



SANSA

The ladder to the forecastle was steep and splintery, so Sansa accepted a hand up from Lothor Brune. *Ser Lothor*, she had to remind herself; the man had been knighted for his valor in the Battle of the Blackwater. Though no proper knight would wear those patched brown breeches and scuffed boots, nor that cracked and water-stained leather jerkin. A square-faced stocky man with a squashed nose and a mat of nappy grey hair, Brune spoke seldom. *He is stronger than he looks, though*. She could tell by the ease with which he lifted her, as if she weighed nothing at all.

Off the bow of the *Merling King* stretched a bare and stony strand, windswept, treeless, and uninviting. Even so, it made a welcome sight. They had been a long while clawing their way back on course. The last storm had swept them out of sight of land, and sent such waves crashing over the sides of the galley that Sansa had been certain they were all going to drown. Two men had been swept overboard, she had heard old Oswell saying, and another had fallen from the mast and broken his neck.

She had seldom ventured out on deck herself. Her little cabin was dank and cold, but Sansa had been sick for most of the voyage . . . sick with terror, sick with fever, or seasick . . . she could keep nothing down, and even sleep came hard. Whenever she closed her eyes she saw Joffrey tearing at his collar, clawing at the soft skin of his throat, dying with flakes of pie crust on his lips and wine stains on his doublet. And the wind

keening in the lines reminded her of the terrible thin sucking sound he'd made as he fought to draw in air. Sometimes she dreamed of Tyrion as well. "He did nothing," she told Littlefinger once, when he paid a visit to her cabin to see if she were feeling any better.

"He did not kill Joffrey, true, but the dwarf's hands are far from clean. He had a wife before you, did you know that?"

"He told me."

"And did he tell you that when he grew bored with her, he made a gift of her to his father's guardsmen? He might have done the same to you, in time. Shed no tears for the Imp, my lady."

The wind ran salty fingers through her hair, and Sansa shivered. Even this close to shore, the rolling of the ship made her tummy queasy. She desperately needed a bath and a change of clothes. *I must look as haggard as a corpse, and smell of vomit.*

Lord Petyr came up beside her, cheerful as ever. "Good morrow. The salt air is bracing, don't you think? It always sharpens my appetite." He put a sympathetic arm about her shoulders. "Are you quite well? You look so pale."

"It's only my tummy. The seasickness."

"A little wine will be good for that. We'll get you a cup, as soon as we're ashore." Petyr pointed to where an old flint tower stood outlined against a bleak grey sky, the breakers crashing on the rocks beneath it. "Cheerful, is it not? I fear there's no safe anchorage here. We'll put ashore in a boat."

"Here?" She did not want to go ashore here. The Fingers were a dismal place, she'd heard, and there was something forlorn and desolate about the little tower. "Couldn't I stay on the ship until we make sail for White Harbor?"

"From here the *King* turns east for Braavos. Without us."

"But . . . my lord, you said . . . you said we were sailing home."

"And there it stands, miserable as it is. My ancestral home. It has no name, I fear. A great lord's seat ought to have a name, wouldn't you agree? Winterfell, the Eyrie, Riverrun, those are *castles*. Lord of Harrenhal now, that has a sweet ring to it, but what was I before? Lord of Sheepshit and

Master of the Drearfort? It lacks a certain something.” His grey-green eyes regarded her innocently. “You look distraught. Did you think we were making for Winterfell, sweetling? Winterfell has been taken, burned, and sacked. All those you knew and loved are dead. What northmen who have not fallen to the ironmen are warring amongst themselves. Even the Wall is under attack. Winterfell was the home of your childhood, Sansa, but you are no longer a child. You’re a woman grown, and you need to make your own home.”

“But not here,” she said, dismayed. “It looks so . . .”

“. . . small and bleak and mean? It’s all that, and less. The Fingers are a lovely place, if you happen to be a stone. But have no fear, we shan’t stay more than a fortnight. I expect your aunt is already riding to meet us.” He smiled. “The Lady Lysa and I are to be wed.”

“Wed?” Sansa was stunned. “You and my aunt?”

“The Lord of Harrenhal and the Lady of the Eyrie.”

You said it was my mother you loved. But of course Lady Catelyn was dead, so even if she had loved Petyr secretly and given him her maidenhood, it made no matter now.

“So silent, my lady?” said Petyr. “I was certain you would wish to give me your blessing. It is a rare thing for a boy born heir to stones and sheep pellets to wed the daughter of Hoster Tully and the widow of Jon Arryn.”

