

SANSA

Once, when she was just a little girl, a wandering singer had stayed with them at Winterfell for half a year. An old man he was, with white hair and windburnt cheeks, but he sang of knights and quests and ladies fair, and Sansa had cried bitter tears when he left them, and begged her father not to let him go. "The man has played us every song he knows thrice over," Lord Eddard told her gently. "I cannot keep him here against his will. You need not weep, though. I promise you, other singers will come."

They hadn't, though, not for a year or more. Sansa had prayed to the Seven in their sept and old gods of the heart tree, asking them to bring the old man back, or better still to send another singer, young and handsome. But the gods never answered, and the halls of Winterfell stayed silent.

But that was when she was a little girl, and foolish. She was a maiden now, three-and-ten and flowered. All her nights were full of song, and by day she prayed for silence.

If the Eyrie had been made like other castles, only rats and gaolers would have heard the dead man singing. Dungeon walls were thick enough to swallow songs and screams alike. But the sky cells had a wall of empty air, so every chord the dead man played flew free to echo off the stony shoulders of the Giant's Lance. And the songs he chose... He sang of the Dance of the Dragons, of fair Jonquil and her fool, of Jenny of Oldstones and the Prince of Dragonflies. He sang of betrayals, and murders most foul, of hanged men and bloody vengeance. He sang of grief and sadness.

No matter where she went in the castle, Sansa could not escape the music. It floated up the winding tower steps, found her naked in her bath, supped with her at dusk, and stole into her bedchamber even when she latched the shutters tight. It came in on the cold thin air, and like the air, it chilled her. Though it had not snowed upon the Eyrie since the day that Lady Lysa fell, the nights had all been bitter cold.

The singer's voice was strong and sweet. Sansa thought he sounded better than he ever had before, his voice richer somehow, full of pain and fear and longing. She did not understand why the gods would have given such a voice to such a wicked man. *He would have taken me by force on the Fingers if Petyr had not set Ser Lothor to watch over me*, she had to remind herself. *And he played to drown out my cries when Aunt Lysa tried to kill me.*

That did not make the songs any easier to hear. "Please," she begged Lord Petyr, "can't you make him stop?"

"I gave the man my word, sweetling." Petyr Baelish, Lord of Harrenhal, Lord Paramount of the Trident, and Lord Protector of the Eyrie and the Vale of Arryn, looked up from the letter he was writing. He had written a hundred letters since Lady Lysa's fall. Sansa had seen the ravens coming and going from the rookery. "I'd sooner suffer his singing than listen to his sobbing."

It is better that he sings, yes, but... "Must he play all night, my lord? Lord Robert cannot sleep. He cries..."

"...for his mother. That cannot be helped, the wench is dead." Petyr shrugged. "It will not be much longer. Lord Nestor is making his ascent on the morrow."

Sansa had met Lord Nestor Royce once before, after Petyr's wedding to her aunt. Royce was the Keeper of the Gates of the Moon, the great castle that stood at the base of the mountain and guarded the steps up to the Eyrie. The wedding party had guested with him overnight before beginning their ascent. Lord Nestor had scarce looked at her twice, but the prospect of him coming here terrified her. He was High Steward of the Vale as well, Jon Arryn's trusted liege man, and Lady Lysa's. "He won't... you won't let Lord Nestor see Marillion, will you?"

Her horror must have shown on her face, since Petyr put down his quill. "On the contrary. I shall insist on it." He beckoned her to take the seat beside him. "We have come to an agreement, Marillion and I. Mord can be most persuasive. And if our singer disappoints us and sings a song we do

not care to hear, why, you and I need only say he lies. Whom do you imagine Lord Nestor will believe?"

"Us?" Sansa wished she could be certain.

"Of course. Our lies will profit him."

The solar was warm, the fire crackling merrily, but Sansa shivered all the same. "Yes, but... but what if..."

"What if Lord Nestor values honor more than profit?" Petyr put his arm around her. "What if it is truth he wants, and justice for his murdered lady?" He smiled. "I know Lord Nestor, sweetling. Do you imagine I'd ever let him harm my daughter?"

