule" that must be ended, and of "false friends and evil counselors" as well.

A cold gust of wind blew up her legs. She went inside to choose a gown to break her fast in. Petyr had given her his late wife's wardrobe, a wealth of silks, satins, velvets, and furs far beyond anything she had ever dreamed, though the great bulk of it was far too large for her; Lady Lysa had grown very stout during her long succession of pregnancies, stillbirths, and miscarriages. A few of the oldest gowns had been made for young Lysa Tully of Riverrun, however, and others Gretchel had been able to alter to fit Alayne, who was almost as long of leg at three-and-ten as her aunt had been at twenty.

This morning her eye was caught by a parti-colored gown of Tully red and blue, lined with vair. Gretchel helped her slide her arms into the belled sleeves and laced her back, then brushed and pinned her hair. Alayne had darkened it again last night before she went to bed. The wash her aunt had given her changed her own rich auburn into Alayne's burnt brown, but it was seldom long before the red began creeping back at the roots. *And what must I do when the dye runs out?* The wash had come from Tyrosh, across the narrow sea.

As she went down to break her fast, Alayne was struck again by the stillness of the Eyrie. There was no quieter castle in all the Seven Kingdoms. The servants here were few and old and kept their voices down so as not to excite the young lord. There were no horses on the mountain, no hounds to bark and growl, no knights training in the yard. Even the footsteps of the guards seemed strangely muffled as they walked the pale stone halls. She could hear the wind moaning and sighing round the towers, but that was all. When she had first come to Eyrie, there had been the murmur of Alyssa's Tears as well, but the waterfall was frozen now. Gretchel said it would stay silent till the spring.

She found Lord Robert alone in the Morning Hall above the kitchens, pushing a wooden spoon listlessly through a big bowl of porridge and honey. "I wanted eggs," he complained when he saw her. "I wanted *three* eggs boiled soft, and some back bacon."

They had no eggs, no more than they had bacon. The Eyrie's granaries held sufficient oats and corn and barley to feed them for a year, but they depended on a bastard girl named Mya Stone to bring fresh foodstuffs up from the valley floor. With the Lords Declarant encamped at the foot of the mountain there was no way for Mya to get through. Lord Belmore, first of the six to reach the Gates, had sent a raven to tell Littlefinger that no more food would go up to the Eyrie until he sent Lord Robert down. It was not quite a siege, not as yet, but it was the next best thing.

"You can have eggs when Mya comes, as many as you like," Alayne promised the little lordling. "She'll bring eggs and butter and melons, all sorts of tasty things."

The boy was unappeased. "I wanted eggs *today*."

"Sweetrobin, there are no eggs, you know that. Please, eat your porridge, it's very nice." She ate a spoonful of her own.

Robert pushed his spoon across the bowl and back, but never brought it to his lips. "I am not hungry," he decided. "I want to go back to bed. I never slept last night. I heard *singing*. Maester Colemon gave me dreamwine but I could still hear it."

Alayne put down her spoon. "If there had been singing, I should have heard it too. You had a bad dream, that's all."

"No, it *wasn't* a dream." Tears filled his eyes. "Marillion was singing again. Your father says he's dead, but he *isn't*."

"He is." It frightened her to hear him talk like this. *Bad enough that he is small and sickly, what if he is mad as well?* "Sweetrobin, he *is*. Marillion loved your lady mother too much and could not live with what he'd done to her, so he walked into the sky." Alayne had not seen the body, no more than Robert had, but she did not doubt the fact of the singer's death. "He's gone, truly."

"But I hear him every night. Even when I close the shutters and put a *pillow* on my head. Your father should have cut his tongue out. I *told* him to, but he wouldn't."

*He needed a tongue to confess.* "Be a good boy and eat your porridge," Alayne pleaded. "Please? For me?"

"I don't want porridge." Robert flung his spoon across the hall. It bounced off a hanging tapestry, and left a smear of porridge upon a white silk moon. "The *lord* wants *eggs!*"

"The lord shall eat porridge and be thankful for it," said Petyr's voice, behind them.

