She was reading her little lord a tale of the Winged Knight when Mya Stone came knocking on the door of his bedchamber, clad in boots and riding leathers and smelling strongly of the stable. Mya had straw in her hair and a scowl on her face. That scowl comes of having Mychel Redfort near, Alayne knew.

“Your lordship,” Mya informed Lord Robert, “Lady Waynwood’s banners have been seen an hour down the road. She will be here soon, with your cousin Harry. Will you want to greet them?”

Why did she have to mention Harry? Alayne thought. We will never get Sweetrobin out of bed now. The boy slapped a pillow. “Send them away. I never asked them here.”

Mya looked nonplussed. No one in the Vale was better at handling a mule, but lordlings were another matter. “They were invited,” she said uncertainly, “for the tourney. I don’t… “

Alayne closed her book. “Thank you, Mya. Let me talk with Lord Robert, if you would.”

Relief plain on her face, Mya fled without another word.

“I hate that Harry,” Sweetrobin said when she was gone. “He calls me cousin, but he’s just waiting for me to die so he can take the Eyrie. He thinks I don’t know, but I do.”

“Your lordship should not believe such nonsense,” Alayne said. “I’m sure Ser Harrold loves you well.” And if the gods are good, he will love me too. Her tummy gave a little flutter.

“He doesn’t,” Lord Robert insisted. “He wants my father’s castle, that’s all, so he pretends.” The boy clutched the blanket to his pimply chest. “I don’t want you to marry him, Alayne. I am the Lord of the Eyrie, and I forbid it.” He sounded as if he were about to cry. “You should marry me instead. We could sleep in the same bed every night, and you could read me stories.”

No man can wed me so long as my dwarf husbandstill lives somewhere in this world. Queen Cersei had collected the head of a dozen dwarfs, Petyr claimed, but none were Tyrion’s. “Sweetrobin, you must not say such things. You are the Lord of the Eyrie and Defender of the Vale, and you must wed a highborn lady and father a son to sit in the High Hall of House Arryn after you are gone.”

Robert wiped his nose. “But I want — “

She put a finger to his lips. “I know what you want, but it cannot be. I am no fit wife for you. I am bastard born.”

“I don’t care. I love you best of anyone. “

You are such a little fool. “Your lords bannermen will care. Some call my father upjumped and ambitious. If you were to take me to wife, they would say that he made you do it, that it was no will of yours. The Lords Declarant might take arms against him once again, and he and I should both be put to death.”

“I wouldn’t let them hurt you!” Lord Robert said. “If they try I will make them all fly.” His hand began to tremble.

Alayne stroked his fingers. “There, my Sweetrobin, be still now.” When the shaking passed, she said, “You must have a proper wife, a trueborn maid of noble birth.”

“No. I want to marry you, Alayne.”

Once your lady mother intended that very thing, but I was trueborn then, and noble. “My lord is kind to say so.” Alayne smoothed his hair. Lady Lysa had never let the servants touch it, and after she had died Robert had suffered terrible shaking fits whenever anyone came near him with a blade, so it had been allowed to grow until it tumbled over his round shoulders and halfway down his flabby white chest. He does have pretty hair. If the gods are good and he lives long enough to wed, his wife will admire his hair, surely. That much she will love about him. “Any child of ours would be baseborn. Only a trueborn child of House Arryn can displace Ser Harrold as your heir. My father will find a proper wife for you, some highborn girl much prettier than me. You’ll hunt and hawk together, and she’ll give you her favor to wear in tournaments. Before long, you will have forgotten me entirely.”

“I won’t!”

“You will. You must.” Her voice was firm, but gentle.

“The Lord of the Eyrie can do as he likes. Can’t I still love you, even if I have to marry her? Ser Harrold has a common woman. Benjicot says she’s carrying his bastard.”

Benjicot should learn to keep his fool’s mouth shut. “Is that what you would have from me? A bastard?” She pulled her fingers from his grasp. “Would you dishonor me that way?”

The boy looked stricken. “No. I never meant — “

Alayne stood. “If it please my lord, I must go and find my father. Someone needs to greet Lady Waynwood.” Before her little lord could find the words to protest, she gave him a quick curtsy and fled the bedchamber, sweeping down the hall and across a covered bridge to the Lord Protector’s apartments.