I am not your daughter, she thought. *I am Sansa Stark, Lord Eddard's daughter and Lady Catelyn's, the blood of Winterfell*. She did not say it, though. If not for Petyr Baelish it would have been *Sansa* who went spinning through a cold blue sky to stony death six hundred feet below, instead of Lysa Arryn. *He is so bold*. Sansa wished she had his courage. She wanted to crawl back into bed and hide beneath her blanket, to sleep and sleep. She had not slept a whole night through since Lysa Arryn's death. "Couldn't you tell Lord Nestor that I am... indisposed, or..."

"He will want to hear your account of Lysa's death."

"My lord, if... if Marillion tells what truly..."

"If he lies, you mean?"

"Lies? Yes... if he lies, if it is my tale against his, and Lord Nestor looks in my eyes and sees how scared I am..."

"A touch of fear will not be out of place, Alayne. You've seen a fearful thing. Nestor will be moved." Petyr studied her eyes, as if seeing them for the first time. "You have your mother's eyes. Honest eyes, and innocent. Blue as a sunlit sea. When you are a little older, many a man will drown in those eyes."

Sansa did not know what to say to that.

"All you need do is tell Lord Nestor the same tale that you told Lord Robert," Petyr went on.

Robert is only a sick little boy, she thought, Lord Nestor is a man grown, stern and suspicious. Robert was not strong and had to be protected, even from the truth. “Some lies are love,” Petyr had assured her. She reminded him of that. “When we lied to Lord Robert, that was just to spare him,” she said.

“And this lie may spare *us*. Else you and I must leave the Eyrie by the same door Lysa used.” Petyr picked up his quill again. “We shall serve him lies and Arbor gold, and he’ll drink them down and ask for more, I promise you.”

He is serving me lies as well, Sansa realized. They were comforting lies, though, and she thought them kindly meant. *A lie is not so bad if it is kindly meant.* If only she believed them...

The things her aunt had said just before she fell still troubled Sansa greatly. “Ravings,” Petyr called them. “My wife was mad, you saw that for yourself.” And so she had. *All I did was build a snow castle, and she meant to push me out the Moon Door. Petyr saved me. He loved my mother well, and...*

And her? How could she doubt it? He had saved her.

He saved Alayne, his daughter, a voice within her whispered. But she was Sansa too... and sometimes it seemed to her that the Lord Protector was two people as well. He was Petyr, her protector, warm and funny and gentle... but he was also Littlefinger, the lord she’d known at King’s Landing, smiling slyly and stroking his beard as he whispered in Queen Cersei’s ear. And Littlefinger was no friend of hers. When Joff had her beaten, the Imp defended her, not Littlefinger. When the mob sought to rape her, the Hound carried her to safety, not Littlefinger. When the Lannisters wed her to Tyrion against her will, Ser Garlan the Gallant gave her comfort, not Littlefinger. Littlefinger never lifted so much as his little finger for her.

Except to get me out. He did that for me. I thought it was Ser Dontos, my poor old drunken Florian, but it was Petyr all the while. Littlefinger was only a mask he had to wear. Only sometimes Sansa found it hard to tell where the man ended and the mask began. Littlefinger and Lord Petyr looked so very much alike. She would have fled them both, perhaps, but

there was nowhere for her to go. Winterfell was burned and desolate, Bran and Rickon dead and cold. Robb had been betrayed and murdered at the Twins, along with their lady mother. Tyrion had been put to death for killing Joffrey, and if she ever returned to King's Landing the queen would have her head as well. The aunt she'd hoped would keep her safe had tried to murder her instead. Her uncle Edmure was a captive of the Freys, while her great-uncle the Blackfish was under siege at Riverrun. I have no place but here, Sansa thought miserably, and no true friend but Petyr.

That night the dead man sang "The Day They Hanged Black Robin," "The Mother's Tears," and "The Rains of Castamere." Then he stopped for a while, but just as Sansa began to drift off he started to play again. He sang "Six Sorrows," "Fallen Leaves," and "Alysanne." *Such sad songs*, she thought. When she closed her eyes she could see him in his sky cell, huddled in a corner away from the cold black sky, crouched beneath a fur with his woodharp cradled against his chest. *I must not pity him*, she told herself. *He was vain and cruel, and soon he will be dead*. She could not save him. And why should she want to? Marillion tried to rape her, and Petyr had saved her life not once but twice. *Some lies you have to tell*. Lies had been all that kept her alive in King's Landing. If she had not lied to Joffrey, his Kingsguard would have beat her bloody.

