

## ALAYNE

She turned the iron ring and pushed the door open, just a crack.

“Sweetrobin?” she called. “May I enter?”

“Have a care, m’lady,” warned old Gretchel, wringing her hands. “His lordship threw his chamber pot at the maester.”

“Then he has none to throw at me. Isn’t there some work you should be doing? And you, Maddy... are all the windows closed and shuttered? Have all the furnishings been covered?”

“All of them, m’lady,” said Maddy.

“Best make certain of it.” Alayne slipped into the darkened bedchamber. “It’s only me, Sweetrobin.”

Someone sniffled in the darkness. “Are you alone?”

“I am, my lord.”

“Come close, then. Just you.”

Alayne shut the door firmly behind her. It was solid oak, four inches thick; Maddy and Gretchel might listen all they wished, but they would hear nothing. That was just as well. Gretchel could hold her tongue, but Maddy gossiped shamelessly.

“Did Maester Colemon send you?” the boy asked.

“No,” she lied. “I heard my Sweetrobin was ailing.” After his encounter with the chamber pot the maester had come running to Ser Lothor, and Brune had come to her. “If m’lady can talk him out of bed nice,” the knight said, “I won’t have to drag him out.”

*We can’t have that*, she told herself. When Robert was handled roughly he was apt to go into a shaking fit. “Are you hungry, my lord?” she asked the little lord. “Shall I send Maddy down for berries and cream, or some warm bread and butter?” Too late she remembered that there was no warm bread; the kitchens were closed, the ovens cold. *If it gets Robert out of bed, it would be worth the bother of lighting a fire*, she told herself.

“I don’t want food,” the little lord said, in a reedy, petulant voice. “I’m going to stay in bed today. You could read to me if you want.”

“It is too dark in here for reading.” The heavy curtains drawn across the windows made the bedchamber black as night. “Has my Sweetrobin forgotten what day this is?”

“No,” he said, “but I’m not going. I want to stay in bed. You could read to me about the Winged Knight.”

The Winged Knight was Ser Artys Arryn. Legend said that he had driven the First Men from the Vale and flown to the top of the Giant’s Lance on a huge falcon to slay the Griffin King. There were a hundred tales of his adventures. Little Robert knew them all so well he could have recited them from memory, but he liked to have them read to him all the same. “Sweetling, we have to go,” she told the boy, “but I promise, I’ll read you *two* tales of the Winged Knight when we reach the Gates of the Moon.”

“Three,” he said at once. No matter what you offered him, Robert always wanted more.

“Three,” she agreed. “Might I let some sun in?”

“No. The light hurts my eyes. Come to bed, Alayne.”

She went to the windows anyway, edging around the broken chamber pot. She could smell it better than she saw it. “I shan’t open them very wide. Only enough to see my Sweetrobin’s face.”

He sniffled. “If you must.”

The curtains were of plush blue velvet. She pulled one back a finger’s length and tied it off. Dust motes danced in a shaft of pale morning light. The small diamond-shaped panes of the window were obscured by frost. Alayne rubbed at one with the heel of her hand, enough to glimpse a brilliant blue sky and a blaze of white from the mountainside. The Eyrie was wrapped in an icy mantle, the Giant’s Lance above buried in waist-deep snows.

When she turned back, Robert Arryn was propped up against the pillows looking at her. *The Lord of the Eyrie and Defender of the Vale*. A woolen blanket covered him below the waist. Above it he was naked, a

pasty boy with hair as long as any girl's. Robert had spindly arms and legs, a soft concave chest and little belly, and eyes that were always red and runny. *He cannot help the way he is. He was born small and sickly.* "You look very strong this morning, my lord." He loved to be told how strong he was. "Shall I have Maddy and Gretchel fetch hot water for your bath? Maddy will scrub your back for you and wash your hair, to make you clean and lordly for your journey. Won't that be nice?"

"No. I hate Maddy. She has a wart on her eye, and she scrubs so hard it hurts. My mommy never hurt me scrubbing."

"I will tell Maddy not to scrub my Sweetrobin so hard. You'll feel better when you're fresh and clean."

"No bath, I *told* you, my head hurts most awfully."

"Shall I bring you a warm cloth for your brow? Or a cup of dreamwine? Only a little one, though. Mya Stone is waiting down at Sky, and she'll be hurt if you go to sleep on her. You know how much she loves you."

"I don't love *her*. She's just the mule girl." Robert sniffled. "Maester Colemon put something vile in my milk last night, I could taste it. I told him I wanted sweetmilk, but he wouldn't bring me any. Not even when I *commanded* him. I am the lord, he should do what I say. No one does what I *say*."

"I'll speak to him," Alayne promised, "but only if you get up out of bed. It's beautiful outside, Sweetrobin. The sun is shining bright, a perfect day for going down the mountain. The mules are waiting down at Sky with Mya..."

His mouth quivered. "I hate those smelly mules. One tried to bite me once! You tell that Mya that I'm staying here." He sounded as if he were about to cry. "No one can hurt me so long as I stay here. The Eyrie is *impregnable*."

"Who would want to hurt my Sweetrobin? Your lords and knights adore you, and the smallfolk cheer your name." *He is afraid*, she thought, *and with good reason*. Since his lady mother had fallen, the boy would not

even stand upon a balcony, and the way from the Eyrie to the Gates of the Moon was perilous enough to daunt anyone. Alayne's heart had been in her throat when she made her own ascent with Lady Lysa and Lord Petyr, and everyone agreed that the descent was even more harrowing, since you were looking down the whole time. Mya could tell of great lords and bold knights who had gone pale and wet their smallclothes on the mountain. *And none of them had the shaking sickness either.*

Still, it would not serve. On the valley floor autumn still lingered, warm and golden, but winter had closed around the mountain peaks. They had weathered three snowstorms, and an ice storm that transformed the castle into crystal for a fortnight. The Eyrie might be impregnable, but it would soon be inaccessible as well, and the way down grew more hazardous every day. Most of the castle's servants and soldiers had already made the descent. Only a dozen still lingered up here, to attend Lord Robert.

"Sweetrobin," she said gently, "the descent will be ever so jolly, you'll see. Ser Lothor will be with us, and Mya. Her mules have gone up and down this old mountain a thousand times."

"I hate mules," he insisted. "Mules are nasty. I *told* you, one tried to bite me when I was little."

