

Alayne II

“Ser Roland,” she whispered into the crisp morning air. “Ser Andrew, Ser Mychel, Ser Jon. The Knight of Ninestars and Ser Marwyn. Ser Harlan, *Harry the Heir*.” The names were like a prayer from her childhood. *If the gods are just, they will deliver me my knights.*

Alayne was seated just outside the lord’s box, her chair high-backed and ornate. It was no place for a bastard girl, she knew—even the highborn mostly sat on simple benches—but her lord father had had his way again over her own blushing protests. “Her presence soothes Lord Robert,” he’d told Nestor Royce, and the last thing they wanted was for the True Warden of the East to have a spell in front of all the lords and ladies of the Vale.

On the other side of the rail sat Lord Petyr and Lord Nestor, with Myranda Royce at her father’s right hand. Between the Lord Protector and the Keeper of the Gates sat the Defender of the Vale himself, a drop of snot dangling from the tip of his nose. The little lord rested atop an elevated throne upholstered in fine sable, its great cushion raising him just above the height of his companions. Alayne could see his shining eyes grow large as the first match neared, and she smiled at his innocent fascination with the attendant ceremonies. Sweetrobin was wrapped in furs from head to toe, his white cloak of bearskin over them all, and beneath them all a belly full of sweetmilk to calm his nerves. Still, from time to time she saw him twitch and shiver. *The cool mountain air*, Alayne told herself, wishing the servants had given him another layer.

Morning rays showered the lists, glimmering off the frost-covered soil. As the first four challengers trotted before the lord’s box, a herald yelled out the knights’ names in turn. They saluted Lord Robert with a lowering of their lances before two circled to the north end of the tilting lanes and two headed south. Ser Garibald Hersy, a winged chalice upon his shield, faced the wheel of Ser Roland Waynwood, whilst the Knight of the Broken Lance, Ser Gulian Wydman, was opposite Ser Luke Grafton with his burning tower. The knights dropped their visors, took their places, couched their lances. A hush fell over the crowd as all awaited the great lord’s signal.

The Lord of Eyrie waved with a child’s gleeful vigor and a trumpet lent him its voice to announce the match was under way. The crowd buzzed with excitement as spur met horse, hoof pounded frozen earth. The charge was a blur, but time seemed to slow in the instant before contact.

CRACK.

A crash of wood rang out and the crowd erupted into thunderous cheers. Ser Roland had unhorsed Ser Hersy, errant splinters raining down upon both men. The lance of Ser Gulian had not shattered, despite his sigil, but its strike had knocked Ser Luke to the earth. Petyr gave Alayne a smile and a wink.

Her father had gone over the list of knights with her that morning in his solar as they broke their fast on porridge and baked apple slices smothered in cinnamon. Four-and-sixty competitors had come to the Gates of the Moon to vie for the protectorship of Lord Robert Arryn. The rules were simple as tourneys go: the first to break three lances or to unhorse his opponent would advance. Today the knights would dwindle to two-and-thirty, tomorrow to six-and-ten. On the final day, her little lord would bestow

silver-winged helms on his eight victors, and her father would claim just as many hostages. The competitors believed the matches were determined by lot, drawn by the most godly of men at the Gates of the Moon. After a miracle was worked in the sept's coffers, however, Septon Vayon indulged the Lord Protector with new and holier pairings.

"Here," Petyr said, taking Alayne's hand and moving it to a group of names on the page. His hand was sticky with apple. "Who is the likely victor?"

Alayne considered the names, all strong competitors. "Ser Samwell Stone is daunting, but Ser Marwyn Belmore is the most seasoned. He will be difficult to defeat."

Littlefinger smiled and nodded in agreement. "Strong Sam is here to spy for Bronze Yohn, not to win. Meanwhile, Ser Ding-Dong is hungry for honor. I shamed him when I made Brune Robert's captain of the guards in his place."

Alayne was confused. "Ser Marwyn already resides here at the Gates. What advantage does he offer us as a Winged Knight?"

"None, and I have bought Lord Benedar besides, but collecting the better knights on one side of the competition leaves green boys and fishmongers on the other. Below, what do you see?"

She examined the next group on the parchment. They were all weak, save one. "Ser Mychel Redfort will surely win." She saw no better knight with the quintains.

"And his brother Jon has an easy path to victory as well." Petyr slid Alayne's hand to another set of names. "Where two Redforts go, the rest will likely follow. It'd be a certainty if Lord Horton would have the grace to die already."

"These men," Alayne said, pointing to the next group. "Ser Ben Coldwater, Ser Andrew Tollett, and Ser Damon Shett are all of similar skill, from what I have seen."