When she had left Petyr Baelish that morning he had been breaking his fast with old Oswell who had arrived last night from Gulltown on a lathered horse. She hoped they might still be talking, but Petyr’s solar proved empty. Someone had left a window open and a stack of papers had blown onto the floor. The sun was slanting through the thick yellow windows, and dust motes danced in the light like tiny golden insects. Though snow had blanketed the heights of the Giant’s Lance above, below the mountain the autumn lingered and winter wheat was ripening in the fields. Outside the window she could hear the laughter of the washerwomen at the well, the din of steel on steel from the ward where the knights were at their drills. Good sounds.

Alayne loved it here. She felt alive again, for the first since her father… since Lord Eddard Stark had died.

She closed the window, gathered up the fallen papers, and stacked them on the table. One was a list of the competitors. Four-and-sixty knights had been invited to vie for places amongst Lord Robert Arryn’s new Brotherhood of Winged Knights, and four­ and-sixty knights had come to tilt for the right to wear falcon’s wings upon their warhelms and guard their lord.

The competitors came from all over the Vale, from the mountain valleys and the coast, from Gulltown and the Bloody Gate, even the Three Sisters. Though a few were promised, only three were wed; the eight victors would be expected to spend the next three years at Lord Robert’s side, as his own personal guard (Alayne had suggested seven, like the Kingsguard, but Sweetrobin had insisted that he must have more knights than King Tommen), so older men with wives and children had not been invited.

And they came, Alayne thought proudly. They all came.

It had fallen out just as Petyr said it would, the day the ravens flew. “They’re young, eager, hungry for adventure and renown. Lysa would not let them go to war. This is the next best thing. A chance to serve their lord and prove their prowess. They will come. Even Harry the Heir.” He had smoothed her hair and kissed her forehead. “What a clever daughter you are.”

It was clever. The tourney, the prizes, the winged knights, it had all been her own notion. Lord Robert’s mother had filled him full of fears, but he always took courage from the tales she read him of Ser Artys Arryn, the Winged Knight of legend, founder of his line. Why not surround him with Winged Knights? She had thought one night, after Sweetrobin had finally drifted off to sleep. His own Kingsguard, to keep him safe and make him brave. And no sooner did she tell Petyr her idea than he went out and made it happen. He will want to be there to greet Ser Harrold. Where could he have gone?

Alayne swept down the tower stairs to enter the pillared gallery at the back of the Great Hall. Below her, serving men were setting up trestle tables for the evening feast, while their wives and daughters swept up the old rushes and scattered fresh ones. Lord Nestor was showing Lady Waxley his prize tapestries, with their scenes of hunt and chase. The same panels had once hung in the Red Keep of King’s Landing, when Robert sat the Iron Throne. Joffrey had them taken down and they had languished in some cellar until Petyr Baelish arranged for them to be brought to the Vale as a gift for Nestor Royce. Not only were the hangings beautiful, but the High Steward delighted in telling anyone who’d listen that they had once belonged to a king.

Petyr was not in the Great Hall. Alayne crossed the gallery and descended the stair built into the thick west wall, to come out in the inner ward, where the jousting would be held. Viewing stands had raised for all those who had come to watch, with four long tilting barriers in between. Lord Nestor’s men were painting the barriers with whitewash, draping the stands with bright banners, and hanging shields on the gate the competitors would pass through when they made their entrance.

At the north end of the yard, three quintains had been set up, and some of the competitors were riding at them. Alayne knew them by their shields; the bells of Belmore, green vipers for the Lynderlys, the red sledge of Breakstone, House Tollett’s black and grey pily. Ser Mychel Redfort set one quintain spinning with a perfectly placed blow. He was one of those favored to win wings.

Petyr was not at the quintains, nor anywhere in the yard, but as she turned to go a woman’s voice called out. “Alayne!” cried Myranda Royce, from a carved stone bench beneath a beech tree, where she was seated between two men. She looked in need of rescue. Smiling, Alayne walked toward her friend.

Myranda was wearing a grey woolen dress, a green hooded cloak, and a rather desperate look. On either side of her sat a knight. The one on her right had a grizzled beard, a bald head, and a belly that spilled over his swordbelt where his lap should have been. The one on her left was no more than eighteen, and skinny as a spear. His ginger-colored whiskers only partially served to disguise the angry red pimples that dotted his face.