Robert had never learned to ride properly, she knew. Mules, horses, donkeys, it made no matter; to him they were all fearsome beasts, as terrifying as dragons or griffins. He had been brought to the Vale at six, riding with his head cradled between his mother's milky breasts, and had never left the Eyrie since.

Still, they had to go, before the ice closed about the castle for good. There was no telling how long the weather would hold. "Mya will keep the mules from biting," Alayne said, "and I'll be riding just behind you. I'm only a girl, not as brave or strong as you. If I can do it, I know you can, Sweetrobin."

"I *could* do it," Lord Robert said, "but I don't choose to." He swiped at his runny nose with the back of his hand. "Tell Mya I am going to stay abed. Perhaps I will come down on the morrow, if I feel better. Today is too cold out, and my head hurts. You can have some sweetmilk too, and I'll tell

Gretchel to bring us some honeycombs to eat. We'll sleep and kiss and play games, and you can read me about the Winged Knight."

"I will. Three tales, as I promised... when we reach the Gates of the Moon." Alayne was running short of patience. *We have to go*, she reminded herself, *or we'll still be above the snow line when the sun goes down*. "Lord Nestor has prepared a feast to welcome you, mushroom soup and venison and cakes. You don't want to disappoint him, do you?"

"Will they be lemon cakes?" Lord Robert loved lemon cakes, perhaps because Alayne did.

"Lemony lemony lemon cakes," she assured him, "and you can have as many as you like."

"A hundred?" he wanted to know. "Could I have a *hundred*?"

"If it please you." She sat on the bed and smoothed his long, fine hair. *He does have pretty hair*. Lady Lysa had brushed it herself every night, and cut it when it wanted cutting. After she had fallen Robert had suffered terrible shaking fits whenever anyone came near him with a blade, so Petyr had commanded that his hair be allowed to grow. Alayne wound a lock around her finger, and said, "Now, will you get out of bed and let us dress you?"

"I want a hundred lemon cakes and *five* tales!"

*I'd like to give you a hundred spankings and five slaps. You would not dare behave like this if Petyr were here*. The little lord had a good healthy fear of his stepfather. Alayne forced a smile. "As my lord desires. But nothing till you're washed and dressed and on your way. Come, before the morning's gone." She took him firmly by the hand, and drew him out of bed.

Before she could summon the servants, however, Sweetrobin threw his skinny arms around her and kissed her. It was a little boy's kiss, and clumsy. Everything Robert Arryn did was clumsy. *If I close my eyes I can pretend he is the Knight of Flowers*. Ser Loras had given Sansa Stark a red rose once, but he had never kissed her... and no Tyrell would ever kiss Alayne

Stone. Pretty as she was, she had been born on the wrong side of the blanket.

As the boy's lips touched her own she found herself thinking of another kiss. She could still remember how it felt, when his cruel mouth pressed down on her own. He had come to Sansa in the darkness as green fire filled the sky. *He took a song and a kiss, and left me nothing but a bloody cloak.*

It made no matter. That day was done, and so was Sansa.

Alayne pushed her little lord away. "That's enough. You can kiss me again when we reach the Gates, if you keep your word."

Maddy and Gretchel were waiting outside with Maester Colemon. The maester had washed the night soil from his hair and changed his robe. Robert's squires had turned up as well. Terrance and Gyles could always sniff out trouble.

"Lord Robert is feeling stronger," Alayne told the serving women. "Fetch hot water for his bath, but see you don't scald him. And do not pull on his hair when you brush out the tangles, he hates that." One of the squires sniggered, until she said, "Terrance, lay out his lordship's riding clothes and his warmest cloak. Gyles, you may clean up that broken chamber pot."

Gyles Grafton made a face. "I'm no scrubwoman."

"Do as Lady Alayne commands, or Lothor Brune will hear of it," said Maester Colemon. He followed her along the hallway and down the twisting stairs. "I am grateful for your intercession, my lady. You have a way with him." He hesitated. "Did you observe any shaking while you were with him?"

"His fingers trembled a little bit when I held his hand, that's all. He says you put something vile in his milk."

"Vile?" Colemon blinked at her, and the apple in his throat moved up and down. "I merely... is he bleeding from the nose?"

"No."

"Good. That is good." His chain clinked softly as he bobbed his head, atop a ridiculously long and skinny neck. "This descent... my lady, it might

be safest if I mixed his lordship some milk of the poppy. Mya Stone could lash him over the back of her most surefooted mule whilst he slumbered.”

“The Lord of the Eyrie cannot descend from his mountain tied up like a sack of barleycorn.” Of that Alayne was certain. They dare not let the full extent of Robert’s frailty and cowardice become too widely known, her father had warned her. *I wish he were here. He would know what to do.*

Petyr Baelish was clear across the Vale, though, attending Lord Lyonel Corbray at his wedding. A widower of forty-odd years, and childless, Lord Lyonel was to wed the strapping sixteen-year-old daughter of a rich Gulltown merchant. Petyr had brokered the match himself. The bride’s dower was said to be staggering; it had to be, since she was of common birth. Corbray’s vassals would be there, with the Lords Waxley, Grafton, Lynderly, some petty lords and landed knights... and Lord Belmore, who had lately reconciled with her father. The other Lords Declarant were expected to shun the nuptials, so Petyr’s presence was essential.

Alayne understood all that well enough, but it meant that the burden of getting Sweetrobin safely down the mountain fell on her. “Give his lordship a cup of sweetmilk,” she told the maester. “That will stop him from shaking on the journey down.”

“He had a cup not three days past,” Colemon objected.

“And wanted another last night, which you refused him.”

“It was too soon. My lady, you do not understand. As I’ve told the Lord Protector, a pinch of sweetsleep will prevent the shaking, but it does not leave the flesh, and in time...”

“Time will not matter if his lordship has a shaking fit and falls off the mountain. If my father were here, I know he would tell you to keep Lord Robert calm at all costs.”

“I try, my lady, yet his fits grow ever more violent, and his blood is so thin I dare not leech him any more. Sweetsleep... you are *certain* he was not bleeding from the nose?”

“He was sniffing,” Alayne admitted, “but I saw no blood.”

“I must speak to the Lord Protector. This feast... is that wise, I wonder, after the strain of the descent?”