"And each is of similar worth to me. Bronze Yohn sent no son to tilt, as he has none to spare, so I must settle for a bannerman of his. Most like Ser Andrew shall prevail amongst his peers, I think."

As Alayne moved down the parchment, her eyes widened. "There's a mystery knight! The Orphan of Godsgrace?"

Petyr sighed. "Yes, Donnel Waynwood insisted the Dornishman ride in his stead to add thrill to the tourney—and did so within the hearing of Lord Robert, no less. I could hardly refuse. Fear not, sweet daughter. You've heard more songs of the Dragonknight than you've seen tourneys, haven't you? But I've seen a hundred tourneys, and I'll tell you a secret: in life, the mystery knight's rarely a prince in disguise. More often, he's there to excite some wagers with a strong first tilt, only to run into some *bad luck* in his second." Littlefinger arched an eyebrow. "The misfortune he'll run into tomorrow is Lothor Brune, so his loss will look utterly convincing, I think."

"Then Ser Lothor will fall to Ser Roland Waynwood, I see."

"Your eyes are as sharp as they are lovely," said Petyr, dusting cinnamon off Alayne's sleeve. "With her grandson a Winged Knight, Lady Anya should no longer trouble us, nor should Roland's father."

Alayne read further. “Do you think Symond Templeton will triumph over Alester Upcliff? I am surprised Ser Symond, a lord, should seek wings.”

“The service to little Robert is but three years, most like far less, and the Knight of Ninestars is eager for some glory, any glory, to attach to his name. His forebears were all the greatest of knights, dying in this battle or that—what the greatest of knights are wont to do. Meanwhile, the page of Ser Symond’s life is blank, so we will give him a quill.”

Her eyes scanned down the page. “Two Hunters look to break lances,” she observed. “Do we want one above the other?”

This time Petyr's smile reached his eyes. "Harlan is here with the promise of meeting his older brother in the lists. He is a better rider than Eustace and accidents are a fact of tourneys. I expect our Arryk and Erryk shall meet on the third day, and if one potential heir should . . . fall, the other's value as a hostage rises." He dismissed the brothers with a shrug. "Now tell me about your Harrold's chances."

Alayne examined the seven names the heir could face. “Harry is strong, but upjumped. Today he will tilt against Wallace Waynwood: a boy just as green, but smaller and more timid. Harry will prevail.”

Her father nodded. “What next?”

“On the morrow, he will face Ser Byron or Ser Shadrich. Both men are in your service and will do as you bid. Harry will not lose.”

“And on the third day?”

She studied the remaining names. One made her shudder. “In his final tilt, Harry will face Ser Lyn Corbray.”

“A formidable knight, a peerless jouster, and my staunchest enemy.”

“But secretly your friend,” said Alayne, uncertain.

“Lyn Corbray is nobody’s friend,” Littlefinger laughed. “Just the same, he will fall on the third day and find his debts paid on the fourth.”

Alayne looked over the page again, admiring Lord Petyr’s handiwork. There were four-and-sixty names from houses all over the Vale—Hersy and Sunderland, Lipps and Upcliff, Egen and Lynderly, Waxley and Pryor. Yet her lord father had so arranged them to gain power over five Lords Declarant and the heir to the Eyrie. Bronze Yohn would stand alone.

With a quill, Petyr circled his choices. “The Brotherhood of Winged Knights, the greatest of swords, the noblest of men. Ser Roland Waynwood, Ser Marwyn Belmore, Ser Harlan Hunter, the brothers Redfort, the Knight of Ninestars, Ser Andrew Tollett, *Lord* Harrold Hardyng. Has there ever been such a roll of heroes?” Petyr’s thin lips smiled as his hand brushed Alayne’s cheek. “My gift to you. Know their names, sweetling. The saviors of Winterfell.”

Alayne did know them. She felt her tummy tie itself in knots when the herald called them out. To her relief, most of her knights rode true. With just one charge, Ser Mychel unhorsed a knight from House Pryor, smashing the knight’s bright shield of moon eclipsing sun. It took Ser Andrew four tilts, but he did

likewise to Ser Schuyler Stone, a hedge knight without device. Ser Everett Moore signaled the Knight of Ninestars for a mercy pass, but Ser Symond struck him down regardless.

Harlan and Eustace each won his tilt, drawing closer to a meeting of brothers on the third day, though it was a near thing for the elder Hunter. He and Lewys of Crab Cove broke three lances apiece, leaving Lord Robert to declare a winner. Her little lord said the knight with the arrows rode steadier, but Alayne suspected that he won because his shield lacked a “scary crab.”