“I . . . I pray you will have long years together, and many children, and be very happy in one another.” It had been years since Sansa last saw her mother’s sister. *She will be kind to me for my mother’s sake, surely. She’s my own blood.* And the Vale of Arryn was beautiful, all the songs said so. Perhaps it would not be so terrible to stay here for a time.

Lothor and old Oswell rowed them ashore. Sansa huddled in the bow under her cloak with the hood drawn up against the wind, wondering what awaited her. Servants emerged from the tower to meet them; a thin old woman and a fat middle-aged one, two ancient white-haired men, and a girl of two or three with a sty on one eye. When they recognized Lord Petyr they knelt on the rocks. “My household,” he said. “I don’t know the child. Another of Kella’s bastards, I suppose. She pops one out every few years.”

The two old men waded out up to their thighs to lift Sansa from the boat so she would not get her skirts wet. Oswell and Lothor splashed their way ashore, as did Littlefinger himself. He gave the old woman a kiss on the cheek and grinned at the younger one. “Who fathered this one, Kella?”

The fat woman laughed. “I can’t rightly say, m’lord. I’m not one for telling them no.”

“And all the local lads are grateful, I am quite sure.”

“It is good to have you home, my lord,” said one old man. He looked to be at least eighty, but he wore a studded brigantine and a longsword at his side. “How long will you be in residence?”

“As short a time as possible, Bryen, have no fear. Is the place habitable just now, would you say?”

“If we knew you was coming we would have laid down fresh rushes, m’lord,” said the crone. “There’s a dung fire burning.”

“Nothing says *home* like the smell of burning dung.” Petyr turned to Sansa. “Grisel was my wet nurse, but she keeps my castle now. Umfred’s my steward, and Bryen—didn’t I name you captain of the guard the last time I was here?”

“You did, my lord. You said you’d be getting some more men too, but you never did. Me and the dogs stand all the watches.”

“And very well, I’m sure. No one has made off with any of my rocks or sheep pellets, I see that plainly.” Petyr gestured toward the fat woman. “Kella minds my vast herds. How many sheep do I have at present, Kella?”

She had to think a moment. “Three and twenty, m’lord. There was nine and twenty, but Bryen’s dogs killed one and we butchered some others and salted down the meat.”

“Ah, cold salt mutton. I *must* be home. When I break my fast on gulls’ eggs and seaweed soup, I’ll be certain of it.”

“If you like, m’lord,” said the old woman Grisel.

Lord Petyr made a face. “Come, let’s see if my hall is as dreary as I recall.” He led them up the strand over rocks slick with rotting seaweed. A handful of sheep were wandering about the base of the flint tower, grazing

on the thin grass that grew between the sheepfold and thatched stable. Sansa had to step carefully; there were pellets everywhere.

Within, the tower seemed even smaller. An open stone stair wound round the inside wall, from undercroft to roof. Each floor was but a single room. The servants lived and slept in the kitchen at ground level, sharing the space with a huge brindled mastiff and a half-dozen sheep-dogs. Above that was a modest hall, and higher still the bedchamber. There were no windows, but arrowslits were embedded in the outer wall at intervals along the curve of the stair. Above the hearth hung a broken longsword and a battered oaken shield, its paint cracked and flaking.

The device painted on the shield was one Sansa did not know; a grey stone head with fiery eyes, upon a light green field. "My grandfather's shield," Petyr explained when he saw her gazing at it. "His own father was born in Braavos and came to the Vale as a sellsword in the hire of Lord Corbray, so my grandfather took the head of the Titan as his sigil when he was knighted."

"It's very fierce," said Sansa.

"Rather too fierce, for an amiable fellow like me," said Petyr. "I much prefer my mockingbird."

Oswell made two more trips out to the *Merling King* to offload provisions. Among the loads he brought ashore were several casks of wine. Petyr poured Sansa a cup, as promised. "Here, my lady, that should help your tummy, I would hope."

Having solid ground beneath her feet had helped already, but Sansa dutifully lifted the goblet with both hands and took a sip. The wine was very fine; an Arbor vintage, she thought. It tasted of oak and fruit and hot summer nights, the flavors blossoming in her mouth like flowers opening to the sun. She only prayed that she could keep it down. Lord Petyr was being so kind, she did not want to spoil it all by retching on him.

He was studying her over his own goblet, his bright grey-green eyes full of . . . was it amusement? Or something else? Sansa was not certain. "Grisel," he called to the old woman, "bring some food up. Nothing too heavy, my lady has a tender tummy. Some fruit might serve, perhaps. Oswell's brought some oranges and pomegranates from the *King*."