“It will not be a large feast,” she assured him. “No more than forty guests. Lord Nestor and his household, the Knight of the Gate, a few lesser lords and their retainers...”

“Lord Robert dislikes strangers, you know that, and there will be drinking, noise... *music*. Music frightens him.”

“Music soothes him,” she corrected, “the high harp especially. It’s *singing* he can’t abide, since Marillion killed his mother.” Alayne had told the lie so many times that she remembered it that way more oft than not; the other seemed no more than a bad dream that sometimes troubled her sleep. “Lord Nestor will have no singers at the feast, only flutes and fiddles for the dancing.” What would she do when the music began to play? It was a vexing question, to which her heart and head gave different answers. Sansa loved to dance, but Alayne... “Just give him a cup of the sweetmilk before we go, and another at the feast, and there should be no trouble.”

“Very well.” They paused at the foot of the stairs. “But this must be the last. For half a year, or longer.”

“You had best take that up with the Lord Protector.” She pushed through the door and crossed the yard. Colemon only wanted the best for his charge, Alayne knew, but what was best for Robert the boy and what was best for Lord Arryn were not always the same. Petyr had said as much, and it was true. *Maester Colemon cares only for the boy, though. Father and I have larger concerns.*

Old snow cloaked the courtyard, and icicles hung down like crystal spears from the terraces and towers. The Eyrie was built of fine white stone, and winter’s mantle made it whiter still. *So beautiful*, Alayne thought, *so impregnable*. She could not love this place, no matter how she tried. Even before the guards and serving men had made their descent, the castle had seemed as empty as a tomb, and more so when Petyr Baelish was away. No one sang up there, not since Marillion. No one ever laughed too loud. Even the gods were silent. The Eyrie boasted a sept, but no septon; a godswood, but no heart tree. *No prayers are answered here*, she often thought, though



some days she felt so lonely she had to try. Only the wind answered her, sighing endlessly around the seven slim white towers and rattling the Moon Door every time it gusted. *It will be even worse in winter, she knew. In winter this will be a cold white prison.*

And yet the thought of leaving frightened her almost as much as it frightened Robert. She only hid it better. Her father said there was no shame in being afraid, only in showing your fear. “All men live with fear,” he said. Alayne was not certain she believed that. Nothing frightened Petyr Baelish. *He only said that to make me brave.* She would need to be brave down below, where the chance of being unmasked was so much greater. Petyr’s friends at court had sent him word that the queen had men out looking for the Imp and Sansa Stark. *It will mean my head if I am found,* she reminded herself as she descended a flight of icy stone steps. *I must be Alayne all the time, inside and out.*

Lothor Brune was in the winch room, helping the gaoler Mord and two serving men wrestle chests of clothes and bales of cloth into six huge oaken buckets, each big enough around to hold three men. The great chain winches were the easiest way to reach the waycastle Sky, six hundred feet below them; otherwise you had to descend the natural stone chimney from the undercellar. *Or go the way Marillion went, and Lady Lysa before him.*

“Boy out of bed?” Ser Lothor asked.

“They’re bathing him. He will be ready within the hour.”

“We best hope he is. Mya won’t wait past midday.” The winch room was unheated, so his breath misted with every word.

“She’ll wait,” Alayne said. “She has to wait.”

“Don’t be so certain, m’lady. She’s half mule herself, that one. I think she’d leave us all to starve before she’d put those animals at risk.” He smiled when he said it. *He always smiles when he speaks of Mya Stone.* Mya was much younger than Ser Lothor, but when her father had been brokering the marriage between Lord Corbray and his merchant’s daughter, he’d told her that young girls were always happiest with older men. “Innocence and experience make for a perfect marriage,” he had said.

Alayne wondered what Mya made of Ser Lothor. With his squashed nose, square jaw, and nap of woolly grey hair, Brune could not be called comely, but he was not *ugly* either. *It is a common face but an honest one.* Though he had risen to knighthood, Ser Lothor's birth had been very low. One night he had told her that he was kin to the Brunes of Brownhollow, an old knightly family from Crackclaw Point. "I went to them when my father died," he confessed, "but they shat on me, and said I was no blood of theirs." He would not speak of what happened after that, except to say that he had learned all he knew of arms the hard way. Sober, he was a quiet man, but a strong one. *And Petyr says he's loyal. He trusts him as much as he trusts anyone.* Brune would be a good match for a bastard girl like Mya Stone, she thought. *It might be different if her father had acknowledged her, but he never did. And Maddy says that she's no maid either.*

Mord took up his whip and cracked it, and the first pair of oxen began to lumber in a circle, turning the winch. The chain uncoiled, rattling as it scraped across the stone, the oaken bucket swaying as it began its long descent to Sky. *Poor oxen*, thought Alayne. Mord would cut their throats and butcher them before he left, and leave them for the falcons. Whatever part remained when the Eyrie was reopened would be roasted up for the spring feast, if it had not spoiled. A good supply of hard frozen meat foretold a summer of plenty, old Gretchel claimed.

"M'lady," Ser Lothor said, "you'd best know. Mya didn't come up alone. Lady Myranda's with her."

"Oh." *Why would she ride all the way up the mountain, just to ride back down again?* Myranda Royce was the Lord Nestor's daughter. The one time that Sansa had visited the Gates of the Moon, on the way up to the Eyrie with her aunt Lysa and Lord Petyr, she had been away, but Alayne had heard much of her since from the Eyrie's soldiers and serving girls. Her mother was long dead, so Lady Myranda kept her father's castle for him; it was a much livelier court when she was home than when she was away, according to rumor. "Soon or late you must meet Myranda Royce," Petyr had warned her. "When you do, be careful. She likes to play the merry fool,

but underneath she's shrewder than her father. Guard your tongue around her."

*I will*, she thought, *but I did not know I'd need to start so soon*. "Robert will be pleased." He liked Myranda Royce. "You must excuse me, ser. I need to finish packing." Alone, she climbed the steps back to her room for one last time. The windows had been sealed and shuttered, the furnishings covered. A few of her things had already been removed, the rest stored away. All of Lady Lysa's silks and samites were to be left behind. Her sheerest linens and plushiest velvets, the rich embroidery and fine Myrish lace; all would remain. Down below, Alayne must dress modestly, as befit a girl of modest birth. *It makes no matter*, she told herself. *I dared not wear the best clothes even here*.