The bald knight wore a dark blue surcoat emblazoned with a huge pair of pink lips. The pimply-gingerlad countered with nine white seagulls on a field of brown, which marked him for a Shett of Gulltown. He was staring so intently at Myranda’s breasts that he hardly noticed Alayne until Myranda rose to hug her. “Thank you, thank you, thank you ” Randa whispered in her ear, before she turned to say, “Sers, may I present you the Lady Alayne Stone?”

“The Lord Protector’s daughter,” the bald knight announced, all hearty gallantry. He rose ponderously. “And full as lovely as the tales told of her, I see.”

Not to be outdone, the pimply knight hopped up and said, “Ser Ossifer speaks truly, you are the most beautiful maid in all the Seven Kingdoms.” It might have been a sweeter courtesy had he not addressed it to her chest.

“And have you seen all those maids yourself, ser?” Alayne asked him. “You are young to be so widely travelled.”

He blushed, which only made his pimples look angrier. “No, my lady. I am from Gulltown.”

And I am not, though Alayne was born there. She would need to be careful around this one. “I remember Gulltown fondly,” she told him, with a smile as vague as it was pleasant. To Myranda she said, “Do you know where my father’s gotten to, perchance?”

“Let me take you to him, my lady.”

“I do hope you will forgive me for depriving you of Lady Myranda’s company,” Alayne told the knights. She did not wait for a reply, but took the older girl arm-in-arm and drew her away from the bench. Only when they were out of earshot did she whisper, “Do you really know where my father is?”

“Of course not. Walk faster, my new suitors may be following.” Myranda made a face. “Ossifer Lipps is the dullest knight in the Vale, but Uther Shett aspires to his laurels. I am praying they fight a duel for my hand, and kill each other.”

Alayne giggled. “Surely Lord Nestor would not seriously entertain a suit from such men.”

“Oh, he might. My lord father is annoyed with me for killing my last husband and putting him to all this trouble.”

“It was not your fault he died.”

“There was no one else in the bed that I recall.”

Alayne could not help but shutter. Myranda’s husband had died when he was making love with her. “Those Sistermen who came in yesterday were gallant,” she said, to change the subject. “If you don’t like Ser Ossifer or Ser Uther, marry one of them instead. I thought the youngest one was very handsome.”

“The one in the sealskin cloak?” Randa said, incredulous.

“One of his brothers, then.”

Myranda rolled her eyes. “They’re from the Sisters. Did you ever know a Sisterman who could joust? They clean their swords with codfish oil and wash in tubs of cold seawater.”

“Well,” Alayne said, “at least they’re clean.”

“Some of them have webs between their toes. I’d sooner marry Lord Petyr. Then I’d be your mother. How little *is* his finger, I ask you?”

Alayne did not dignify that question with an answer. “Lady Waynwood will be here soon, with her sons.”

“Is that a promise or a threat?” Myranda said. “The first Lady Waynwood must have been a mare, I think. How else to explain why all the Waynwood men are horse-faced? If I were ever to wed a Waynwood, he would have to swear a vow to don his helm whenever he wished to fuck me, and keep the visor closed.” She gave Alayne a pinch on the arm. “My Harry will be with them, though. I notice that you left him out. I shall never forgive you for stealing him away from me. He’s the boy I want to marry.”

“The betrothal was my father’s doing,” Alayne protested, as she had a hundred times before. She is only teasing, she told herself… but behind the japes, she could hear the hurt.

Myranda stopped to gaze across the yard at the knights at their practice. “Now there’s the very sort of husband I need.”

A few feet away, two knights were fighting with blunted practice swords. Their blades crashed together twice, then slipped past each other only to be blocked by upraised shields, but the bigger man gave ground at the impact. Alayne could not see the front of his shield from where she stood, but his attacker bore three ravens in flight, each clutching a red heart in its claws. *Three hearts and three ravens.*

She knew right then how the fight would end.