“Yes, m’lord.”

“Might I have a hot bath as well?” asked Sansa.

“I’ll have Kella draw some water, m’lady.”

Sansa took another sip of wine and tried to think of some polite conversation, but Lord Petyr saved her the effort. When Grisel and the other servants had gone, he said, “Lysa will not come alone. Before she arrives, we must be clear on who you are.”

“Who I . . . I don’t understand.”

“Varys has informers everywhere. If Sansa Stark should be seen in the Vale, the eunuch will know within a moon’s turn, and that would create unfortunate . . . complications. It is not safe to be a Stark just now. So we shall tell Lysa’s people that you are my natural daughter.”

“Natural?” Sansa was aghast. “You mean, a bastard?”

“Well, you can scarcely be my trueborn daughter. I’ve never taken a wife, that’s well known. What should you be called?”

“I . . . I could call myself after my mother . . .”

“Catelyn? A bit too obvious . . . but after *my* mother, that would serve. Alayne. Do you like it?”

“Alayne is pretty.” Sansa hoped she would remember. “But couldn’t I be the trueborn daughter of some knight in your service? Perhaps he died gallantly in the battle, and . . .”

“I have no gallant knights in my service, Alayne. Such a tale would draw unwanted questions as a corpse draws crows. It is rude to pry into the origins of a man’s natural children, however.” He cocked his head. “So, who are you?”

“Alayne . . . Stone, would it be?” When he nodded, she said, “But who is my mother?”

“Kella?”

“Please no,” she said, mortified.

“I was teasing. Your mother was a gentlewoman of Braavos, daughter of a merchant prince. We met in Gulltown when I had charge of the port. She died giving you birth, and entrusted you to the Faith. I have some

devotional books you can look over. Learn to quote from them. Nothing discourages unwanted questions as much as a flow of pious bleating. In any case, at your flowering you decided you did not wish to be a septa and wrote to me. That was the first I knew of your existence.” He fingered his beard. “Do you think you can remember all that?”

“I hope. It will be like playing a game, won’t it?”

“Are you fond of games, Alayne?”

The new name would take some getting used to. “Games? I . . . I suppose it would depend . . .”

Grisel reappeared before he could say more, balancing a large platter. She set it down between them. There were apples and pears and pomegranates, some sad-looking grapes, a huge blood orange. The old woman had brought a round of bread as well, and a crock of butter. Petyr cut a pomegranate in two with his dagger, offering half to Sansa. “You should try and eat, my lady.”

“Thank you, my lord.” Pomegranate seeds were so messy; Sansa chose a pear instead, and took a small delicate bite. It was very ripe. The juice ran down her chin.

Lord Petyr loosened a seed with the point of his dagger. “You must miss your father terribly, I know. Lord Eddard was a brave man, honest and loyal . . . but quite a hopeless player.” He brought the seed to his mouth with the knife. “In King’s Landing, there are two sorts of people. The players and the pieces.”

“And I was a piece?” She dreaded the answer.

“Yes, but don’t let that trouble you. You’re still half a child. Every man’s a piece to start with, and every maid as well. Even some who think they are players.” He ate another seed. “Cersei, for one. She thinks herself sly, but in truth she is utterly predictable. Her strength rests on her beauty, birth, and riches. Only the first of those is truly her own, and it will soon desert her. I pity her then. She wants power, but has no notion what to do with it when she gets it. Everyone wants something, Alayne. And when you know what a man wants you know who he is, and how to move him.”

“As you moved Ser Dontos to poison Joffrey?” It *had* to have been Dontos, she had concluded.

Littlefinger laughed. “Ser Dontos the Red was a skin of wine with legs. He could never have been trusted with a task of such enormity. He would have bungled it or betrayed me. No, all Dontos had to do was lead you from the castle . . . and make certain you wore your silver hair net.”

The black amethysts. “But . . . if not Dontos, who? Do you have other . . . pieces?”

“You could turn King’s Landing upside down and not find a single man with a mockingbird sewn over his heart, but that does not mean I am friendless.” Petyr went to the steps. “Oswell, come up here and let the Lady Sansa have a look at you.”

The old man appeared a few moments later, grinning and bowing. Sansa eyed him uncertainly. “What am I supposed to see?”

“Do you know him?” asked Petyr.

“No.”

“Look closer.”