Alayne turned, and saw him in the doorway arch with Maester Colemon at his side. "You should heed the Lord Protector, my lord," the maester said. "Your lord's bannermen are coming up the mountain to pay you homage, so you will need all your strength."

Robert rubbed at his left eye with a knuckle. "Send them away. I don't *want* them. If they come, I'll make them fly."

"You tempt me sorely, my lord, but I fear I promised them safe conduct," said Petyr. "In any case, it is too late to turn them back. By now they may have climbed as far as Stone."

"Why won't they leave us be?" wailed Alayne. "We never did them any harm. What do they *want* of us?"

“Just Lord Robert. Him, and the Vale.” Petyr smiled. “There will be eight of them. Lord Nestor is showing them up, and they have Lyn Corbray with them. Ser Lyn is not the sort of man to stay away when blood is in the offing.”

His words did little to soothe her fears. Lyn Corbray had slain almost as many men in duels as he had in battle. He had won his spurs during Robert’s Rebellion, she knew, fighting first against Lord Jon Arryn at the gates of Gulltown, and later beneath his banners on the Trident, where he had cut down Prince Lewyn of Dorne, a white knight of the Kingsguard. Petyr said that Prince Lewyn had been sorely wounded by the time the tide of battle swept him to his final dance with Lady Forlorn, but added, “That’s not a point you’ll want to raise with Corbray, though. Those who do are soon given the chance to ask Martell himself the truth of it, down in the halls of hell.” If even half of what she had heard from Lord Robert’s guards was true, Lyn Corbray was more dangerous than all six of the Lords Declarant put together. “Why is *he* coming?” she asked. “I thought the Corbrays were for you.”

“Lord Lyonel Corbray is well disposed toward my rule,” said Petyr, “but his brother goes his own way. On the Trident, when their father fell wounded, it was Lyn who snatched up Lady Forlorn and slew the man who’d cut him down. Whilst Lyonel was carrying the old man back to the maesters in the rear, Lyn led his charge against the Dornishmen threatening Robert’s left, broke their lines to pieces, and slew Lewyn Martell. So when old Lord Corbray died, he bestowed the Lady upon his younger son. Lyonel got his lands, his title, his castle, and all his coin, yet still feels he was cheated of his birthright, whilst Ser Lyn... well, he loves Lyonel as much as he loves me. He wanted Lysa’s hand for himself.”

“I don’t like Ser Lyn,” Robert insisted. “I won’t have him here. You send him back down. I never said that he could come. Not *here*. The Eyrie is *impregnable*, Mother said.”

“Your mother is dead, my lord. Until your sixteenth name day, *I* rule the Eyrie.” Petyr turned to the stoop-backed serving woman hovering near

the kitchen steps. “Mela, fetch his lordship a new spoon. He wants to eat his porridge.”

“I do *not*! Let my porridge *fly*!” This time Robert flung the bowl, porridge and honey and all. Petyr Baelish ducked aside nimbly, but Maester Colemon was not so quick. The wooden bowl caught him square in the chest, and its contents exploded upward over his face and shoulders. He yelped in a most unmaesterlike fashion, while Alayne turned to soothe the little lordling, but too late. The fit was on him. A pitcher of milk went flying as his hand caught it, flailing. When he tried to rise he knocked his chair backwards and fell on top of it. One foot caught Alayne in the belly, so hard it knocked the wind from her. “Oh, gods be good,” she heard Petyr say, disgusted.

Globs of porridge dotted Maester Colemon’s face and hair as he knelt over his charge, murmuring soothing words. One gobbet crept slowly down his right cheek, like a lumpy grey-brown tear. *It is not so bad a spell as the last one*, Alayne thought, trying to be hopeful. By the time the shaking stopped, two guards in sky-blue cloaks and silvery mail shirts had come at Petyr’s summons. “Take him back to bed and leech him,” the Lord Protector said, and the taller guardsman scooped the boy up in his arms. *I could carry him myself*, Alayne thought. *He is no heavier than a doll*.

Colemon lingered a moment before following. “My lord, this parley might best be left for another day. His lordship’s spells have grown worse since Lady Lysa’s death. More frequent and more violent. I bleed the child as often as I dare, and mix him dreamwine and milk of the poppy to help him sleep, but...”