A few moments later and the big man sprawled dazed in the dust with his helm askew. When his squire undid the fastenings to bare his head, there was blood trickling down his scalp. If the swords had not been blunted, there would be brains as well. That last head blow had been so hard Alayne had winced in sympathy when it fell. Myranda Royce considered the victor thoughtfully. “Do you think if I asked nicely Ser Lyn would kill my suitors for me?”

“He might, for a plump bag of gold.” Ser Lyn Corbray was forever desperately short of coin, all the Vale knew that.

“Alas, all I have is a plump pair of teats. Though with Ser Lyn, a plump sausage under my skirts would serve me better.”

Alayne’s giggle drew Corbray’s attention. He handed his shield to his loutish squire, removed his helm and quilted coif. “Ladies.” His long brown hair was plastered to his brow by sweat.

“Well struck, Ser Lyn,” Alayne called out. “Though I fear you’ve knocked poor Ser Owen insensible.”

Corbray glanced back to where his foe was being helped from the yard by his squire. “He had no sense to start with, or he should not have tried me.”

There is truth in that, Alayne thought, but some demon of mischief was in her that morning, so she gave Ser Lyn a thrust of her own. Smiling sweetly, she said, “My lord father tells me your brother’s new wife is with child.”

Corbray gave her a dark look. “Lyonel sends his regrets. He remains at Heart’s Home with his peddler’s daughter, watching her belly swell as if he were the first man who ever got a wench pregnant.”

Oh, that’s an open wound, thought Alayne. Lyonel Corbray’s first wife had given him nothing but a frail, sickly babe who died in infancy, and during all those years Ser Lyn had remained his brother’s heir. When the poor woman finally died, however, Petyr Baelish had stepped in and brokered a new marriage for Lord Corbray. The second Lady Corbray was sixteen, the daughter of a wealthy Gulltown merchant, but she had come with an immense dowry, and men said she was a tall, strapping, healthy girl, with big breasts and good, wide hips. And fertile too, it seems.

“We are all praying that the Mother grants Lady Corbray an easy labor and a healthy child,” said Myranda.

Alayne could not help herself. She smiled and said, “My father is always pleased to be of service to one of Lord Robert’s leal bannermen. I’m sure he would be most delighted to help broker a marriage for you as well, Ser Lyn.”

“How kind of him.” Corbray’s lips drew back in something that might have been meant as a smile, though it gave Alayne a chill. “But what need have I for heirs when I am landless and like to remain so, thanks to our Lord Protector? No. Tell your lord father I need none of his brood mares.”

The venom in his voice was so thick that for a moment she almost forgot that Lyn Corbray was actually her father’s catspaw, bought and paid for. Or was he? Perhaps, instead of being Petyr’s man pretending to be Petyr’s foe, he was actually his foe pretending to be his man pretending to be his foe.

Just thinking about it was enough to make her head spin. Alayne turned abruptly from the yard… and bumped into a short, sharp-faced man with a brush of orange hair who had come up behind her. His hand shot out and caught her arm before she could fall. “My lady. My pardons if I took you unawares.”

“The fault was mine. I did not see you standing there.”

“We mice are quiet creatures.” Ser Shadrich was so short that he might have been taken for a squire, but his face belonged to a much older man. She saw long leagues in the wrinkles at the corner of his mouth, old battles in the scar beneath his ear, and a hardness behind the eyes that no boy would ever have. This was a man grown. Even Randa overtopped him, though.

“Will you be seeking wings?” the Royce girl said.

“A mouse with wings would be a silly sight.”

“Perhaps you will try the melee instead?” Alayne suggested. The melee was an afterthought, a sop for all the brothers, uncles, fathers, and friends who had accompanied the competitors to the Gates of the Moon to see them win their silver wings, but there would be prizes for the champions, and a chance to win ransoms.

“A good melee is all a hedge knight can hope for, unless he stumbles on a bag of dragons. And that’s not likely, is it?”

“I suppose not. But now you must excuse us, ser, we need to find my lord father. “

Horns sounded from atop the wall. “Too late,” Myranda said. “They’re here. We shall need to do the honors by ourselves.” She grinned. “Last one to the gate must marry Uther Shett.”

They made a race of it, dashing headlong across the yard and past the stables, skirts flapping, whilst knights and serving men alike looked on, and pigs and chickens scattered before them. It was most unladylike, but Alayne sound found herself laughing. For just a little while, as she ran, she forget who she was, and where, and found herself remembering bright cold days at Winterfell, when she would race through Winterfell with her friend Jeyne Poole, with Arya running after them trying to keep up.