Marwyn Belmore disappointed her, however, breaking only one lance to three by Lord Nestor’s son Albar. Randa squealed with glee at her brother’s victory, while her father nodded with quiet pride. Alayne was careful to cheer just as she’d done for the rest.

In the afternoon, four riders came before the lord’s box for the next matches. “*Ser Alester of House Upcliff, a knight of Witch Isle,*” the herald announced. “*Ser Xander, called the Hungry, in service of House Templeton. Ser Gareth of House Sunderland, son of Lord Triston Sunderland. Ser Jon of House Redfort, son of Lord Horton Redfort.*” Alayne sat up straight at the sound of Jon’s name.

The knights dipped their lances in salute, but before they made for their places, Maester Colemon entered the box bearing a large covered cage. He shuffled toward the Lord Protector, but Littlefinger was already out of his seat and signaling the herald. The man nodded, then sounded his trumpet long, and long again.

“*Lords and ladies,*” the herald boomed into the hushed crowd. “*A splendid omen has graced this tourney, for it ushers in the first day of winter.*” As Colemon held the cage aloft, Petyr swept away the sheet to reveal the surprise beneath.

Looking at the color of its feathers, Alayne remembered words from her childhood.

A happy shriek called her back to Sweetrobin. The lordling was beside himself in delight at the enormous bird. Polite applause at the season’s changing was all the crowd could muster.

Ser Gareth bowed his head. “My lord, the beast is white like the moon of your sigil, and it looks more falcon than raven. This is a sign. The gods have blessed your tourney!”

The raven hopped around its cage in some dismay at all the noise, letting out a caw to rival the herald’s cry. Then it turned toward the knights and screamed, “*Jon!*”

After a pause broke out a smattering of uncertain laughter. Jon Redfort lifted his visor to grin at Gareth. “It speaks my name. What better omen than that? The wings are for me this season. That must mean you’ll be flopping back into the sea.”

The raven cocked its head and squawked, “*Beware!*” This time the crowd stayed quiet.

“*Beware!*” it screamed a second time. “*Jon, beware!*”

Jon’s face turned pale as the raven.

It was on the third charge that Ser Jon erred, keeping his shield too low to stop the Sisterman’s lance. The tip found the center of his breastplate and he flew from the saddle to the dirt.

My father will not be happy about that, thought Alayne, but all that truly matters is my betrothed, my Harry. He need win but this one tilt. Earlier in the day, Ser Byron the Beautiful had gracefully broken three lances on the shield of Ser Shadrich, scraping off his mouse's head in the process. *Ser Byron will let Harry through the second round, Ser Lyn the third. One tilt and he'll stay, we'll be married, the Vale will rise against the Boltons, ... I can go home.*

Ser Harrold Hardyng entered the lists on his destrier, a beast as white as the snow atop the Giant's Lance. Barded in the red-and-white diamonds of House Hardyng, his horse trotted toward the lord's box at a leisurely pace as the crowd roared Harry's name. *They love him well. He knows it, too.* And there were the moon-and-falcon quarterings upon his shield, presenting his claim for all to see. Robert Arryn saw. Alayne wondered what face Harry would make if he could hear Sweetrobin's feeble jeers.

Before the lord's box, the herald bellowed the names of the competitors. The four knights saluted by dipping their lances, though Ser Harrold's effort was little more than a twitch. Harry glanced at Alayne and grinned, but Alayne kept her face still.

"I order you to make him fly, Ser Wallace!" Robert suddenly blurted out.

Wallace bowed his head. "I w-w-will make him fl- f- ... soar from his saddle, my lord."

Harry scowled, closed his visor, and cantered off. Butterflies fluttered in Alayne's stomach. *No, not butterflies. Bats.* She looked to her father, but he only smirked, his eyes locked on Harry. Alayne said a prayer, the trumpet sounded, and the knights rode.

CRACK.

There was an explosion of lances ... though not Harry's or Wallace's. Ser Morgarth the Merry and Ser Gregor Egen had struck each other's shields, but the knights Alayne watched had missed each other and now reared their horses around for another pass. Their second charge was as fruitless as the first.

"Oh, dear," Lord Nestor groaned.

It took nine passes for Harry to break two lances, Wallace one. The boys were then given warning to present their shields properly, though the knights' aim did not soon improve on the tenth or eleventh go. On the twelfth charge, the Waynwood knight leaned too far toward the tilting barrier, lost his balance, and fell from his mount. It was decided that Ser Harrold had unhorsed him. Though the tilt was an embarrassment for Harry, Alayne was awash in relief.