After "Alysanne" the singer stopped again, long enough for Sansa to snatch an hour's rest. But as the first light of dawn was prying at her shutters, she heard the soft strains of "On a Misty Morn" drifting up from below, and woke at once. That was more properly a woman's song, a lament sung by a mother on the dawn after some terrible battle, as she searches amongst the dead for the body of her only son. *The mother sings her grief for her dead son*, Sansa thought, *but Marillion grieves for his fingers, for his eyes*. The words rose like arrows and pierced her in the darkness.

*Oh, have you seen my boy, good ser?
His hair is chestnut brown
He promised he'd come back to me
Our home's in Wendish Town.*

Sansa covered her ears with a goose down pillow to shut out the rest of it, but it was no good. Day had come and she had woken, and Lord Nestor Royce was coming up the mountain.

The High Steward and his party reached the Eyrie in the late afternoon, with the valley gold and red beneath them and the wind rising. He brought his son Ser Albar, along with a dozen knights and a score of men-at-arms. *So many strangers.* Sansa looked at their faces anxiously, wondering if they were friends or foes.

Petyr welcomed his visitors in a black velvet doublet with grey sleeves that matched his woolen breeches and lent a certain darkness to his grey-green eyes. Maester Coleman stood beside him, his chain of many metals hanging loose about his long, skinny neck. Although the maester was much the taller of the two men, it was the Lord Protector who drew the eye. He had put away his smiles for the day, it seemed. He listened solemnly as Royce introduced the knights who had accompanied him, then said, “My lords are welcome here. You know our Maester Coleman, of course. Lord Nestor, you will recall Alayne, my natural daughter?”

“To be sure.” Lord Nestor Royce was a bullnecked, barrel-chested, balding man with a grey-shot beard and a stern look. He inclined his head a whole half inch in greeting.

Sansa curtsied, too frightened to speak for fear she might misspeak. Petyr drew her to her feet. “Sweetling, be a good girl and bring Lord Robert to the High Hall to receive his guests.”

“Yes, Father.” Her voice sounded thin and strained. *A liar’s voice*, she thought as she hurried up the steps and across the gallery to the Moon Tower. *A guilty voice.*

Gretchel and Maddy were helping Robert Arryn squirm into his breeches when Sansa stepped into his bedchamber. The Lord of the Eyrie had been crying again. His eyes were red and raw, his lashes crusty, his nose swollen and runny. A trail of snot glistened underneath one nostril, and his lower lip was bloody where he’d bitten it. *Lord Nestor must not see him like this*, Sansa thought, despairing. “Gretchel, fetch me the washbasin.”

She took the boy by the hand and drew him to the bed. “Did my Sweetrobin sleep well last night?”

“No.” He sniffed. “I never slept one bit, Alayne. He was *singing* again, and my *door* was locked. I called for them to let me out, but no one ever came. Someone locked me in my room.”

“That was wicked of them.” Dipping a soft cloth into the warm water, she began to clean his face... gently, oh so gently. If you scrubbed Robert too briskly, he might begin to shake. The boy was frail, and terribly small for his age. He was eight, but Sansa had known bigger five-year-olds.

Robert’s lip quivered. “I was going to come sleep with you.”

I know you were. Sweetrobin had been accustomed to crawling in beside his mother, until she wed Lord Petyr. Since Lady Lysa’s death he had taken to wandering the Eyrie in quest of other beds. The one he liked best was Sansa’s... which was why she had asked Ser Lothor Brune to lock his door last night. She would not have minded if he only slept, but he was always trying to nuzzle at her breasts, and when he had his shaking spells he often wet the bed.

“Lord Nestor Royce has come up from the Gates to see you.” Sansa wiped beneath his nose.

“I don’t want to see *him*,” he said. “I want a story. A story of the Winged Knight.”

“After,” Sansa said. “First you must see Lord Nestor.”

“Lord Nestor has a mole,” he said, squirming. Robert was afraid of men with moles. “Mommy said he was *dreadful*.”