By the time they arrived at the gatehouse, both of them were red-faced and panting. Myranda had lost her cloak somewhere along the way. They were just in time. The portcullis had been raised, and a column of riders twenty strong were passing underneath. At their head rode Anya Waynwood, Lady of Ironoaks, stern and slim, her grey-brown hair bound up in a scarf. Her riding cloak was heavy green wool trimmed with brown fur, and clasped at the throat by a niello brooch in the shape of the broken wheel of her House.

Myranda Royce stepped forward and sketched a curtsy. “Lady Anya. Welcome to the Gates of the Moon.”

“Lady Myranda. Lady Alayne.” Anya Waynwood inclined her head to each of them in turn. “It is good of you to greet us. Allow me to present my grandson, Ser Roland Waynwood.” She nodded at the knight who had spoken. “And this is my youngest son, Ser Wallace Waynwood. And of course my ward, Ser Harrold Hardyng.”

Harry the Heir, Alayne thought. My husband-to-be, if he will have me. A sudden terror filled her. She wondered if her face was red. Don’t stare at him, she reminded herself, don’t stare, don’t gape, don’t gawk. Look away. Her hair must be a frightful mess after all that running. It took all her will to stop herself from trying to tuck the loose strands back into place. Never mind your stupid hair. Your hair doesn’t matter. It’s him that matters. Him, and the Waynwoods.

Ser Roland was the oldest of the three, though no more than five-and-twenty. He was taller and more muscular than Ser Wallace, but both were long-faced and lantern-jawed, with stringy brown hair and pinched noses. Horsefaced and homely, Alayne thought.

Harry, though…

My Harry. My lord, my lover, my betrothed.

Ser Harrold Hardyng looked every inch a lord-in-waiting; clean-limbed and handsome, straight as a lance, hard with muscle. Men old enough to have known Jon Arryn in his youth said Ser Harrold had his look, she knew. He had a mop of sandy blond hair, pale blue eyes, an aquiline nose. Joffrey was comely too, though, she reminded herself. A comely monster, that’s what he was. Little Lord Tyrion was kinder, twisted though he was.

Harry was staring at her. He knows who I am, she realized, and he does not seem pleased to see me. It was only then that she took note of his heraldry. Though his surcoat and horse trappings were patterned in the red-and-white diamonds of House Hardyng, his shield was quartered. The arms of Hardyng and Waynwood were displayed in the first and third quarters, respectively, but in the second and fourth quarters he bore the moon-and-falcon of House Arryn, sky blue and cream. Sweetrobin will not like that.

Ser Wallace said, “Are we the l-l-last?”

“You are, sers,” replied Myranda Royce, taking absolutely no notice of his stammer.

“Wh-wh-when will the t-t-tilts commence?”

“Oh, soon, I pray,” said Randa. “Some of the competitors have been here for almost a moon’s turn, partaking of my father’s meat and mead. All good fellows, and very brave… but they do eat rather a lot.”

The Waynwoods laughed, and even Harry the Heir cracked a thin smile. “It was snowing in the passes, else we would have been here sooner,” said Lady Anya.

“Had we known such beauty awaited us at the Gates, we would have flown,” Ser Roland said. Though his words were addressed to Myranda Royce, he smiled at Alayne as he said them.

“To fly you would need wings,” Randa replied, “and there are some knights here who might have a thing to say concerning that.”

“I look forward to a spirited discussion.” Ser Roland swung down from his horse, turned to Alayne, and smiled. “I had heard that Lord Littlefinger’s daughter was fair of face and full of grace, but no one ever told me that she was a thief.”

“You wrong me, ser. I am no thief!”

Ser Roland placed his hand over his heart. “Then how do you explain this hole in my chest, from where you stole my heart?”

“He is only t-teasing you, my lady,” stammered Ser Wallace. “My n-n-nephew never had a h-h-heart.”

“The Waynwood wheel has a broken spoke, and we have my nuncle here.” Ser Roland gave Wallace a whap behind the ear. “Squires should be quiet when knights are speaking.”