“He sleeps twelve hours a day,” Petyr said. “I require him awake from time to time.”

The maester combed his fingers through his hair, dribbling globs of porridge on the floor. “Lady Lysa would give his lordship her breast whenever he grew overwrought. Archmaester Ebrose claims that mother’s milk has many heathful properties.”

“Is that your counsel, maester? That we find a wet nurse for the Lord of the Eyrie and Defender of the Vale? When shall we wean him, on his

wedding day? That way he can move directly from his nurse's nipples to his wife's." Lord Petyr's laugh made it plain what he thought of that. "No, I think not. I suggest you find another way. The boy is fond of sweets, is he not?"

"Sweets?" said Colemon.

"Sweets. Cakes and pies, jams and jellies, honey on the comb. Perhaps a pinch of sweetsleep in his milk, have you tried that? Just a pinch, to calm him and stop his wretched shaking."

"A pinch?" The apple in the maester's throat moved up and down as he swallowed. "One small pinch... perhaps, perhaps. Not too much, and not too often, yes, I might try..."

"A pinch," Lord Petyr said, "before you bring him forth to meet the lords."

"As you command, my lord." The maester hurried out, his chain clinking softly with every step.

"Father," Alayne asked when he was gone, "will you have a bowl of porridge to break your fast?"

"I despise porridge." He looked at her with Littlefinger's eyes. "I'd sooner break my fast with a kiss."

A true daughter would not refuse her sire a kiss, so Alayne went to him and kissed him, a quick dry peck upon the cheek, and just as quickly stepped away.

"How... dutiful." Littlefinger smiled with his mouth, but not his eyes. "Well, I have other duties for you, as it happens. Tell the cook to mull some red wine with honey and raisins. Our guests will be cold and thirsty after their long climb. You are to meet them when they arrive, and offer them refreshment. Wine, bread, and cheese. What sort of cheese is left to us?"

"The sharp white and the stinky blue."

"The white. And you'd best change as well."

Alayne looked down at her dress, the deep blue and rich dark red of Riverrun. "Is it too—"

“It is too *Tully*. The Lords Declarant will not be pleased by the sight of my bastard daughter prancing about in my dead wife’s clothes. Choose something else. Need I remind you to avoid sky blue and cream?”

“No.” Sky blue and cream were the colors of House Arryn. “Eight, you said... Bronze Yohn is one of them?”

“The only one who matters.”

“Bronze Yohn *knows* me,” she reminded him. “He was a guest at Winterfell when his son rode north to take the black.” She had fallen wildly in love with Ser Waymar, she remembered dimly, but that was a lifetime ago, when she was a stupid little girl. “And that was not the only time. Lord Royce saw... he saw Sansa Stark again at King’s Landing, during the Hand’s tourney.”

Petyr put a finger under her chin. “That Royce glimpsed this pretty face I do not doubt, but it was one face in a thousand. A man fighting in a tourney has more to concern him than some child in the crowd. And at Winterfell, Sansa was a little girl with auburn hair. My daughter is a maiden tall and fair, and her hair is chestnut. Men see what they expect to see, Alayne.” He kissed her nose. “Have Maddy lay a fire in the solar. I shall receive our Lords Declarant there.”

“Not the High Hall?”

“No. Gods forbid they glimpse me near the high seat of the Arryns, they might think that I mean to sit in it. Cheeks born so low as mine must never aspire to such lofty cushions.”

“The solar.” She should have stopped with that, but the words came tumbling out of her. “If you gave them Robert...”

“...and the Vale?”

“They *have* the Vale.”

“Oh, much of it, that’s true. Not all, however. I am well loved in Gulltown, and have some lordly friends of mine own as well. Grafton, Lynderly, Lyonel Corbray... though I’ll grant you, they are no match for the Lords Declarant. Still, where would you have us go, Alayne? Back to my mighty stronghold on the Fingers?”



She had thought about that. “Joffrey gave you Harrenhal. You are lord in your own right there.”

“By title. I needed a great seat to marry Lysa, and the Lannisters were not about to grant me Casterly Rock.”