“My poor Sweetrobin.” Sansa smoothed his hair back. “You miss her, I know. Lord Petyr misses her too. He loved her just as you do.” That was a lie, though kindly meant. The only woman Petyr ever loved was Sansa’s murdered mother. He had confessed as much to Lady Lysa just before he pushed her out the Moon Door. *She was mad and dangerous. She murdered her own lord husband, and would have murdered me if Petyr had not come along to save me.*

Robert did not need to know that, though. He was only a sick little boy who'd loved his mother. "There," Sansa said, "you look a proper lord now. Maddy, fetch his cloak." It was lambswool, soft and warm, a handsome sky-blue that set off the cream color of his tunic. She fastened it about his shoulders with a silver brooch in the shape of a crescent moon, and took him by the hand. Robert came meekly for once.

The High Hall had been closed since Lady Lysa's fall, and it gave Sansa a chill to enter it again. The hall was long and grand and beautiful, she supposed, but she did not like it here. It was a pale cold place at the best of times. The slender pillars looked like fingerbones, and the blue veins in the white marble brought to mind the veins in an old crone's legs. Though fifty silver sconces lined the walls, less than a dozen torches had been lit, so shadows danced upon the floors and pooled in every corner. Their footsteps echoed off the marble, and Sansa could hear the wind rattling at the Moon Door. *I must not look at it, she told herself, else I'll start to shake as badly as Robert.*

With Maddy's help, she got Robert seated on his weirwood throne with a stack of pillows underneath him and sent word that his lordship would receive his guests. Two guards in sky-blue cloaks opened the doors at the lower end of the hall, and Petyr ushered them in and down the long blue carpet that ran between the rows of bone-white pillars.

The boy greeted Lord Nestor with squeaky courtesy and made no mention of his mole. When the High Steward asked about his lady mother, Robert's hands began to tremble ever so slightly. "Marillion hurt my mother. He threw her out the Moon Door."

"Did your lordship see this happen?" asked Ser Marwyn Belmore, a lanky ginger-headed knight who had been Lysa's captain of guards till Petyr had put Ser Lothor Brune in his place.

"Alayne saw it," the boy said. "And my lord stepfather."

Lord Nestor looked at her. Ser Albar, Ser Marwyn, Maester Colemon, all of them were looking. She was my aunt but she wanted to kill me, Sansa thought. She dragged me to the Moon Door and tried to push me out. I

never wanted a kiss, I was building a castle in the snow. She hugged herself to keep from shaking.

“Forgive her, my lords,” Petyr Baelish said softly. “She still has nightmares of that day. Small wonder if she cannot bear to speak of it.” He came up behind her and put his hands gently on her shoulders. “I know how hard this is for you, Alayne, but our friends must hear the truth.”

“Yes.” Her throat felt so dry and tight it almost hurt to speak. “I saw... I was with the Lady Lysa when...” A tear rolled down her cheek. *That’s good, a tear is good.* “...when Marillion... pushed her.” And she told the tale again, hardly hearing the words as they spilled out of her.

Before she was half-done Robert began to cry, the pillows shifting perilously beneath him. “He killed my *mother*. I want him to fly!” The trembling in his hands had grown worse, and his arms were shaking too. The boy’s head jerked and his teeth began to chatter. “*Fly!*” he shrieked. “*Fly, fly.*” His arms and legs flailed wildly. Lothor Brune strode to the dais in time to catch the boy as he slipped from his throne. Maester Colemon was just a step behind, though there was naught that he could do.

Helpless as the rest, Sansa could only stand and watch as the shaking spell ran its course. One of Robert’s legs kicked Ser Lothor in the face. Brune cursed, but still held on as the boy twitched and flailed and wet himself. Their visitors said not a word; Lord Nestor at least had seen these fits before. It was long moments before Robert’s spasms began to subside, and seemed even longer. By the end, the little lordling was so weak he could not stand. “Best take his lordship back to bed and bleed him,” Lord Petyr said. Brune lifted the boy in his arms and carried him from the hall. Maester Colemon followed, grim-faced.

When their footsteps died away there was no sound in the High Hall of the Eyrie. Sansa could hear the night wind moaning outside and scratching at the Moon Door. She was very cold and very tired. *Must I tell the tale again?* she wondered.

But she must have told it well enough. Lord Nestor cleared his throat. “I misliked that singer from the first,” he grumbled. “I urged Lady Lysa to send him away. Many a time I urged her.”