She studied the old man’s lined windburnt face, hook nose, white hair, and huge knuckly hands. There *was* something familiar about him, yet Sansa had to shake her head. “I don’t. I never saw Oswell before I got into his boat, I’m certain.”

Oswell grinned, showing a mouth of crooked teeth. “No, but m’lady might of met my three sons.”

It was the “three sons,” and that smile too. “*Kettleblack!*” Sansa’s eyes went wide. “You’re a Kettleblack!”

“Aye, m’lady, as it please you.”

“She’s beside herself with joy.” Lord Petyr dismissed him with a wave, and returned to the pomegranate again as Oswell shuffled down the steps. “Tell me, Alayne—which is more dangerous, the dagger brandished by an enemy, or the hidden one pressed to your back by someone you never even see?”

“The hidden dagger.”

“There’s a clever girl.” He smiled, his thin lips bright red from the pomegranate seeds. “When the Imp sent off her guards, the queen had Ser Lancel hire sellswords for her. Lancel found her the Kettleblacks, which delighted your little lord husband, since the lads were in his pay through his man Bronn.” He chuckled. “But it was me who told Oswell to get his sons to King’s Landing when I learned that Bronn was looking for swords. Three hidden daggers, Alayne, now perfectly placed.”

“So one of the Kettleblacks put the poison in Joff’s cup?” Ser Osmund had been near the king all night, she remembered.

“Did I say that?” Lord Petyr cut the blood orange in two with his dagger and offered half to Sansa. “The lads are far too treacherous to be part of any such scheme . . . and Osmund has become especially unreliable since he joined the Kingsguard. That white cloak does things to a man, I find. Even a man like him.” He tilted his chin back and squeezed the blood orange, so the juice ran down into his mouth. “I love the juice but I loathe the sticky fingers,” he complained, wiping his hands. “Clean hands, Sansa. Whatever you do, make certain your hands are clean.”

Sansa spooned up some juice from her own orange. “But if it wasn’t the Kettleblacks and it wasn’t Ser Dontos . . . you weren’t even in the city, and it couldn’t have been Tyrion . . .”

“No more guesses, sweetling?”

She shook her head. “I don’t . . .”

Petyr smiled. “I will wager you that at some point during the evening someone told you that your hair net was crooked and straightened it for you.”

Sansa raised a hand to her mouth. “You cannot mean . . . she wanted to take me to Highgarden, to marry me to her grandson . . .”

“Gentle, pious, good-hearted Willas Tyrell. Be grateful you were spared, he would have bored you spitless. The old woman is not boring, though, I’ll grant her that. A fearsome old harriidan, and not near as frail as she pretends. When I came to Highgarden to dicker for Margaery’s hand, she let her lord son bluster while she asked pointed questions about Joffrey’s nature. I praised him to the skies, to be sure . . . whilst my men spread

disturbing tales amongst Lord Tyrell's servants. That is how the game is played.

"I also planted the notion of Ser Loras taking the white. Not that I *suggested* it, that would have been too crude. But men in my party supplied grisly tales about how the mob had killed Ser Preston Greenfield and raped the Lady Lollys, and slipped a few silvers to Lord Tyrell's army of singers to sing of Ryam Redwyne, Serwyn of the Mirror Shield, and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight. A harp can be as dangerous as a sword, in the right hands.

"Mace Tyrell actually thought it was his own idea to make Ser Loras's inclusion in the Kingsguard part of the marriage contract. Who better to protect his daughter than her splendid knightly brother? And it relieved him of the difficult task of trying to find lands and a bride for a third son, never easy, and doubly difficult in Ser Loras's case.

"Be that as it may. Lady Olenna was not about to let Joff harm her precious darling granddaughter, but unlike her son she also realized that under all his flowers and finery, Ser Loras is as hot-tempered as Jaime Lannister. Toss Joffrey, Margaery, and Loras in a pot, and you've got the makings for kingslayer stew. The old woman understood something else as well. Her son was determined to make Margaery a queen, and for that he needed a king . . . but he did not need *Joffrey*. We shall have another wedding soon, wait and see. Margaery will marry Tommen. She'll keep her queenly crown and her maidenhead, neither of which she especially wants, but what does that matter? The great western alliance will be preserved . . . for a time, at least."

Margaery and Tommen. Sansa did not know what to say. She had liked Margaery Tyrell, and her small sharp grandmother as well. She thought wistfully of Highgarden with its courtyards and musicians, and the pleasure barges on the Mander; a far cry from this bleak shore. *At least I am safe here. Joffrey is dead, he cannot hurt me anymore, and I am only a bastard girl now. Alayne Stone has no husband and no claim.* And her aunt would soon be here as well. The long nightmare of King's Landing was behind her, and her mockery of a marriage as well. She could make herself a new home here, just as Petyr said.