“Yes, but the castle is *yours*.”

“Ah, and what a castle it is. Cavernous halls and ruined towers, ghosts and draughts, ruinous to heat, impossible to garrison... and there’s that small matter of a curse.”

“Curses are only in songs and stories.”

That seemed to amuse him. “Has someone made a song about Gregor Clegane dying of a poisoned spear thrust? Or about the sellsword before him, whose limbs Ser Gregor removed a joint at a time? That one took the castle from Ser Amory Lorch, who received it from Lord Tywin. A bear killed one, your dwarf the other. Lady Whent’s died as well, I hear. Lothstons, Stronges, Harroways, Stronges... Harrenhal has withered every hand to touch it.”

“Then give it to Lord Frey.”

Petyr laughed. “Perhaps I shall. Or better still, to our sweet Cersei. Though I should not speak harshly of her, she is sending me some splendid tapestries. Isn’t that kind of her?”

The mention of the queen’s name made her stiffen. “She’s *not* kind. She scares me. If she should learn where I am—”

“—I might have to remove her from the game sooner than I’d planned. Provided she does not remove herself first.” Petyr teased her with a little smile. “In the game of thrones, even the humblest pieces can have wills of their own. Sometimes they refuse to make the moves you’ve planned for them. Mark that well, Alayne. It’s a lesson that Cersei Lannister still has yet to learn. Now, don’t you have some duties to perform?”

She did indeed. She saw to the mulling of the wine first, found a suitable wheel of sharp white cheese, and commanded the cook to bake bread enough for twenty, in case the Lords Declarant brought more men than expected. *Once they eat our bread and salt they are our guests and*

*cannot harm us.* The Freys had broken all the laws of hospitality when they'd murdered her lady mother and her brother at the Twins, but she could not believe that a lord as noble as Yohn Royce would ever stoop to do the same.

The solar next. Its floor was covered by a Myrish carpet, so there was no need to lay down rushes. Alayne asked two serving men to erect the trestle table and bring up eight of the heavy oak-and-leather chairs. For a feast she would have placed one at the head of the table, one at the foot, and three along each side, but this was no feast. She had the men arrange six chairs on one side of the table, two on the other. By now the Lords Declarant might have climbed as far as Snow. It took most of a day to make the climb, even on muleback. Afoot, most men took several days.

It might be that the lords would talk late into the night. They would need fresh candles. After Maddy laid the fire, she sent her down to find the scented beeswax candles Lord Waxley had given Lady Lysa when he sought to win her hand. Then she visited the kitchens once again, to make certain of the wine and bread. All seemed well in hand, and there was still time enough for her to bathe and wash her hair and change.

There was a gown of purple silk that gave her pause, and another of dark blue velvet slashed with silver that would have woken all the color in her eyes, but in the end she remembered that Alayne was after all a bastard, and must not presume to dress above her station. The dress she picked was lambswool, dark brown and simply cut, with leaves and vines embroidered around the bodice, sleeves, and hem in golden thread. It was modest and becoming, though scarce richer than something a serving girl might wear. Petyr had given her all of Lady Lysa's jewels as well, and she tried on several necklaces, but they all seemed ostentatious. In the end she chose a simple velvet ribbon in autumn gold. When Gretchel fetched her Lysa's silvered looking glass, the color seemed just perfect with Alayne's mass of dark brown hair. *Lord Royce will never know me*, she thought. *Why, I hardly know myself.*

Feeling near as bold as Petyr Baelish, Alayne Stone donned her smile and went down to meet their guests.

The Eyrie was the only castle in the Seven Kingdoms where the main entrance was underneath the dungeons. Steep stone steps crept up the mountainside past the waycastles Stone and Snow, but they came to an end at Sky. The final six hundred feet of the ascent were vertical, forcing would-be visitors to dismount their mules and make a choice. They could ride the swaying wooden basket that was used to lift supplies, or clamber up a rocky chimney using handholds carved into the rock.

Lord Redfort and Lady Waynwood, the most elderly of the Lords Declarant, chose to be drawn up by the winch, after which the basket was lowered once more for fat Lord Belmore. The other lords made the climb. Alayne met them in the Crescent Chamber beside a warming fire, where she welcomed them in Lord Robert's name and served them bread and cheese and cups of hot mulled wine in silver cups.