Her solace was short-lived. Ser Lyn Corbray was next to enter the lists through the shield-covered gate. When the knight tilted against Ser Ossifer, lance met lips with such force that Ossifer's charger went down with him. The horse got back up, but Ser Ossifer had to be carried from the field with a broken ankle. Alayne shuddered, thinking of the poor Sunderland boy who would face Ser Lyn on the morrow.

The Sisterman was handsome and a fine dancer, Randa's smirks aside. Her father said the knights from Houses Sunderland, Pryor, and Elesham had been invited for their skill at jousting—or, more precisely, for their lack of skill. The islands of the Bite were as poor and bleak as the Fingers, Petyr had told her, filled with fish, fishermen, and the smell of fish. "In truth, they are more squishers than men," he'd added with a laugh, though Alayne had never heard of a squisher.

“My lady Alayne,” the Sunderland knight had called to her as she’d strolled past his green-and-blue pavilion only a few hours before. “I bid you good morning.”

“You bid me? I know you not, yet you would have me do your bidding.”

“I only meant ...” the boy started, before catching Alayne’s playful look. “My apologies. You granted me a dance and I had not even the courtesy to give you my name. I am Ser Daemon.”

“Daemon?” asked Alayne. “Like the rogue prince?” In the stories, Daemon Targaryen was ruthless. *Ruthless and gallant.*

“I am not such a rogue as that one.” The boy was no older than eight-and-ten, with brown hair and brown eyes. One of his teeth was a bit crooked, but Alayne found him dashing all the same. “Lord Robert summoned us to defend him. I see no greater honor than in doing so, if I should prove worthy.”

“Then well met, Ser Daemon *the Honorable*,” she said with a mock curtsy. “I pray the Warrior shall guide your lance. If you will excuse me, I must find my father before the tilts commence.”

“Of course, my lady.” The knight bowed his head.

Alayne took four steps, then shot a sly look over her shoulder. “Unless there is some favor you would beg of me?”

The green ribbon from Alayne’s hair was wrapped about Daemon’s arm as he broke three lances against Ser Leon Elesham. It was a grand performance. *Was that my doing?* A lady’s favor was known to hearten men in the joust, giving them the courage and confidence to prevail. But the victory had put him in Lyn Corbray’s way. *Does Ser Lyn know what mercy is?*

For the day’s final tilt, the Orphan of Godsgrace arrived in a motley of mismatched armor. His breastplate was old and rusty, showing a Waynwood wheel painted over in haste with red and black between its spokes. In the center of the new sigil was a golden hand, repeated on his shield, drawn with skill equal to that of the Lord of the Eyrie. As a crest, a lobstered gauntlet had been affixed atop his helm. The man looked more a fool than Florian, but the snickering ceased when the Orphan’s lance sent Ser Hector Hardyng to the earth. Victorious, the mystery knight galloped off the field and back to his tent without even interrupting his charge.

“What Dornishman would even come to the Vale?” asked Ser Byron that night in the Great Hall. “They think snowflakes are tiny white demons that steal their young. It’s why they keep south of Blackhaven.”

“Word is some Yronwood knights went missing a few months back,” said Andrew Tollett. “Lord Anders’ own son Cletus, along with his nephew and some others. The Bloodroyal won’t say where they went. The Orphan must be one of those.”

“Couldn’t he be Oberyn Martell’s squire?” asked Strong Sam Stone. “I think *he* was from Godsgrace. Or maybe it was the Hellholt.”

“I say he’s the ghost of Aron Santagar,” put in Ben Coldwater. “He has returned from the dead for one last tourney. He hides a crushed skull beneath that helm, I bet.”

“Is it time for wagers, then? Fifty dragons on the Orphan to win his next tilt!” yelled Lord Belmore.

“Deal,” called back Littlefinger.

Alayne had no seat of honor at this meal; the places around the dais had been reserved for the victorious. *Ser Roland*, Alayne saw, *Ser Andrew. The Knight of Ninestars and Ser Harlan. Ser Mychel. Harry the Heir.* Only six of her eight, but it made no matter: Ser Marwyn was at the Gates already, and Jon Redfort’s brother would be hostage enough. *Had it all gone perfectly, it would have been too obvious, in truth.* Amongst two-and-thirty winners’ chairs, one sat empty. The mystery knight who sparked so much conjecture was still in his tent, though the squires of Donnel Waynwood and Hector Hardyng had taken him a tray of food.