“You always gave her good counsel, my lord,” Petyr said.

“She took no heed of it,” Royce complained. “She heard me grudgingly and took no heed.”

“My lady was too trusting for this world.” Petyr spoke so tenderly that Sansa would have believed he’d loved his wife. “Lysa could not see the evil in men, only the good. Marillion sang sweet songs, and she mistook that for his nature.”

“He called us pigs,” Ser Albar Royce said. A blunt broad-shouldered knight who shaved his chin but cultivated thick black side-whiskers that framed his homely face like hedgerows, Ser Albar was a younger version of his father. “He made a song about two pigs snuffling round a mountain, eating a falcon’s leavings. That was meant to be us, but when I said so he laughed at me. ‘Why, ser, ’tis a song about some pigs,’ he said.”

“He made mock of me as well,” Ser Marwyn Belmore said. “Ser Ding-Dong, he named me. When I vowed I’d cut his tongue out, he ran to Lady Lysa and hid behind her skirts.”

“As oft he did,” Lord Nestor said. “The man was craven, but the favor Lady Lysa showed him made him insolent. She dressed him like a lord, gave him gold rings and a moonstone belt.”

“Even Lord Jon’s favorite falcon.” The knight’s doublet showed the six white candles of Waxley. “His lordship loved that bird. King Robert gave it to him.”

Petyr Baelish sighed. “It was unseemly,” he agreed, “and I put an end to it. Lysa agreed to send him away. That was why she met him here, that day. I should have been with her, but I never dreamt... if I had not insisted... it was I who killed her.”

No, Sansa thought, you mustn’t say that, you mustn’t tell them, you mustn’t. But Albar Royce was shaking his head. “No, my lord, you must not blame yourself,” he said.

“This was the singer’s work,” his father agreed. “Bring him up, Lord Petyr. Let us write an end to this sorry business.”

Petyr Baelish composed himself, and said, “As you wish, my lord.” He turned to his guardsmen and spoke a command, and the singer was fetched up from the dungeons. The gaoler Mord came with him, a monstrous man with small black eyes and a lopsided, scarred face. One ear and part of his cheek had been cleaved off in some battle, but twenty stone of pallid white flesh remained. His clothes fit poorly and had a rank, ripe smell.

Marillion by contrast looked almost elegant. Someone had bathed him and dressed him in a pair of sky-blue breeches and a loose-fitting white tunic with puffed sleeves, belted with a silvery sash that had been a gift from Lady Lysa. White silk gloves covered his hands, while a white silk bandage spared the lords the sight of his eyes.

Mord stood behind him with a lash. When the gaoler prodded him in the ribs, the singer went to one knee. “Good lords, I beg your forgiveness.”

Lord Nestor scowled. “You confess your crime?”

“If I had eyes I should weep.” The singer’s voice, so strong and sure by night, was cracked and whispery now. “I loved her so, I could not bear to see her in another’s arms, to know she shared his bed. I meant no harm to my sweet lady, I swear it. I barred the door so no one could disturb us whilst I declared my passion, but Lady Lysa was so cold... when she told that she was carrying Lord Petyr’s child, a... a madness seized me...”

Sansa stared at his hands while he spoke. Fat Maddy claimed that Mord had taken off three of his fingers, both pinkies and a ring finger. His little fingers did appear somewhat stiffer than the others, but with those gloves it was hard to be certain. *It might have been no more than a story. How would Maddy know?*

“Lord Petyr has been kind enough to let me keep my harp,” the blind singer said. “My harp and... my tongue... so I may sing my songs. Lady Lysa dearly loved my singing...”

“Take this creature away, or I’m like to kill him myself,” Lord Nestor growled. “It sickens me to look at him.”

“Mord, take him back to his sky cell,” said Petyr.

“Yes, m’lord.” Mord grabbed Marillion roughly by the collar. “No more mouth.” When he spoke, Sansa saw to her astonishment that the gaoler’s teeth were made of gold. They watched as he half dragged half shoved the singer toward the doors.

“The man must die,” Ser Marywn Belmore declared when they were gone. “He should have followed Lady Lysa out the Moon Door.”