It was eight long days until Lysa Arryn arrived. On five of them it rained, while Sansa sat bored and restless by the fire, beside the old blind dog. He was too sick and toothless to walk guard with Bryen anymore, and mostly all he did was sleep, but when she patted him he whined and licked her hand, and after that they were fast friends. When the rains let up, Petyr walked with her around his holdings, which took less than half a day. He owned a lot of rocks, just as he had said. There was one place where the tide came jetting up out of a blowhole to shoot thirty feet into the air, and another where someone had chiseled the seven-pointed star of the new gods upon a boulder. Petyr said that marked one of the places the Andals had landed, when they came across the sea to wrest the Vale from the First Men.

Farther inland a dozen families lived in huts of piled stone beside a peat bog. "Mine own smallfolk," Petyr said, though only the oldest seemed to know him. There was a hermit's cave on his land as well, but no hermit. "He's dead now, but when I was a boy my father took me to see him. The man had not washed in forty years, so you can imagine how he smelled, but supposedly he had the gift of prophecy. He groped me a bit and said I would be a great man, and for that my father gave him a skin of wine." Petyr snorted. "I would have told him the same thing for half a cup."

Finally, on a grey windy afternoon, Bryen came running back to the tower with his dogs barking at his heels, to announce that riders were approaching from the southwest. "Lysa," Lord Petyr said. "Come, Alayne, let us greet her."

They put on their cloaks and waited outside. The riders numbered no more than a score; a very modest escort, for the Lady of the Eyrie. Three maids rode with her, and a dozen household knights in mail and plate. She brought a septon as well, and a handsome singer with a wisp of a mustache and long sandy curls.

Could that be my aunt? Lady Lysa was two years younger than Mother, but this woman looked ten years older. Thick auburn tresses fell down past her waist, but beneath the costly velvet gown and jeweled bodice her body sagged and bulged. Her face was pink and painted, her breasts heavy, her limbs thick. She was taller than Littlefinger, and heavier; nor did she show any grace in the clumsy way she climbed down off her horse.

Petyr knelt to kiss her fingers. “The king’s small council commanded me to woo and win you, my lady. Do you think you might have me for your lord and husband?”

Lady Lysa pooched her lips and pulled him up to plant a kiss upon his cheek. “Oh, mayhaps I could be persuaded.” She giggled. “Have you brought gifts to melt my heart?”

“The king’s peace.”

“Oh, poo to the peace, what else have you brought me?”

“My daughter.” Littlefinger beckoned Sansa forward with a hand. “My lady, allow me to present you Alayne Stone.”

Lysa Arryn did not seem greatly pleased to see her. Sansa did a deep curtsy, her head bowed. “A bastard?” she heard her aunt say. “Petyr, have you been wicked? Who was her mother?”

“The wench is dead. I’d hoped to take Alayne to the Eyrie.”

“What am I to do with her there?”

“I have a few notions,” said Lord Petyr. “But just now I am more interested in what I might do with you, my lady.”

All the sternness melted off her aunt’s round pink face, and for a moment Sansa thought Lysa Arryn was about to cry. “Sweet Petyr, I’ve missed you so, you don’t know, you can’t know. Yohn Royce has been stirring up all sorts of trouble, demanding that I call my banners and go to war. And the others all swarm around me, Hunter and Corbray and that *dreadful* Nestor Royce, all wanting to wed me and take my son to ward, but none of them truly love me. Only you, Petyr. I’ve dreamed of you so long.”

“And I of you, my lady.” He slid an arm around behind her and kissed her on the neck. “How soon can we be wed?”

“Now,” said Lady Lysa, sighing. “I’ve brought my own septon, and a singer, and mead for the wedding feast.”

“Here?” That did not please him. “I’d sooner wed you at the Eyrie, with your whole court in attendance.”

“Poo to my court. I have waited so long, I could not bear to wait another moment.” She put her arms around him. “I want to share your bed tonight,

my sweet. I want us to make another child, a brother for Robert or a sweet little daughter.”

“I dream of that as well, sweetling. Yet there is much to be gained from a great public wedding, with all the Vale—”

“No.” She stamped a foot. “I want you now, this very night. And I must warn you, after all these years of silence and whisperings, I mean to *scream* when you love me. I am going to scream so loud they’ll hear me in the Eyrie!”