Petyr had given her a roll of arms to study, so she knew their heraldry if not their faces. The red castle was Redfort, plainly; a short man with a neat grey beard and mild eyes. Lady Anya was the only woman amongst the Lords Declarant, and wore a deep green mantle with the broken wheel of Waynwood picked out in beads of jet. Six silver bells on purple, that was Belmore, pear-bellied and round of shoulder. His beard was a ginger-grey horror sprouting from a multiplicity of chins. Symond Templeton's, by contrast, was black and sharply pointed. A beak of a nose and icy blue eyes made the Knight of Ninestars look like some elegant bird of prey. His doublet displayed nine black stars within a golden saltire. Young Lord Hunter's ermine cloak confused her till she spied the brooch that pinned it, five silver arrows fanned. Alayne would have put his age closer to fifty than to forty. His father had ruled at Longbow Hall for nigh on sixty years, only to die so abruptly that some whispered the new lord had hastened his inheritance. Hunter's cheeks and nose were red as apples, which bespoke a certain fondness for the grape. She made certain to fill his cup as often as he emptied it.

The youngest man in the party had three ravens on his chest, each clutching a blood-red heart in its talons. His brown hair was shoulder

length; one stray lock curled down across his forehead. *Ser Lyn Corbray*, Alayne thought, with a wary glance at his hard mouth and restless eyes.

Last of all came the Royces, Lord Nestor and Bronze Yohn. The Lord of Runestone stood as tall as the Hound. Though his hair was grey and his face lined, Lord Yohn still looked as though he could break most younger men like twigs in those huge gnarled hands. His seamed and solemn face brought back all of Sansa's memories of his time at Winterfell. She remembered him at table, speaking quietly with her mother. She heard his voice booming off the walls when he rode back from a hunt with a buck behind his saddle. She could see him in the yard, a practice sword in hand, hammering her father to the ground and turning to defeat Ser Rodrik as well. *He will know me. How could he not?* She considered throwing herself at his feet to beg for his protection. *He never fought for Robb, why should he fight for me? The war is finished and Winterfell is fallen.* "Lord Royce," she asked timidly, "will you have a cup of wine, to take the chill off?"

Bronze Yohn had slate-grey eyes, half-hidden beneath the bushiest eyebrows she had ever seen. They crinkled when he looked down at her. "Do I know you, girl?"

Alayne felt as though she had swallowed her tongue, but Lord Nestor rescued her. "Alayne is the Lord Protector's natural daughter," he told his cousin gruffly.

"Littlefinger's little finger has been busy," said Lyn Corbray, with a wicked smile. Belmore laughed, and Alayne could feel the color rising in her cheeks.

"How old are you, child?" asked Lady Waynwood.

"Four-fourteen, my lady." For a moment she forgot how old Alayne should be. "And I am no child, but a maiden flowered."

"But not *deflowered*, one can hope." Young Lord Hunter's bushy mustache hid his mouth entirely.

"Yet," said Lyn Corbray, as if she were not there. "But ripe for plucking soon, I'd say."

“Is that what passes for courtesy at Heart’s Home?” Anya Waynwood’s hair was greying and she had crow’s-feet around her eyes and loose skin beneath her chin, but there was no mistaking the air of nobility about her. “The girl is young and gently bred, and has suffered enough horrors. Mind your tongue, ser.”

“My tongue is my concern,” Corbray replied. “Your ladyship should take care to mind her own. I have never taken kindly to chastisement, as any number of dead men could tell you.”

Lady Waynwood turned away from him. “Best take us to your father, Alayne. The sooner we are done with this, the better.”

“The Lord Protector awaits you in the solar. If my lords would follow me.” From the Crescent Chamber they climbed a steep flight of marble steps that bypassed both undercrofts and dungeons and passed beneath three murder holes, which the Lords Declarant pretended not to notice. Belmore was soon puffing like a bellows, and Redfort’s face turned as grey as his hair. The guards atop the stairs raised the portcullis at their coming. “This way, if it please my lords.” Alayne led them down the arcade past a dozen splendid tapestries. Ser Lothor Brune stood outside the solar. He opened the door for them and followed them inside.