Gretchel had stripped the bed and laid out the rest of her clothing. Alayne was already wearing woolen hose beneath her skirts, over a double layer of smallclothes. Now she donned a lambswool overtunic and a hooded fur cloak, fastening it with an enameled mockingbird that had been a gift from Petyr. There was a scarf as well, and a pair of leather gloves lined with fur to match her riding boots. When she'd donned it all, she felt as fat and furry as a bear cub. *I will be glad of it on the mountain*, she had to remind herself. She took one last look at her room before she left. *I was safe here*, she thought, *but down below...*

When Alayne returned to the winch room, she found Mya Stone waiting impatiently with Lothor Brune and Mord. *She must have come up in the bucket to see what was taking us so long*. Slim and sinewy, Mya looked as tough as the old riding leathers she wore beneath her silvery ringmail shirt. Her hair was black as a raven's wing, so short and shaggy that Alayne suspected that she cut it with a dagger. Mya's eyes were her best feature, big and blue. *She could be pretty, if she would dress up like a girl*. Alayne found herself wondering whether Ser Lothor liked her best in her iron and leather, or dreamed of her gowned in lace and silk. Mya liked to say that her father had been a goat and her mother an owl, but Alayne had gotten the true story from Maddy. *Yes*, she thought, looking at her now, *those are his eyes, and she has his hair too, the thick black hair he shared with Renly*.

“Where is he?” the bastard girl demanded.

“His lordship is being bathed and dressed.”

“He needs to make some haste. It’s getting colder, can’t you feel it? We need to get below Snow before the sun goes down.”

“How bad is the wind?” Alayne asked her.

“It could be worse... and will be, after dark.” Mya pushed a lock of hair from her eyes. “If he bathes much longer, we’ll be trapped up here all winter with nothing to eat except each other.”

Alayne did not know what to say to that. Thankfully, she was spared by the arrival of Robert Arryn. The little lord wore sky-blue velvet, a chain of gold and sapphires, and a white bearskin cloak. His squires each held an end, to keep the cloak from dragging on the floor. Maester Colemon accompanied them, in a threadbare grey cloak lined with squirrel fur. Gretchel and Maddy were not far behind.

When he felt the cold wind on his face, Robert quailed, but Terrance and Gyles were behind him, so he could not flee. “My lord,” said Mya, “will you ride down with me?”

Too brusque, Alayne thought. She should have greeted him with a smile, told him how strong and brave he looks.

“I want Alayne,” Lord Robert said. “I’ll only go with her.”

“The bucket can hold all three of us.”

“I just want Alayne. You smell all stinky, like a mule.”

“As you wish.” Mya’s face showed no emotion.

Some of the winch chains were fixed to wicker baskets, others to stout oaken buckets. The largest of those was taller than Alayne, with iron bands girding its dark brown staves. Even so, her heart was in her throat as she took Robert’s hand and helped him in. Once the hatch was closed behind them, the wood surrounded them on all sides. Only the top was open. *It is best that way, she told herself, we can’t look down.* Below them was only Sky and sky. Six hundred feet of sky. For a moment she found herself wondering how long it had taken her aunt to fall that distance, and what her

last thought had been as the mountain rushed up to meet her. *No, I mustn't think of that. I mustn't!*

"AWAY!" came Ser Lothor's shout. Someone shoved the bucket hard. It swayed and tipped, scraped against the floor, then swung free. She heard the *crack* of Mord's whip and the rattle of the chain. They began to descend, by jerks and starts at first, then more smoothly. Robert's face was pale and his eyes puffy, but his hands were still. The Eyrie shrank above them. The sky cells on the lower levels made the castle look something like a honeycomb from below. *A honeycomb made of ice*, Alayne thought, *a castle made of snow*. She could hear the wind whistling round the bucket.

A hundred feet down, a sudden gust caught hold of them. The bucket swayed sideways, spinning in the air, then bumped hard against the rock face behind them. Shards of ice and snow rained down on them, and the oak creaked and strained. Robert gave a gasp and clung to her, burying his face between her breasts.

"My lord is brave," Alayne said, when she felt him shaking. "I'm so frightened I can hardly talk, but not you."

She felt him nod. "The Winged Knight was brave, and so am I," he boasted to her bodice. "I'm an *Arryn*."

"Will my Sweetrobin hold me tight?" she asked, though he was already holding her so tightly that she could scarcely breathe.

"If you like," he whispered. And clinging hard to one another, they continued on straight down to Sky.

*Calling this a castle is like calling a puddle on a privy floor a lake*, Alayne thought, when the bucket was opened so they might emerge within the waycastle. Sky was no more than a crescent-shaped wall of old unmortared stone, enclosing a stony ledge and the yawning mouth of a cavern. Inside were storehouses and stables, a long natural hall, and the chiseled handholds that led up to the Eyrie. Outside, the ground was strewn by broken stones and boulders. Earthen ramps gave access to the wall. Six hundred feet above, the Eyrie was so small she could hide it with her hand, but far below the Vale stretched green and golden.

Twenty mules awaited them within the waycastle, along with two mule-walkers and the Lady Myranda Royce. Lord Nestor's daughter proved to be a short, fleshy woman, of an age with Mya Stone, but where Mya was slim and sinewy, Myranda was soft-bodied and sweet-smelling, broad of hip, thick of waist, and extremely buxom. Her thick chestnut curls framed round red cheeks, a small mouth, and a pair of lively brown eyes. When Robert climbed gingerly from the bucket, she knelt in a patch of snow to kiss his hand and cheeks. "My lord," she said, "you've grown so *big*!"

"Have I?" said Robert, pleased.

"You will be taller than me soon," the lady lied. She got to her feet and brushed the snow from her skirts. "And you must be the Lord Protector's daughter," she added, as the bucket went rattling back up to the Eyrie. "I had heard that you were beautiful. I see that it is true."

Alayne curtsied. "My lady is kind to say so."

"Kind?" The older girl gave a laugh. "How boring that would be. I aspire to be wicked. You must tell me all your secrets on the ride down. May I call you Alayne?"

"If you wish, my lady." But you'll get no secrets from me.

"I am 'my lady' at the Gates, but up here on the mountain you may call me Randa. How many years have you, Alayne?"

"Four-and-ten, my lady." She had decided that Alayne Stone should be older than Sansa Stark.