“Without his tongue,” Ser Albar Royce added. “Without that lying, mocking tongue.”

“I have been too gentle with him, I know,” Petyr Baelish said in an apologetic tone. “If truth be told, I pity him. He killed for love.”

“For love or hate,” said Belmore, “he must die.”

“Soon enough,” Lord Nestor said gruffly. “No man lingers long in the sky cells. The blue will call to him.”

“It may,” said Petyr Baelish, “but whether Marillion will answer, only he can say.” He gestured, and his guardsmen opened the doors at the far end of the hall. “Sers, I know you must be weary after your ascent. Rooms have been prepared for all of you to spend the night, and food and wine await you in the Lower Hall. Oswell, show them the way, and see that they have all they need.” He turned to Nestor Royce. “My lord, will you join me in the solar for a cup of wine? Alayne, sweetling, come pour for us.”

A low fire burned in the solar, where a flagon of wine awaited them. *Arbor gold*. Sansa filled Lord Nestor’s cup whilst Petyr prodded at the logs with an iron poker.

Lord Nestor seated himself beside the fire. “This will not be the end of it,” he said to Petyr, as if Sansa were not there. “My cousin means to question the singer himself.”

“Bronze Yohn mistrusts me.” Petyr pushed a log aside.

“He means to come in force. Symond Templeton will join him, do not doubt it. And Lady Waynwood too, I fear.”

“And Lord Belmore, Young Lord Hunter, Horton Redfort. They will bring Strong Sam Stone, the Tolletts, the Shetts, the Coldwaters, some Corbrays.”

“You are well-informed. Which Corbrays? Not Lord Lyonel?”

“No, his brother. Ser Lyn dislikes me, for some reason.”

“Lyn Corbray is a dangerous man,” Lord Nestor said doggedly. “What do you intend to do?”

“What *can* I do but make them welcome if they come?” Petyr gave the flames another stir and set the poker down.

“My cousin means to remove you as Lord Protector.”

“If so, I cannot stop him. I keep a garrison of twenty men. Lord Royce and his friends can raise twenty thousand.” Petyr went to the oaken chest that sat beneath the window. “Bronze Yohn will do what he will do,” he said, kneeling. He opened the chest, drew out a roll of parchment, and brought it to Lord Nestor. “My lord. This is a token of the love my lady bore you.”

Sansa watched Royce unroll the parchment. “This... this is unexpected, my lord.” She was startled to see tears in his eyes.

“Unexpected, but not undeserved. My lady valued you above all her other bannermen. You were her rock, she told me.”

“Her rock.” Lord Nestor reddened. “She said that?”

“Often. And this”—Petyr gestured at the parchment—“is the proof of it.”

“That... that is good to know. Jon Arryn valued my service, I know, but Lady Lysa... she scorned me when I came to court her, and I feared...” Lord Nestor furrowed his brow. “It bears the Arryn seal, I see, but the signature...”

“Lysa was murdered before the document could be presented for her signature, so I signed as Lord Protector. I knew that would have been her wish.”

“I see.” Lord Nestor rolled the parchment. “You are... dutiful, my lord. Aye, and not without courage. Some will call this grant unseemly, and fault you for making it. The Keeper’s post has never been hereditary. The Arryns raised the Gates, in the days when they still wore the Falcon Crown and ruled the Vale as kings. The Eyrie was their summer seat, but when the

snows began to fall the court would make its descent. Some would say the Gates were as royal as the Eyrie.”

“There has been no king in the Vale for three hundred years,” Petyr Baelish pointed out.

“The dragons came,” Lord Nestor agreed. “But even after, the Gates remained an Arryn castle. Jon Arryn himself was Keeper of the Gates whilst his father lived. After his ascent, he named his brother Ronnel to the honor, and later his cousin Denys.”

“Lord Robert has no brothers, and only distant cousins.”

“True.” Lord Nestor clutched the parchment tightly. “I will not say I had not hoped for this. Whilst Lord Jon ruled the realm as Hand, it fell to me to rule the Vale for him. I did all that he required of me and asked nothing for myself. But by the gods, I earned this!”

“You did,” said Petyr, “and Lord Robert sleeps more easily knowing that you are always there, a staunch friend at the foot of his mountain.” He raised a cup. “So... a toast, my lord. To House Royce, Keepers of the Gates of the Moon... now and forever.”