“Perhaps I could bed you now, and wed you later?”

The Lady Lysa giggled like a girl. “Oh, Petyr Baelish, you are so *wicked*. No, I say no, I am the Lady of the Eyrie, and I command you to wed me this very moment!”

Petyr gave a shrug. “As my lady commands, then. I am helpless before you, as ever.”

They said their vows within the hour, standing beneath a sky-blue canopy as the sun sank in the west. Afterward trestle tables were set up beneath the small flint tower, and they feasted on quail, venison, and roast boar, washing it down with a fine light mead. Torches were lit as dusk crept in. Lysa’s singer played “The Vow Unspoken” and “Seasons of My Love” and “Two Hearts That Beat as One.” Several younger knights even asked Sansa to dance. Her aunt danced as well, her skirts whirling when Petyr spun her in his arms. Mead and marriage had taken years off Lady Lysa. She laughed at everything so long as she held her husband’s hand, and her eyes seemed to glow whenever she looked at him.

When it was time for the bedding, her knights carried her up to the tower, stripping her as they went and shouting bawdy jests. *Tyrion spared me that*, Sansa remembered. It would not have been so bad being undressed for a man she loved, by friends who loved them both. *By Joffrey, though . . .* She shuddered.

Her aunt had brought only three ladies with her, so they pressed Sansa to help them undress Lord Petyr and march him up to his marriage bed. He submitted with good grace and a wicked tongue, giving as good as he got. By the time they had gotten him into the tower and out of his clothes, the other women were flushed, with laces unlaced, kirtles crooked, and skirts in

disarray. But Littlefinger only smiled at Sansa as they marched him up to the bedchamber where his lady wife was waiting.

Lady Lysa and Lord Petyr had the third-story bedchamber to themselves, but the tower was small . . . and true to her word, her aunt screamed. It had begun to rain outside, driving the feasters into the hall one floor below, so they heard most every word. “Petyr,” her aunt moaned. “Oh, Petyr, Petyr, sweet *Petyr*, oh oh oh. There, Petyr, there. That’s where you belong.” Lady Lysa’s singer launched into a bawdy version of “Milady’s Supper,” but even his singing and playing could not drown out Lysa’s cries. “Make me a baby, Petyr,” she screamed, “make me another sweet little baby. Oh, Petyr, my precious, my precious, *PEEEEEETYR!*” Her last shriek was so loud that it set the dogs to barking, and two of her aunt’s ladies could scarce contain their mirth.

Sansa went down the steps and out into the night. A light rain was falling on the remains of the feast, but the air smelled fresh and clean. The memory of her own wedding night with Tyrion was much with her. *In the dark, I am the Knight of Flowers*, he had said. *I could be good to you*. But that was only another Lannister lie. *A dog can smell a lie, you know*, the Hound had told her once. She could almost hear the rough rasp of his voice. *Look around you, and take a good whiff. They’re all liars here, and every one better than you*. She wondered what had become of Sandor Clegane. Did he know that they’d killed Joffrey? Would he care? He had been the prince’s sworn shield for years.

She stayed outside for a long time. When at last she sought her own bed, wet and chilled, only the dim glow of a peat fire lit the darkened hall. There was no sound from above. The young singer sat in a corner, playing a slow song to himself. One of her aunt’s maids was kissing a knight in Lord Petyr’s chair, their hands busy beneath each other’s clothing. Several men had drunk themselves to sleep, and one was in the privy, being noisily sick. Sansa found Bryen’s old blind dog in her little alcove beneath the steps, and lay down next to him. He woke and licked her face. “You sad old hound,” she said, ruffling his fur.

“Alayne.” Her aunt’s singer stood over her. “Sweet Alayne. I am Marillion. I saw you come in from the rain. The night is chill and wet. Let me warm you.”

The old dog raised his head and growled, but the singer gave him a cuff and sent him slinking off, whimpering.

“Marillion?” she said, uncertain. “You are . . . kind to think of me, but . . . pray forgive me. I am very tired.”

“And very beautiful. All night I have been making songs for you in my head. A lay for your eyes, a ballad for your lips, a duet to your breasts. I will not sing them, though. They were poor things, unworthy of such beauty.” He sat on her bed and put his hand on her leg. “Let me sing to you with my body instead.”

She caught a whiff of his breath. “You’re drunk.”

“I never get drunk. Mead only makes me merry. I am on fire.” His hand slipped up to her thigh. “And you as well.”