"*Randa*. It seems a hundred years since I was four-and-ten. How innocent I was. Are you still innocent, Alayne?"

She blushed. "You should not... yes, of course."

"Saving yourself for Lord Robert?" Lady Myranda teased. "Or is there some ardent squire dreaming of your favors?"

"No," said Alayne, even as Robert said, "She's *my* friend. Terrance and Gyles can't have her."

A second bucket had arrived by then, thumping down softly on a mound of frozen snow. Maester Colemon emerged with the squires Terrance and Gyles. The next winch delivered Maddy and Gretchel, who

rode with Mya Stone. The bastard girl wasted no time taking charge. “We don’t want to get bunched up on the mountain,” she told the other mule handlers. “I’ll take Lord Robert and his companions. Ossy, you’ll bring down Ser Lothor and the rest, but give me an hour’s lead. Carrot, you’ll have charge of their chests and boxes.” She turned to Robert Arryn, her black hair blowing. “Which mule will you ride today, my lord?”

“They’re all stinky. I’ll have the grey one, with the ear chewed off. I want Alayne to ride with me. And Myranda too.”

“Where the way is wide enough. Come, my lord, let’s get you on your mule. There’s a smell of snow in the air.”

It was another half hour before they were ready to set out. When all of them were mounted up, Mya Stone gave a crisp command, and two of Sky’s men-at-arms swung the gates open. Mya led them out, with Lord Robert just behind her, swaddled in his bearskin cloak. Alayne and Myranda Royce followed, then Gretchel and Maddy, then Terrance Lynderly and Gyles Grafton. Maester Colemon brought up the rear, leading a second mule laden with his chests of herbs and potions.

Beyond the walls, the wind picked up sharply. They were above the tree line here, exposed to the elements. Alayne was thankful that she’d dressed so warmly. Her cloak was flapping noisily behind her, and a sudden gust blew back her hood. She laughed, but a few yards ahead Lord Robert squirmed, and said, “It’s too cold. We should go back and wait until it’s warmer.”

“It will be warmer on the valley floor, my lord,” said Mya. “You’ll see when we get down there.”

“I don’t *want* to see,” said Robert, but Mya paid no mind.

Their road was a crooked series of stone steps carved into the mountainside, but the mules knew every inch of it. Alayne was glad of that. Here and there the stone was shattered from the strain of countless seasons, with all their thaws and freezes. Patches of snow clung to the rock on either side of the path, blinding white. The sun was bright, the sky was blue, and there were falcons circling overhead, riding on the wind.

Up here where the slope was steepest, the steps wound back and forth rather than plunging straight down. *Sansa Stark went up the mountain, but Alayne Stone is coming down.* It was a strange thought. Coming up, Mya had warned her to keep her eyes on the path ahead, she remembered. “Look up, not down,” she said... but that was not possible on the descent. *I could close my eyes. The mule knows the way, he has no need of me.* But that seemed more something Sansa would have done, that frightened girl. Alayne was an older woman, and bastard brave.

At first they rode in single file, but farther down the path widened enough for two to ride abreast, and Myranda Royce came up beside her. “We have had a letter from your father,” she said, as casually as if they were sitting with their septa, doing needlework. “He is on his way home, he says, and hopes to see his darling daughter soon. He writes that Lyonel Corbray seems well pleased with his bride, and even more so with her dowry. I *do* hope Lord Lyonel remembers which one he needs to bed. Lady Waynwood turned up with the Knight of Ninestars for the wedding feast, Lord Petyr says, to everyone’s astonishment.”

“Any Waynwood? Truly?” The Lords Declarant were down from six to three, it would seem. The day he’d departed the mountain, Petyr Baelish had been confident of winning Symond Templeton to his side, but not so Lady Waynwood. “Was there more?” she asked. The Eyrie was such a lonely place that she was eager for any bit of news from the world beyond, however trivial or insignificant.

“Not from your father, no, but we’ve had other birds. The war goes on, everywhere but here. Riverrun has yielded, but Dragonstone and Storm’s End still hold for Lord Stannis.”

“Lady Lysa was so wise, to keep us out of it.”

Myranda gave her a shrewd little smile. “Yes, she was the very soul of wisdom, that good lady.” She shifted her seat. “Why must mules be so bony and ill-tempered? Mya does not feed them enough. A nice fat mule would be more comfortable to ride. There’s a new High Septon, did you know? Oh, and the Night’s Watch has a boy commander, some bastard son of Eddard Stark’s.”



“Jon Snow?” she blurted out, surprised.

“Snow? Yes, it would be Snow, I suppose.”

She had not thought of Jon in ages. He was only her half brother, but still... with Robb and Bran and Rickon dead, Jon Snow was the only brother that remained to her. *I am a bastard too now, just like him. Oh, it would be so sweet, to see him once again.* But of course that could never be. Alayne Stone had no brothers, baseborn or otherwise.

“Our cousin Bronze Yohn had himself a *mêlée* at Runestone,” Myranda Royce went on, oblivious, “a small one, just for squires. It was meant for Harry the Heir to win the honors, and so he did.”

“Harry the Heir?”

“Lady Waynwood’s ward. Harrold Hardyng. I suppose we must call him *Ser* Harry now. Bronze Yohn knighted him.”

“Oh.” Alayne was confused. Why should Lady Waynwood’s ward be her heir? She had sons of her own blood. One was the Knight of the Bloody Gate, Ser Donnel. She did not want to look stupid, though, so all she said was, “I pray he proves a worthy knight.”

Lady Myranda snorted. “I pray he gets the pox. He has a bastard daughter by some common girl, you know. My lord father had hoped to marry me to Harry, but Lady Waynwood would not hear of it. I do not know whether it was me she found unsuitable, or just my dowry.” She gave a sigh. “I do need another husband. I had one once, but I killed him.”

“You did?” Alayne said, shocked.

“Oh, yes. He died on top of me. *In* me, if truth be told. You do know what goes on in a marriage bed, I hope?”

She thought of Tyrion, and of the Hound and how he’d kissed her, and gave a nod. “That must have been dreadful, my lady. Him dying. *There*, I mean, whilst... whilst he was...”

“...fucking me?” She shrugged. “It was disconcerting, certainly. Not to mention discourteous. He did not even have the common decency to plant a child in me. Old men have weak seed. So here I am, a widow, but scarce used. Harry could have done much worse. I daresay that he will. Lady

Waynwood will most like marry him to one of her granddaughters, or one of Bronze Yohn's."