Petyr was seated at the trestle table with a cup of wine to hand, looking over a crisp white parchment. He glanced up as the Lords Declarant filed in. “My lords, be welcome. And you as well, my lady. The ascent is wearisome, I know. Please be seated. Alayne, my sweet, more wine for our noble guests.”

“As you say, Father.” The candles had been lighted, she was pleased to see; the solar smelled of nutmeg and other costly spices. She went to fetch the flagon whilst the visitors arranged themselves side by side... all save Nestor Royce, who hesitated before walking around the table to take the empty chair beside Lord Petyr, and Lyn Corbray, who went to stand beside the hearth instead. The heart-shaped ruby in the pommel of his sword shone redly as he warmed his hands. Alayne saw him smile at Ser Lothor Brune. *Ser Lyn is very handsome, for an older man, she thought, but I do not like the way he smiles.*

“I have been reading this remarkable declaration of yours,” Petyr began. “Splendid. Whatever maester wrote this has a gift for words. I only wish you had invited me to sign as well.”

That took them unawares. “You?” said Belmore. “Sign?”

“I wield a quill as well as any man, and no one loves Lord Robert more than I do. As for these false friends and evil counselors, by all means let us root them out. My lords, I am with you, heart and hand. Show me where to sign, I beg you.”

Alayne, pouring, heard Lyn Corbray chuckle. The others seemed at a loss till Bronze Yohn Royce cracked his knuckles, and said, “We did not come for your signature. Nor do we mean to bandy words with you, Littlefinger.”

“What a pity. I do so love a nicely bandied word.” Petyr set the parchment to one side. “As you wish. Let us be blunt. What would you have of me, my lords and lady?”

“We will have naught of you.” Symond Templeton fixed the Lord Protector with his cold blue stare. “We will have you gone.”

“Gone?” Petyr feigned surprise. “Where would I go?”

“The crown has made you Lord of Harrenhal,” Young Lord Hunter pointed out. “That should be enough for any man.”

“The riverlands have need of a lord,” old Horton Redfort said. “Riverrun stands besieged, Bracken and Blackwood are at open war, and outlaws roam freely on both sides of the Trident, stealing and killing as they will. Unburied corpses litter the landscape everywhere you go.”

“You make it sound so wonderfully attractive, Lord Redfort,” Petyr answered, “but as it happens I have pressing duties here. And there is Lord Robert to consider. Would you have me drag a sickly child into the midst of such carnage?”

“His lordship will remain in the Vale,” declared Yohn Royce.

“I mean to take the boy with me to Runestone, and raise him up to be a knight that Jon Arryn would be proud of.”

“Why Runestone?” Petyr mused. “Why not Ironoaks or the Redfort? Why not Longbow Hall?”

“Any of these would serve as well,” declared Lord Belmore, “and his lordship will visit each in turn, in due time.”

“Will he?” Petyr’s tone seemed to hint at doubts.

Lady Waynwood sighed. “Lord Petyr, if you think to set us one against the other, you may spare yourself the effort. We speak with one voice here. Runestone suits us all. Lord Yohn raised three fine sons of his own, there is no man more fit to foster his young lordship. Maester Helliweg is a good deal older and more experienced than your own Maester Colemon, and better suited to treat Lord Robert’s frailties. In Runestone the boy will learn the arts of war from Strong Sam Stone. No man could hope for a finer master-at-arms. Septon Lucos will instruct him in matters of the spirit. At Runestone he will also find other boys his own age, more suitable companions than the old women and sellswords that presently surround him.”

Petyr Baelish fingered his beard. “His lordship needs companions, I do not disagree. Alayne is hardly an old woman, though. Lord Robert loves my daughter dearly, he will be glad to tell you so himself. And as it happens, I have asked Lord Grafton and Lord Lynderly to send me each a son to ward. Each of them has a boy of an age with Robert.”

Lyn Corbray laughed. “Two pups from a pair of lapdogs.”