Ser Wallace reddened. “I am no more a s-squire, my lady. My n-nephew knows full well that I was k-k-kni-k-k-kni –“

“Dubbed?” Alayne suggested gently.

“Dubbed,” said Wallace Waynwood, gratefully.

Robb would be his age, if he were still alive, she could not help but think, but Robb died a king, and this is just a boy.

“My lord father has assigned you rooms in the East Tower,” Lady Myranda was telling Lady Waynwood, “but I fear your knights will need to share a bed. The Gates of the Moon were never meant to house so many noble visitors.”

“You are in the Falcon Tower, Ser Harrold,” Alayne put in. Far away from Sweetrobin. That was intentional, she knew. Petyr Baelish did not leave such things to chance. “If it please you, I will show you to your chambers myself.” This time her eyes met Harry’s. She smiled just for him, and said a silent prayer to the Maiden. Please, he doesn’t need to love me, just make him like me, just a little, that would be enough for now.

Ser Harrold looked down at her coldly. “Why should it please me to be escorted anywhere by Littlefinger’s bastard?”

All three Waynwoods looked at him askance. “You are a guest here, Harry,” Lady Anya reminded him, in a frosty voice. “See that you remember that.”

A lady’s armor is her courtesy. Alayne could feel the blood rushing to her face. No tears, she prayed. Please, please, I must not cry. “As you wish, ser. And now if you will excuse me, Littlefinger’s bastard must find her lord father and let him know that you have come, so we can begin the tourney on the morrow.” And may your horse stumble, Harry the Heir, so you fall on your stupid head in your first tilt. She showed the Waynwoods a stone face as they blurted out awkward apologies for their companion. When they were done she turned and fled.

Near the keep, she ran headlong into Ser Lothor Brune and almost knocked him off his feet. “Harry the Heir? Harry the Arse, I say. He’s just some upjumped squire.”

Alayne was so grateful that she hugged him. “Thank you. Have you seen my father, ser?”

“Down in the vaults, ” Ser Lothar said, “inspecting Lord Nestor’s granaries with Lord Grafton and Lord Belmore.”

The vaults were large and dark and filthy. Alayne lit a taper and clutched her skirt as she made the descent. Near the bottom, she heard Lord Grafton’s booming voice, and followed.”The merchants are clamoring to buy, and the lords are clamoring to sell,” the Gulltowner was saying when she found them. Though not a tall man, Grafton was wide, with thick arms and shoulders. His hair was a dirty blond mop. “How am I to stop that, my lord?”

“Post guardsmen on the docks. If need be, seize the ships. How does not matter, so long as no food leaves the Vale. “

“These prices, though,” protested fat Lord Belmore,” these prices are more than fair.”

“You say more than fair, my lord. I say less than we would wish. Wait. If need be, buy the food yourself and keep it stored. Winter is coming. Prices must go higher.”

“Perhaps,” said Belmore, doubtfully.

“Bronze Yohn will not wait, ” Grafton complained. “He need not ship through Gulltown, he has his own ports. Whilst we are hoarding our harvest, Royce and the other Lords Declarant will turn theirs into silver, you may be sure of that.”

“Let us hope so,” said Petyr. “When their granaries are empty, they will need every scrap of that silver to buy sustenance from us. And now if you will excuse me, my lord, it would seem my daughter has need of me.”

“Lady Alayne,” Lord Grafton said. “You look bright-eyed this morning.”

“You are kind to say so, my lord. Father, I am sorry to disturb you, but I thought you would want to know that the Waynwoods have arrived.”

“And is Ser Harrold with them?”

Horrible Ser Harrold. “ He is.”

Lord Belmore laughed. “I never thought Royce would let him come. Is he blind, or merely stupid?”

“He is honorable. Sometimes it amounts to the same thing. If he denied the lad the chance to prove himself, it could create a rift between them, so why not let him tilt? The boy is nowise skilled enough to win a place amongst the Winged Knights.”

“I suppose not,” said Belmore, grudgingly. Lord Grafton kissed Alayne on the hand, and the two lords went off, leaving her alone with her lord father.

“Come,” Petyr said, “walk with me.” He took her by the arm and led her deeper into the vaults, past an empty dungeon. “And how was your first meeting with Harry the Heir?”