"As you say, my lady." Alayne remembered Petyr's warning.

"*Randa*. Come now, you can say it. Ran. Da."

"Randa."

"Much better. I fear I must apologize to you. You will think me a dreadful slut, I know, but I bedded that pretty boy Marillion. I did not know he was a monster. He sang beautifully, and could do the sweetest things with his fingers. I would never have taken him to bed if I had known he was going to push Lady Lysa through the Moon Door. I do not bed monsters, as a rule." She studied Alayne's face and chest. "You are prettier than me, but my breasts are larger. The maesters say large breasts produce no more milk than small ones, but I do not believe it. Have you ever known a wet nurse with small teats? Yours are ample for a girl your age, but as they are bastard breasts, I shan't concern myself with them." Myranda edged her mule closer. "You know our Mya's not a maid, I trust?"

She did. Fat Maddy had whispered it to her, one time when Mya brought up their supplies. "Maddy told me."

"Of course she did. She has a mouth as big as her thighs, and her thighs are *enormous*. Mychel Redfort was the one. He used to be Lyn Corbray's squire. A *real* squire, not like that loutish lad Ser Lyn's got squiring for him now. He only took that one on for coin, they say. Mychel was the best young swordsman in the Vale, and gallant... or so poor Mya thought, till he wed one of Bronze Yohn's daughters. Lord Horton gave him no choice in the matter, I am sure, but it was still a cruel thing to do to Mya."

"Ser Lothor is fond of her." Alayne glanced down at the mule girl, twenty steps below. "More than fond."

"Lothor *Brune*?" Myranda raised an eyebrow. "Does she know?" She did not wait for an answer. "He has no hope, poor man. My father's tried to make a match for Mya, but she'll have none of them. She *is* half mule, that one."

Despite herself, Alayne found herself warming to the older girl. She had not had a friend to gossip with since poor Jeyne Poole. “Do you think Ser Lothor likes her as she is, in mail and leather?” she asked the older girl, who seemed so worldly-wise. “Or does he dream of her draped in silks and velvets?”

“He’s a man. He dreams of her naked.”

She is trying to make me blush again.

Lady Myranda must have heard her thoughts. “You do turn such a pretty shade of pink. When I blush I look quite like an apple. I have not blushed for years, though.” She leaned closer. “Does your father plan to wed again?”

“My father?” Alayne had never considered that. Somehow the notion made her squirm. She found herself remembering the look on Lysa Arryn’s face as she’d tumbled through the Moon Door.

“We all know how devoted he was to Lady Lysa,” said Myranda, “but he cannot mourn forever. He needs a pretty young wife to wash away his grief. I imagine he could have his pick of half the noble maidens in the Vale. Who could be a better husband than our own bold Lord Protector? Though I do wish he had a better name than *Littlefinger*. How little is it, do you know?”

“His finger?” She blushed again. “I don’t... I never...”

Lady Myranda laughed so loud that Mya Stone glanced back at them. “Never you mind, Alayne, I’m sure it’s large enough.”

They passed beneath a wind-carved arch, where long icicles clung to the pale stone, dripping down on them. On the far side the path narrowed and plunged down sharply for a hundred feet or more. Myranda was forced to drop back. Alayne gave the mule his head. The steepness of this part of the descent made her cling tightly to her saddle. The steps here had been worn smooth by the iron-shod hooves of all the mules who’d passed this way, until they resembled a series of shallow stone bowls. Water filled the bottoms of the bowls, glimmering golden in the afternoon sun. *It is water now*, Alayne thought, *but come dark, all of it will turn to ice*. She realized

that she was holding her breath, and let it out. Mya Stone and Lord Robert had almost reached the rock spire where the slope leveled off again. She tried to look at them, and only them. *I will not fall*, she told herself. *Mya's mule will see me through*. The wind skirled around her, as she bumped and scraped her way down step by step. It seemed to take a lifetime.

Then all at once she was at the bottom with Mya and her little lord, huddled beneath a twisted, rocky spire. Ahead stretched a high stone saddle, narrow and icy. Alayne could hear the wind shrieking, and feel it plucking at her cloak. She remembered this place from her ascent. It had frightened her then, and it frightened her now. "It is wider than it looks," Mya was telling Lord Robert in a cheerful voice. "A yard across, and no more than eight yards long, that's nothing."

"Nothing," Robert said. His hand was shaking.

Oh, no, Alayne thought. Please. Not here. Not now.

"It's best to lead the mules across," Mya said. "If it please my lord, I'll take mine over first, then come back for yours." Lord Robert did not answer. He was staring at the narrow saddle with his reddened eyes. "I shan't be long, my lord," Mya promised, but Alayne doubted that the boy could even hear her.

When the bastard girl led her mule out from beneath the shelter of the spire, the wind caught her in its teeth. Her cloak lifted, twisting and flapping in the air. Mya staggered, and for half a heartbeat it seemed as if she would be blown over the precipice, but somehow she regained her balance and went on.

Alayne took Robert's gloved hand in her own to stop his shaking. "Sweetrobin," she said, "I'm scared. Hold my hand, and help me get across. I know *you're* not afraid."

He looked at her, his pupils small dark pinpricks in eyes as big and white as eggs. "I'm not?"

"Not you. You're my winged knight, Ser Sweetrobin."

"The Winged Knight could fly," Robert whispered.

"Higher than the mountains." She gave his hand a squeeze.

Lady Myranda had joined them by the spire. “He could,” she echoed, when she saw what was happening.

“Ser Sweetrobin,” Lord Robert said, and Alayne knew that she dare not wait for Mya to return. She helped the boy dismount, and hand in hand they walked out onto the bare stone saddle, their cloaks snapping and flapping behind them. All around was empty air and sky, the ground falling away sharply to either side. There was ice underfoot, and broken stones just waiting to turn an ankle, and the wind was howling fiercely. *It sounds like a wolf*, thought Sansa. *A ghost wolf, big as mountains.*

And then they were on the other side, and Mya Stone was laughing and lifting Robert for a hug. “Be careful,” Alayne told her. “He can hurt you, flailing. You wouldn’t think so, but he can.” They found a place for him, a cleft in the rock to keep him out of the cold wind. Alayne tended him until the shaking passed, whilst Mya went back to help the others cross.