“Robert should have an older boy about him too. A promising young squire, say. Someone he could admire and try to emulate.” Petyr turned to Lady Waynwood. “You have such a boy at Ironoaks, my lady. Perhaps you might agree to send me Harrold Hardyng.”

Anya Waynwood seemed amused. “Lord Petyr, you are as bold a thief as I’d ever care to meet.”

“I do not wish to steal the boy,” said Petyr, “but he and Lord Robert should be friends.”

Bronze Yohn Royce leaned forward. “It is meet and proper that Lord Robert should befriend young Harry, and he shall... at Runestone, under my

care, as my ward and squire.”

“Give us the boy,” said Lord Belmore, “and you may depart the Vale unmolested for your proper seat at Harrenhal.”

Petyr gave him a look of mild reproach. “Are you suggesting that otherwise I might come to harm, my lord? I cannot think why. My late wife seemed to think *this* was my proper seat.”

“Lord Baelish,” Lady Waynwood said, “Lysa Tully was Jon Arryn’s widow and the mother of his child, and ruled here as his regent. You... let us be frank, you are no Arryn, and Lord Robert is no blood of yours. By what right do you presume to rule us?”

“Lysa named me Lord Protector, I do seem to recall.”

Young Lord Hunter said, “Lysa Tully was never truly of the Vale, nor had she the right to dispose of us.”

“And Lord Robert?” Petyr asked. “Will your lordship also claim that Lady Lysa had no right to dispose of her own son?”

Nestor Royce had been silent all this while, but now he spoke up loudly. “I once hoped to wed Lady Lysa myself. As did Lord Hunter’s father and Lady Anya’s son. Corbray scarce left her side for half a year. Had she chosen any one of us, no man here would dispute his right to be the Lord Protector. It happens that she chose Lord Littlefinger, and entrusted her son to his care.”

“He was Jon Arryn’s son as well, cousin,” Bronze Yohn said, frowning at the Keeper. “He belongs to the Vale.”

Petyr feigned puzzlement. “The Eyrie is as much a part of the Vale as Runestone. Unless someone has moved it?”

“Jape all you like, Littlefinger,” Lord Belmore blustered. “The boy shall come with us.”

“I am loath to disappoint you, Lord Belmore, but my stepson will be remaining here with me. He is not a robust child, as all of you know well. The journey would tax him sorely. As his stepfather and Lord Protector, I cannot permit it.”



Symond Templeton cleared his throat, and said, "Each of us has a thousand men at the foot of this mountain, Littlefinger."

"What a splendid place for them."

"If need be, we can summon many more."

"Are you threatening me with war, ser?" Petyr did not sound the least afraid.

Bronze Yohn said, "We *shall* have Lord Robert."

For a moment it seemed as though they had come to an impasse, until Lyn Corbray turned from the fire. "All this talk makes me ill. Littlefinger will talk you out of your smallclothes if you listen long enough. The only way to settle his sort is with steel." He drew his longsword.

Petyr spread his hands. "I wear no sword, ser."

"Easily remedied." Candlelight rippled along the smoke-grey steel of Corbray's blade, so dark that it put Sansa in mind of Ice, her father's greatsword. "Your apple-eater holds a blade. Tell him to give it to you, or draw that dagger."

She saw Lothor Brune reach for his own sword, but before the blades could meet Bronze Yohn rose in wrath. "*Put up your steel, ser!* Are you a Corbray or a *Frey*? We are guests here."

Lady Waynwood pursed her lips, and said, "This is unseemly."

"Sheathe your sword, Corbray," Young Lord Hunter echoed. "You shame us all with this."

"Come, Lyn," chided Redfort in a softer tone. "This will serve for nought. Put Lady Forlorn to bed."

"My lady has a thirst," Ser Lyn insisted. "Whenever she comes out to dance, she likes a drop of red."

"Your lady must go thirsty." Bronze Yohn put himself squarely in Corbray's path.

"The Lords Declarant." Lyn Corbray snorted. "You should have named yourselves the Six Old Women." He slid the dark sword back into its

scabbard and left them, shouldering Brune aside as if he were not there. Alayne listened to his footsteps recede.