“Now and forever, aye!” The silver cups crashed together.

Later, much later, after the flagon of Arbor gold was dry, Lord Nestor took his leave to rejoin his company of knights. Sansa was asleep on her feet by then, wanting only to crawl off to her bed, but Petyr caught her by the wrist. “You see the wonders that can be worked with lies and Arbor gold?”

Why did she feel like weeping? It was good that Nestor Royce was with them. “Were they all lies?”

“Not *all*. Lysa often called Lord Nestor a rock, though I do not think she meant it as a compliment. She called his son a clod. She knew Lord Nestor dreamed of holding the Gates in his own right, a lord in truth as well as name, but Lysa dreamed of other sons and meant the castle to go to Robert’s little brother.” He stood. “Do you understand what happened here, Alayne?”

Sansa hesitated a moment. “You gave Lord Nestor the Gates of the Moon to be certain of his support.”

“I did,” Petyr admitted, “but our rock is a Royce, which is to say he is overproud and prickly. Had I asked him his price, he would have swelled up like an angry toad at the slight upon his honor. But this way... the man is not *utterly* stupid, but the lies I served him were sweeter than the truth. He *wants* to believe that Lysa valued him above her other bannermen. One of those others is Bronze Yohn, after all, and Nestor is very much aware that he was born of the *lesser* branch of House Royce. He wants more for his son. Men of honor will do things for their children that they would never consider doing for themselves.”

She nodded. “The signature... you might have had Lord Robert put his hand and seal to it, but instead...”

“...I signed myself, as Lord Protector. Why?”

“So... if you are removed, or... or killed...”

“...Lord Nestor’s claim to the Gates will suddenly be called into question. I promise you, that is not lost on him. It was clever of you to see it. Though no more than I’d expect of mine own daughter.”

“Thank you.” She felt absurdly proud for puzzling it out, but confused as well. “I’m not, though. Your daughter. Not truly. I mean, I pretend to be Alayne, but *you* know...”

Littlefinger put a finger to her lips. “I know what I know, and so do you. Some things are best left unsaid, sweetling.”

“Even when we are alone?”

“*Especially* when we are alone. Elsewise a day will come when a servant walks into a room unannounced, or a guardsman at the door chances to hear something he should not. Do you want more blood on your pretty little hands, my darling?”

Marillion’s face seemed to float before her, the bandage pale across his eyes. Behind him she could see Ser Dontos, the crossbow bolts still in him. “No,” Sansa said. “Please.”

“I am tempted to say this is no game we play, daughter, but of course it is. The game of thrones.”

I never asked to play. The game was too dangerous. *One slip and I am dead.* “Oswell... my lord, Oswald rowed me from King’s Landing the night that I escaped. He must know who I am.”

“If he’s half as clever as a sheep pellet, you would think so. Ser Lothor knows as well. But Oswald has been in my service a long time, and Brune is close-mouthed by nature. Kettleblack watches Brune for me, and Brune watches Kettleblack. *Trust no one*, I once told Eddard Stark, but he would not listen. You are Alayne, and you must be Alayne *all the time*.” He put two fingers on her left breast. “Even here. In your heart. Can you do that? Can you be my daughter in your heart?”

“I...” *I do not know, my lord*, she almost said, but that was not what he wanted to hear. *Lies and Arbor gold*, she thought. “I am Alayne, Father. Who else would I be?”

Lord Littlefinger kissed her cheek. “With my wits and Cat’s beauty, the world will be yours, sweetling. Now off to bed.”

Gretchel had laid a fire in her hearth and plumped her featherbed. Sansa undressed and slipped beneath the blankets. *He will not sing tonight*, she prayed, *not with Lord Nestor and the others in the castle. He would not dare.* She closed her eyes.

Sometime during the night she woke, as little Robert climbed up into her bed. *I forgot to tell Lothor to lock him in again*, she realized. There was nothing to be done for it, so she put her arm around him. “Sweetrobin? You can stay, but try not to squirm around. Just close your eyes and sleep, little one.”

“I will.” He cuddled close and laid his head between her breasts. “Alayne? Are you my mother now?”

“I suppose I am,” she said. If a lie was kindly meant, there was no harm in it.