Fresh mules awaited them at Snow, and a hot meal of stewed goat and onions. She ate with Mya and Myranda. “So you’re brave as well as beautiful,” Myranda said to her.

“No.” The compliment made her blush. “I’m not. I was so scared. I don’t think I could have crossed without Lord Robert.” She turned to Mya Stone. “You almost fell.”

“You’re mistaken. I never fall.” Mya’s hair had tumbled across her cheek, hiding one eye.

“Almost, I said. I saw you. Weren’t you afraid?”

Mya shook her head. “I remember a man throwing me in the air when I was very little. He stands as tall as the sky, and he throws me up so high it feels as though I’m flying. We’re both laughing, laughing so much that I can hardly catch a breath, and finally I laugh so hard I wet myself, but that only makes him laugh the louder. I was never afraid when he was throwing me. I knew that he would always be there to catch me.” She pushed her hair back. “Then one day he wasn’t. Men come and go. They lie, or die, or leave you. A mountain is not a man, though, and a stone is a mountain’s daughter. I trust my father, and I trust my mules. I won’t fall.” She put her hand on a

jagged spur of rock, and got to her feet. “Best finish. We have a long way yet to go, and I can smell a storm.”

The snow began to fall as they were leaving Stone, the largest and lowest of the three waycastles that defended the approaches to the Eyrie. Dusk was settling by then. Lady Myranda suggested that perhaps they might turn back, spend the night at Stone, and resume their descent when the sun came up, but Mya would not hear of it. “The snow might be five feet deep by then, and the steps treacherous even for my mules,” she said. “We will do better to press on. We’ll take it slow.”

And so they did. Below Stone the steps were broader and less steep, winding in and out of the tall pines and grey-green sentinels that cloaked the lower slopes of the Giant’s Lance. Mya’s mules knew every root and rock on the way down, it seemed, and any they forgot the bastard girl remembered. Half the night was gone before they sighted the lights of the Gates of the Moon through the falling snow. The last part of their journey was the most peaceful. The snow fell steadily, cloaking all the world in white. Sweetrobin drifted to sleep in the saddle, swaying back and forth with the motion of his mule. Even Lady Myranda began to yawn and complain of being weary. “We have apartments prepared for all of you,” she told Alayne, “but if you like you may share my bed tonight. It’s large enough for four.”

“I should be honored, my lady.”

“Randa. Count yourself fortunate that I’m so tired. All I want to do is curl up and go to sleep. Usually when ladies share my bed they have to pay a pillow tax and tell me all about the wicked things they’ve done.”

“What if they haven’t done any wicked things?”

“Why, then they must confess all the wicked things they *want* to do. Not you, of course. I can see how virtuous you are just by looking at those rosy cheeks and big blue eyes of yours.” She yawned again. “I hope your feet are warm. I do hate bedmaids with cold feet.”

By the time they finally reached her father’s castle, Lady Myranda was drowsing too, and Alayne was dreaming of her bed. *It will be a featherbed, she told herself, soft and warm and deep, piled high with furs. I will dream*

*a sweet dream, and when I wake there will be dogs barking, women gossiping beside the well, swords ringing in the yard. And later there will be a feast, with music and dancing.* After the deathly silence of the Eyrie, she yearned for shouts and laughter.

As the riders were climbing off their mules, however, one of Petyr's guardsmen emerged from within the keep. "Lady Alayne," he said, "the Lord Protector has been waiting for you."

"He's back?" she said, startled.

"At evenfall. You'll find him in the west tower."

The hour was closer to dawn than to dusk, and most of the castle was asleep, but not Petyr Baelish. Alayne found him seated by a crackling fire, drinking hot mulled wine with three men she did not know. They all rose when she entered, and Petyr smiled warmly. "Alayne. Come, give your father a kiss."

She hugged him dutifully and kissed him on the cheek. "I am sorry to intrude, Father. No one told me you had company."

"You are never an intrusion, sweetling. I was just now telling these good knights what a dutiful daughter I had."

"Dutiful and beautiful," said an elegant young knight whose thick blond mane cascaded down well past his shoulders.

"Aye," said the second knight, a burly fellow with a thick salt-and-pepper beard, a red nose bulbous with broken veins, and gnarled hands as large as hams. "You left out that part, m'lord."

"I would do the same if she were my daughter," said the last knight, a short, wiry man with a wry smile, pointed nose, and bristly orange hair. "Particularly around louts like us."

Alayne laughed. "Are you louts?" she said, teasing. "Why, I took the three of you for gallant knights."

"Knights they are," said Petyr. "Their gallantry has yet to be demonstrated, but we may hope. Allow me to present Ser Byron, Ser Morgarth, and Ser Shadrich. Sers, the Lady Alayne, my natural and very

clever daughter... with whom I must needs confer, if you will be so good as to excuse us.”

The three knights bowed and withdrew, though the tall one with the blond hair kissed her hand before taking his leave.

“Hedge knights?” said Alayne, when the door had closed.

“Hungry knights. I thought it best that we have a few more swords about us. The times grow ever more interesting, my sweet, and when the times are interesting you can never have too many swords. The *Merling King*’s returned to Gulltown, and old Oswell had some tales to tell.”

She knew better than to ask what sort of tales. If Petyr had wanted her to know, he would have told her. “I did not expect you back so soon,” she said. “I am glad you’ve come.”

“I would never have known it from the kiss you gave me.” He pulled her closer, caught her face between his hands, and kissed her on the lips for a long time. “Now that’s the sort of kiss that says *welcome home*. See that you do better next time.”

“Yes, Father.” She could feel herself blushing.

He did not hold her kiss against her. “You would not believe half of what is happening in King’s Landing, sweetling. Cersei stumbles from one idiocy to the next, helped along by her council of the deaf, the dim, and the blind. I always anticipated that she would beggar the realm and destroy herself, but I never expected she would do it quite so *fast*. It is quite vexing. I had hoped to have four or five quiet years to plant some seeds and allow some fruits to ripen, but now... it is a good thing that I thrive on chaos. What little peace and order the five kings left us will not long survive the three queens, I fear.”

“Three queens?” She did not understand.

Nor did Petyr choose to explain. Instead, he smiled and said, “I have brought my sweet girl back a gift.”