Anya Waynwood and Horton Redfort exchanged a look. Hunter drained his wine cup and held it out to be refilled. “Lord Baelish,” Ser Symond said, “you must forgive us that display.”

“Must I?” Littlefinger’s voice had grown cold. “You brought him here, my lords.”

Bronze Yohn said, “It was never our intent—”

“*You brought him here.* I would be well within my rights to call my guards and have all of you arrested.”

Hunter lurched to his feet so wildly that he almost knocked the flagon out of Alayne’s hands. “You gave us safe conduct!”

“Yes. Be grateful that I have more honor than some.” Petyr sounded as angry as she had ever heard him. “I have read your *declaration* and heard your demands. Now hear mine. Remove your armies from this mountain. Go home and leave my son in peace. Misrule there has been, I will not deny it, but that was Lysa’s work, not mine. Grant me but a year, and with Lord Nestor’s help I promise that none of you shall have any cause for grievance.”

“So you say,” said Belmore. “Yet how shall we trust you?”

“You dare call *me* untrustworthy? It was not me who bared steel at a parley. You write of defending Lord Robert even as you deny him food. That must end. I am no warrior, but I *will* fight you if you do not lift this siege. There are other lords besides you in the Vale, and King’s Landing will send men as well. If it is war you want, say so now and the Vale will bleed.”

Alayne could see the doubt blooming in the eyes of the Lords Declarant. “A year is not so long a time,” Lord Redfort said uncertainly. “Mayhaps... if you gave assurances...”

“None of us wants war,” acknowledged Lady Waynwood. “Autumn wanes, and we must gird ourselves for winter.”

Belmore cleared his throat. “At the end of this year...”

“...if I have not set the Vale to rights, I shall willingly step down as Lord Protector,” Petyr promised them.

“I call that more than fair,” Lord Nestor Royce put in.

“There must be no reprisals,” insisted Templeton. “No talk of treason or rebellion. You must swear to that as well.”

“Gladly,” said Petyr. “It is friends I want, not foes. I shall pardon all of you, in writing if you wish. Even Lyn Corbray. His brother is a good man, there is no need to bring down shame upon a noble House.”

Lady Waynwood turned to her fellow Lords Declarant. “My lords, perhaps we might confer?”

“There is no need. It is plain that he has won.” Bronze Yohn’s grey eyes considered Petyr Baelish. “I like it not, but it would seem you have your year. Best use it well, my lord. Not all of us are fooled.” He opened the door so forcefully that he all but wrenched it off its hinges.

Later there was a feast of sorts, though Petyr was forced to make apologies for the humble fare. Robert was trotted out in a doublet of cream and blue, and played the little lord quite graciously. Bronze Yohn was not there to see; he had already departed from the Eyrie to begin the long descent, as had Ser Lyn Corbray before him. The other lords remained with them till morn.

*He bewitched them*, Alayne thought as she lay abed that night listening to the wind howl outside her windows. She could not have said where the suspicion came from, but once it crossed her mind it would not let her sleep. She tossed and turned, worrying at it like a dog at some old bone. Finally, she rose and dressed herself, leaving Gretchel to her dreams.

Petyr was still awake, scratching out a letter. “Alayne,” he said. “My sweet. What brings you here so late?”

“I had to know. What will happen in a year?”

He put down his quill. “Redfort and Waynwood are old. One or both of them may die. Gilwood Hunter will be murdered by his brothers. Most likely by young Harlan, who arranged Lord Eon’s death. In for a penny, in for a stag, I always say. Belmore is corrupt and can be bought. Templeton I

shall befriend. Bronze Yohn Royce will continue to be hostile, I fear, but so long as he stands alone he is not so much a threat.”

“And Ser Lyn Corbray?”

The candlelight was dancing in his eyes. “Ser Lyn will remain my implacable enemy. He will speak of me with scorn and loathing to every man he meets, and lend his sword to every secret plot to bring me down.”

That was when her suspicion turned to certainty. “And how shall you reward him for this service?”

Littlefinger laughed aloud. “With gold and boys and promises, of course. Ser Lyn is a man of simple tastes, my sweetling. All he likes is gold and boys and killing.”