“Unhand me. You forget yourself.”

“Mercy. I have been singing love songs for hours. My blood is stirred. And yours, I know . . . there’s no wench half so lusty as one bastard born. Are you wet for me?”

“I’m a *maiden*,” she protested.

“Truly? Oh, Alayne, Alayne, my fair maid, give me the gift of your innocence. You will thank the gods you did. I’ll have you singing louder than the Lady Lysa.”

Sansa jerked away from him, frightened. “If you don’t leave me, my au—my *father* will hang you. Lord Petyr.”

“Littlefinger?” He chuckled. “Lady Lysa loves me well, and I am Lord Robert’s favorite. If your father offends me, I will destroy him with a verse.” He put a hand on her breast, and squeezed. “Let’s get you out of these wet clothes. You wouldn’t want them ripped, I know. Come, sweet lady, heed your heart—”

Sansa heard the soft sound of steel on leather. “Singer,” a rough voice said, “best go, if you want to sing again.” The light was dim, but she saw a faint glimmer of a blade.

The singer saw it too. “Find your own wench—” The knife flashed, and he cried out. “You *cut* me!”

“I’ll do worse, if you don’t go.”

And quick as that, Marillion was gone. The other remained, looming over Sansa in the darkness. “Lord Petyr said watch out for you.” It was Lothor Brune’s voice, she realized. *Not the Hound’s, no, how could it be? Of course it had to be Lothor . . .*

That night Sansa scarcely slept at all, but tossed and turned just as she had aboard the *Merling King*. She dreamt of Joffrey dying, but as he clawed at his throat and the blood ran down across his fingers she saw with horror that it was her brother Robb. And she dreamed of her wedding night too, of Tyrion’s eyes devouring her as she undressed. Only then he was bigger than Tyrion had any right to be, and when he climbed into the bed his face was scarred only on one side. “*I’ll have a song from you,*” he rasped, and Sansa woke and found the old blind dog beside her once again. “I wish that you were Lady,” she said.

Come the morning, Grisel climbed up to the bedchamber to serve the lord and lady a tray of morning bread, with butter, honey, fruit, and cream. She returned to say that Alayne was wanted. Sansa was still drowsy from sleep. It took her a moment to remember that *she* was Alayne.

Lady Lysa was still abed, but Lord Petyr was up and dressed. “Your aunt wishes to speak with you,” he told Sansa, as he pulled on a boot. “I’ve told her who you are.”

Gods be good. “I . . . I thank you, my lord.”

Petyr yanked on the other boot. “I’ve had about as much home as I can stomach. We’ll leave for the Eyrie this afternoon.” He kissed his lady wife and licked a smear of honey off her lips, then headed down the steps.

Sansa stood by the foot of the bed while her aunt ate a pear and studied her. “I see it now,” the Lady Lysa said, as she set the core aside. “You look so much like Catelyn.”

“It’s kind of you to say so.”

“It was not meant as flattery. If truth be told, you look too much like Catelyn. Something must be done. We shall darken your hair before we bring you back to the Eyrie, I think.”

Darken my hair? “If it please you, Aunt Lysa.”

“You must not call me that. No word of your presence here must be allowed to reach King’s Landing. I do not mean to have my son endangered.” She nibbled the corner of a honeycomb. “I have kept the Vale out of this war. Our harvest has been plentiful, the mountains protect us, and the Eyrie is impregnable. Even so, it would not do to draw Lord Tywin’s wrath down upon us.” Lysa set the comb down and licked honey from her fingers. “You were wed to Tyrion Lannister, Petyr says. That vile *dwarf*.”

“They made me marry him. I never wanted it.”

“No more than I did,” her aunt said. “Jon Arryn was no dwarf, but he was *old*. You may not think so to see me now, but on the day we wed I was so lovely I put your mother to shame. But all Jon desired was my father’s swords, to aid his darling boys. I should have refused him, but he was such an old man, how long could he live? Half his teeth were gone, and his breath smelled like bad cheese. I cannot abide a man with foul breath. Petyr’s breath is always fresh . . . he was the first man I ever kissed, you know. My father said he was too lowborn, but *I* knew how high he’d rise. Jon gave him the customs for Gulltown to please me, but when he increased the incomes tenfold my lord husband saw how clever he was and gave him other appointments, even brought him to King’s Landing to be master of coin. That was hard, to see him every day and still be wed to that old cold man. Jon did his *duty* in the bedchamber, but he could no more give me pleasure than he could give me children. His seed was old and weak. All my babies died but Robert, three girls and two boys. All my sweet little babies dead, and that old man just went on and on with his stinking breath. So you see, I have suffered too.” Lady Lysa sniffed. “You do know that your poor mother is dead?”