“He’s horrible.”

“The world is full of horrors, sweet. By now you ought to know that. You’ve seen enough of them.”

“Yes,” she said, “but why must he be so cruel? He called me your bastard. Right in the yard, in front of everyone.”

“So far as he knows, that’s who you are. This betrothal was never his idea, and Bronze Yohn has no doubt warned him against my wiles. You are my daughter. He does not trust you, and he believes that you’re beneath him.”

“Well, I’m not. He may think he’s some great knight, but Ser Lothor says he’s just some upjumped squire.”

Petyr put his arm around her. “So he is, but he is Robert’s heir as well. Bringing Harry here was the first step in our plan, but now we need to keep him, and only you can do that. He has a weakness for a pretty face, and whose face is prettier than yours? Charm him. Entrance him. Bewitch him.”

“I don’t know how,” she said miserably.

“Oh, I think you do,” said Littlefinger, with one of those smiles that did not reach his eyes. “You will be the most beautiful woman in the hall tonight, as lovely as your lady mother at your age. I cannot seat you on the dais, but you’ll have a place of honor above the salt and underneath a wall sconce. The fire will be shining in your hair, so everyone will see how fair of face you are. Keep a good long spoon on hand to beat the squires off, sweetling. You will not want green boys underfoot when the knights come round to beg you for your favor.”

“Who would ask to wear a bastard’s favor?”

“Harry, if he has the wits the gods gave a goose… but do not give it to him. Choose some other gallant, and favor him instead. You do not want to seem too eager.”

“No,” Alayne said.

“Lady Waynwood will insist that Harry dance with you, I can promise you that much. That will be your chance. Smile at the boy. Touch him when you speak. Tease him, to pique his pride. If he seems to be responding, tell him that you are feeling faint, and ask him to take you outside for a breath of fresh air. No knight could refuse such a request from a fair maiden.”

“Yes,” she said, “but he thinks that I’m a bastard.”

“A beautiful bastard, and the Lord Protector’s daughter.” Petyr drew her close and kissed her on both cheeks. “The night belongs to you, sweetling, Remember that, always.”

“I’ll try, father,” she said.

The feast proved to be everything her father promised.

Sixty-four dishes were served, in honor of the sixty-four competitors who had come so far to contest for silver wings before their lord. From the rivers and the lakes came pike and trout and salmon, from the seas crabs and cod and herring. Ducks there were, and capons, peacocks in their plumage and swans in almond milk. Suckling pigs were served up crackling with apples in their mouths, and three huge aurochs were roasted whole above firepits in the castle yard, since they were too big to get through the kitchen doors. Loaves of hot bread filled the trestle tables in Lord Nestor’s hall, and massive wheels of cheese were brought up from the vaults. The butter was fresh-churned, and there were leeks and carrots, roasted onions, beets, turnips, parsnips. And best of all, Lord Nestor’s cooks prepared a splendid subtlety, a lemon cake in the shape of the Giant’s Lance, twelve feet tall and adorned with an Eyrie made of sugar.

*For me*, Alayne thought, as they wheeled it out. Sweetrobin loved lemon cakes too, but only after she told him that they were her favorites. The cake had required every lemon in the Vale, but Petyr had promised that he would send to Dorne for more.

There were gifts as well, splendid gifts. Each of the competitors received a cloak of cloth-of-silver and a lapis brooch in the shape of a pair of falcon’s wings. Fine steel daggers were given to the brothers, fathers, and friends who had come to watch them tilt. For their mothers, sisters, and ladies fair there were bolts of silk and Myrish lace.

“Lord Nestor has an open hand,” Alayne heard Ser Edmund Breakstone say. “An open hand and a little finger,” Lady Waynwood replied, with a nod toward Petyr Baelish. Breakstone was not slow to take her meaning. The true source of this largesse was not Lord Nestor, but the Lord Protector.

When the last course had been served and cleared, the tables were lifted from their trestles to clear the floor for dancing, and musicians were brought in.

“Are there no singers?” asked Ben Coldwater.

“The little lord cannot abide them,” Ser Lymond Lynderly replied. “Not since Marillion.”

“Ah… that was the man who murdered Lady Lysa, yes?”