Alayne was as pleased as she was surprised. “Is it a gown?” She had heard there were fine seamstresses in Gulltown, and she was so tired of dressing drably.



“Something better. Guess again.”

“Jewels?”

“No jewels could hope to match my daughter’s eyes.”

“Lemons? Did you find some lemons?” She had promised Sweetrobin lemon cake, and for lemon cake you needed lemons.

Petyr Baelish took her by the hand and drew her down onto his lap. “I have made a marriage contract for you.”

“A marriage...” Her throat tightened. She did not want to wed again, not now, perhaps not ever. “I do not... I cannot marry. Father, I...” Alayne looked to the door, to make certain it was closed. “I *am* married,” she whispered. “You know.”

Petyr put a finger to her lips to silence her. “The dwarf wed Ned Stark’s daughter, not mine. Be that as it may. This is only a betrothal. The marriage must needs wait until Cersei is done and Sansa’s safely widowed. And you must meet the boy and win his approval. Lady Waynwood will not make him marry against his will, she was quite firm on that.”

“Lady *Waynwood*?” Alayne could hardly believe it. “Why would she marry one of her sons to... to a...”

“...bastard? For a start, you are the *Lord Protector*’s bastard, never forget. The Waynwoods are very old and very proud, but not as rich as one might think, as I discovered when I began buying up their debt. Not that Lady Anya would ever sell a son for gold. A ward, however... young Harry’s only a cousin, and the dower that I offered her ladyship was even larger than the one that Lyonel Corbray just collected. It had to be, for her to risk Bronze Yohn’s wrath. This will put all his plans awry. You are promised to Harrold Hardyng, sweetling, provided you can win his boyish heart... which should not be hard, for you.”

“Harry the Heir?” Alayne tried to recall what Myranda had told her about him on the mountain. “He was just knighted. And he has a bastard daughter by some common girl.”

“And another on the way by a different wench. Harry can be a beguiling one, no doubt. Soft sandy hair, deep blue eyes, and dimples when

he smiles. And *very* gallant, I am told.” He teased her with a smile. “Bastard-born or no, sweetling, when this match is announced you will be the envy of every highborn maiden in the Vale, and a few from the riverlands and the Reach as well.”

“Why?” Alayne was lost. “Is Ser Harrold... how could he be Lady Waynwood’s heir? Doesn’t she have sons of her own blood?”

“Three,” Petyr allowed. She could smell the wine on his breath, the cloves and nutmeg. “Daughters too, and grandsons.”

“Won’t they come before Harry? I don’t understand.”

“You will. Listen.” Petyr took her hand in his own and brushed his finger lightly down the inside of her palm. “Lord Jasper Arryn, begin with him. Jon Arryn’s father. He begot three children, two sons and a daughter. Jon was the eldest, so the Eyrie and the lordship passed to him. His sister Alys wed Ser Elys Waynwood, uncle to the present Lady Waynwood.” He made a wry face. “Elys and Alys, isn’t that precious? Lord Jasper’s younger son, Ser Ronnel Arryn, wed a Belmore girl, but only rang her once or twice before dying of a bad belly. Their son Elbert was being born in one bed even as poor Ronnel was dying in another down the hall. Are you paying close attention, sweetling?”

“Yes. There was Jon and Alys and Ronnel, but Ronnel died.”

“Good. Now, Jon Arryn married thrice, but his first two wives gave him no children, so for long years his nephew Elbert was his heir. Meantime, Elys was plowing Alys quite dutifully, and she was whelping once a year. She gave him nine children, eight girls and one precious little boy, another Jasper, after which she died exhausted. Boy Jasper, inconsiderate of the heroic efforts that had gone into begetting him, got himself kicked in the head by a horse when he was three years old. A pox took two of his sisters soon after, leaving six. The eldest married Ser Denys Arryn, a distant cousin to the Lords of the Eyrie. There are several branches of House Arryn scattered across the Vale, all as proud as they are penurious, save for the Gulltown Arryns, who had the rare good sense to marry merchants. They’re rich, but less than couth, so no one talks about them. Ser Denys hailed from one of the poor, proud branches... but he was also a

renowned jouster, handsome and gallant and brimming with courtesy. And he had that magic Arryn name, which made him ideal for the eldest Waynwood girl. Their children would be Arryns, and the next heirs to the Vale should any ill befall Elbert. Well, as it happened, Mad King Aerys befell Elbert. You know that story?”

She did. “The Mad King murdered him.”

“He did indeed. And soon after, Ser Denys left his pregnant Waynwood wife to ride to war. He died during the Battle of the Bells, of an excess of gallantry and an axe. When they told his lady of his death she perished of grief, and her newborn son soon followed. No matter. Jon Arryn had gotten himself a young wife during the war, one he had reason to believe fertile. He was very hopeful, I’m sure, but you and I know that all he ever got from Lysa were stillbirths, miscarriages, and poor Sweetrobin.

“Which brings us back to the five remaining daughters of Elys and Alys. The eldest had been left terribly scarred by the same pox that killed her sisters, so she became a septa. Another was seduced by a sellsword. Ser Elys cast her out, and she joined the silent sisters after her bastard died in infancy. The third wed the Lord of the Paps, but proved barren. The fourth was on her way to the riverlands to marry some Bracken when Burned Men carried her off. That left the youngest, who wed a landed knight sworn to the Waynwoods, gave him a son that she named Harrold, and perished.” He turned her hand over and lightly kissed her wrist. “So tell me, sweetling—why is Harry the Heir?”

Her eyes widened. “He is not Lady Waynwood’s heir. He’s *Robert’s* heir. If Robert were to die...”

Petyr arched an eyebrow. “*When* Robert dies. Our poor brave Sweetrobin is such a sickly boy, it is only a matter of time. *When* Robert dies, Harry the Heir becomes Lord Harrold, Defender of the Vale and Lord of the Eyrie. Jon Arryn’s bannermen will never love me, nor our silly, shaking Robert, but they will love their Young Falcon... and when they come together for his wedding, and you come out with your long auburn hair, clad in a maiden’s cloak of white and grey with a direwolf emblazoned on the back... why, every knight in the Vale will pledge his sword to win

you back your birthright. So those are your gifts from me, my sweet Sansa... Harry, the Eyrie, and Winterfell. That's worth another kiss now, don't you think?"