“Tyrion told me,” said Sansa. “He said the Freys murdered her at The Twins, with Robb.”

Tears welled suddenly in Lady Lysa’s eyes. “We are women alone now, you and I. Are you afraid, child? Be brave. I would never turn away Cat’s daughter. We are bound by blood.” She beckoned Sansa closer. “You may come kiss my cheek, Alayne.”

Dutifully she approached and knelt beside the bed. Her aunt was drenched in sweet scent, though under that was a sour milky smell. Her cheek tasted of paint and powder.

As Sansa stepped back, Lady Lysa caught her wrist. "Now tell me," she said sharply. "Are you with child? The truth now, I will know if you lie."

"No," she said, startled by the question.

"You *are* a woman flowered, are you not?"

"Yes." Sansa knew the truth of her flowering could not be long hidden in the Eyrie. "Tyrion didn't . . . he never . . ." She could feel the blush creeping up her cheeks. "I am still a maid."

"Was the dwarf incapable?"

"No. He was only . . . he was . . ." *Kind?* She could not say that, not here, not to this aunt who hated him so. "He . . . he had whores, my lady. He told me so."

"Whores." Lysa released her wrist. "Of course he did. What woman would bed such a creature, but for gold? I should have killed the Imp when he was in my power, but he tricked me. He is full of low cunning, that one. His sellsword slew my good Ser Vardis Egen. Catelyn should not have brought him here, I told her that. She made off with our uncle too. That was wrong of her. The Blackfish was my Knight of the Gate, and since he left us the mountain clans are growing very bold. Petyr will soon set all that to rights, though. I shall make him Lord Protector of the Vale." Her aunt smiled for the first time, almost warmly. "He may not look as tall or strong as some, but he is worth more than all of them. Trust in him and do as he says."

"I shall, Aunt . . . my lady."

Lady Lysa seemed pleased by that. "I knew that boy Joffrey. He used to call my Robert cruel names, and once he slapped him with a wooden sword. A man will tell you poison is dishonorable, but a woman's honor is different. The Mother shaped us to protect our children, and our only dishonor is in failure. You'll know that, when you have a child."

"A child?" said Sansa, uncertainly.

Lysa waved a hand negligently. “Not for many years. You are too young to be a mother. One day you shall want children, though. Just as you will want to marry.”

“I . . . I *am* married, my lady.”

“Yes, but soon a widow. Be glad the Imp preferred his whores. It would not be fitting for my son to take that *dwarf’s* leavings, but as he never touched you . . . How would you like to marry your cousin, the Lord Robert?”

The thought made Sansa weary. All she knew of Robert Arryn was that he was a little boy, and sickly. *It is not me she wants her son to marry, it is my claim. No one will ever marry me for love.* But lying came easy to her now. “I . . . can scarcely wait to meet him, my lady. But he is still a child, is he not?”

“He is eight. And not robust. But such a good boy, so bright and clever. He will be a great man, Alayne. *The seed is strong*, my lord husband said before he died. His last words. The gods sometimes let us glimpse the future as we lay dying. I see no reason why you should not be wed as soon as we know that your Lannister husband is dead. A secret wedding, to be sure. The Lord of the Eyrie could scarcely be thought to have married a bastard, that would not be fitting. The ravens should bring us the word from King’s Landing once the Imp’s head rolls. You and Robert can be wed the next day, won’t that be joyous? It will be good for him to have a little companion. He played with Vardis Egen’s boy when we first returned to the Eyrie, and my steward’s sons as well, but they were much too rough and I had no choice but to send them away. Do you read well, Alayne?”

“Septa Mordane was good enough to say so.”

“Robert has weak eyes, but he loves to be read to,” Lady Lysa confided. “He likes stories about animals the best. Do you know the little song about the chicken who dressed as a fox? I sing him that all the time, he never grows tired of it. And he likes to play hopfrog and spin-the-sword and come-into-my-castle, but you must always let him win. That’s only proper, don’t you think? He is the Lord of the Eyrie, after all, you must never forget that. You are well born, and the Starks of Winterfell were always proud, but Winterfell has fallen and you are really just a beggar now, so put that pride

aside. Gratitude will better become you, in your present circumstances. Yes, and obedience. My son will have a grateful and obedient wife.”