Alayne spoke up. “His singing pleased her greatly, and she showed him too much favor, perhaps. When she wed my father he went mad and pushed her out the Moon Door. Lord Robert has hated singing ever since. He is still fond of music, though.”

“As am I,” Coldwater said. Rising, he offered Alayne his hand. “Would you honor me with this dance, my lady?”

“You’re very kind,” she said, as he led her to the floor.

He was her first partner of the evening, but far from the last. Just as Petyr had promised, the young knights flocked around her, vying for her favor. After Ben came Andrew Tollett, handsome Ser Byron, red-nosed Ser Morgarth, and Ser Shadrich the Mad Mouse. Then Ser Albar Royce, Myranda’s stout dull brother and Lord Nestor’s heir. She danced with all three Sunderlands, none of whom had webs between their fingers, though she could not vouch for their toes. Uther Shett appeared to pay her slimy compliments as he trod upon her feet, but Ser Targon the Halfwild proved to be the soul of courtesy. After that Ser Roland Waynwood swept her up and made her laugh with mocking comments about half the other knights in the hall. His uncle Wallace took a turn as well and tried to do the same, but the words would not come. Alayne finally took pity on him and began to chatter happily, to spare him the embarrassment. When the dance was done she excused herself, and went back to her place to have a drink of wine.

And there he stood, Harry the Heir himself; tall, handsome, scowling. “Lady Alayne. May I partner you in this dance?”

She considered for a moment. “No. I don’t think so.”

Color rose to his cheeks. “I was unforgiveably rude to you in the yard. You must forgive me.”

“Must?” She tossed her hair, took a sip of wine, made him wait. “How can you forgive someone who is unforgiveably rude? Will you explain that to me, ser?”

Ser Harrold looked confused. “Please. One dance.”

Charm him. Entrance him. Bewitch him. “If you insist.”

He nodded, offered his arm, led her out onto the floor. As they waited for the music to resume, Alayne glanced at the dais, where Lord Robert sat staring at them. Please, she prayed, don’t let him start to twitch and shake. Not here. Not now. Maester Coleman would have made certain that he drank a strong dose of sweetmilk before the feast, but even so.

Then the musicians took up a tune, and she was dancing.

Say something, she urged herself. You will never make Ser Harry love you if you don’t have the courage to talk him. Should she tell him what a good dancer he was?  *No*, he’s probably heard that a dozen times tonight. Besides, Petyr said that I should not seem eager. Instead she said, “I have heard that you are about to be a father.” It was not something most girls would say to their almost-betrothed, but she wanted to see if Ser Harrold would lie.

“For the second time. My daughter Alys is two years old.”

Your bastard daughter Alys, Alayne thought, but what she said was, “That one had a different mother, though.”

“Yes. Cissy was a pretty thing when I tumbled her, but childbirth left her as fat as a cow, so Lady Anya arranged for her to marry one of her men-at-arms. It is different with Saffron.”

“Saffron?” Alayne tried not to laugh. “Truly?”

Ser Harrold had the grace to blush. “Her father says she is more precious to him than gold. He’s rich, the richest man in Gulltown. A fortune in spices.”

“What will you name the babe?” she asked. “Cinnamon if she’s a girl? Cloves if he’s a boy?”

That almost made him stumble. “My lady japes.”

“Oh, no.” Petyr will howl when I tell him what I said.

“Saffron is very beautiful, I’ll have you know. Tall and slim, with big brown eyes and hair like honey.”

Alayne raised her head. “More beautiful than me?”

Ser Harrold studied her face. “You are comely enough, I grant you. When Lady Anya first told me of this match, I was afraid that you might look like your father.”

“Little pointy beard and all?” Alayne laughed.

“I never meant**…** “

“I hope you joust better than you talk.”

For a moment he looked shocked. But as the song was ending, he burst into a laugh. “No one told me you were clever.”

He has good teeth, she thought, straight and white. And when he smiles, he has the nicest dimples. She ran one finger down his cheek. “Should we ever wed, you’ll have to send Saffron back to her father. I’ll be all the spice you’ll want.”

He grinned. “I will hold you to that promise, my lady. Until that day, may I wear your favor in the tourney?”

“You may not. It is promised to… another.” She was not sure who as yet, but she knew she would find someone.