As she ate, Alayne was subject to several passionate explanations of jousting and its strategy. The game took not only strength and speed and balance, old Oswell told her, but also planning, cunning, and deception. “It is *cyvasse* on destrier,” he said, speaking of the game he’d brought up with him from Gulltown. Ser Targon the Halfwild, reaching generously for a more feminine comparison, told her tilts were “no less than song with lance.”

“I won didn’t I? The boy’s stupid plume met dirt all the same,” Ser Gareth Sunderland said in dismissal of Lymond Lynderly’s criticism. The two would not meet in the lists and made frank talk.

“His helm is not your concern,” scolded Ser Lymond. “It was there to distract you and that it did. Look to his shield and only his shield. Before your horse, rides your lance; before your lance, rides your gaze.”

After dinner, Alayne met Sweetrobin in his tower for the game of rats and cats she’d promised him. She bid her little lord count seven sevens, then rushed down the corridor to his chambers. After pushing aside a stack of doublets, she found room to curl up inside his wardrobe, shutting the doors behind her. A minute later, the hinge of the chamber door groaned. She held her breath, waiting for his giggles.

“We can speak here,” she heard instead. “I must wait to give the boy his sleeping draught.”

“Which potion is it?” asked a second voice, more high and shrill than the first.

Alayne did not move. *As still as stone*, she thought, recalling her surname. She glimpsed a grey robe from between the wardrobe’s doors.

“Mummer’s wine,” replied the first man. He sounded familiar. “The Lord Protector wants me dosing him day and night. His bastard commands me, too. If I heeded them, the boy would be dead five times over.”

The second man let out a quick cackle. “Ebrose says that a man’s belief can cure half of what ails him.” His footsteps grew louder, and suddenly the wardrobe shifted and creaked as he leaned against it. “What of the white raven? What does the conclave say?”

“One loose in the east, two chained by the King of Meereen.” She could place this first voice now: it was Maester Colemon. “Daenerys herself is missing.”

The second man breathed a sigh of relief. “This is good news, is it not?”

Colemon grunted. “They live. This Meereenese king could make a new rider, or fail and let another loose. The stray could be claimed by the slave cities or Aegon or the ironmen for all we know.”

“They don’t have the blood.”

“We thought Daenerys didn’t either. You have your copper link; you know the tale of Nettles.”

“Has anyone gotten a raven from Kedry?”

“We are blind when it comes to the Dornish,” said Colemon. “Though in Oldtown they say Marwyn—”

The hinge of the chamber door creaked again and a boy asked, “What are you doing in my chambers? I have to find Alayne.”

“The lady is not here,” said Colemon. “My lord, would you like honeyed milk before bed?”

The sound of footsteps faded. Alayne waited till she heard nothing, then a long while after that.

The next morning, Alayne could not find her father, so she broke her fast with Sweetrobin. They ate bacon, melon, and eggs boiled soft, as they had every day since coming to the Gates. It was a meal he had oft taken with the Lady Lysa, it seemed. Alayne looked at the boy and thought of Maester Colemon’s words. *Mummer’s wine ... the white raven’s message ... blood*. She could not find the sense in them.

Alayne put her hand on the boy’s head, caressing his hair. “Sweetrobin, do you know the tale of Nettles?” she asked. “Or of Daenerys?” The names seemed familiar, but she had forgotten the details.

“Nettles was a beautiful bastard girl—like you, Alayne,” said Robert through a mouth stuffed with egg. “And she could fly! She came to the Vale on dragonback and ruled as queen over the Burned Men. Daenerys was a Dornish princess.” Bits of egg sprayed from his mouth to land upon the table.

Alayne remembered the stories now, but they did not solve the puzzle for her. *An Aegon, a Dornish princess, a warning for Ser Jon*. How did they all fit? They were related to Ser Marwyn Belmore, and Oldtown, and the Dornish mystery knight, she knew, but how?

Half as many competitors would compete on the second day of tilts, but only a single lane was to be used henceforth instead of two, so the day would be just as long. Alayne arrived at her seat as the trumpets called the first jousts to the field.

“Father,” Alayne said. “We should speak ...” She did not know how to explain what she had heard while crammed in the wardrobe. “It’s about Ser Marwyn ... and Ser Jon ... and the Dornishman. I believe—”

“You need not trouble yourself, my sweet,” Petyr assured her. “Our plans are all intact. But remember, there are spies about.” He raised a finger to his lips and smiled.

And at first, all the pieces seemed to move as they’d planned. Ser Mychel broke three lances against his opponent, as did Ser Eustace; both would advance to the final day. Ser Roland was the victor against Ser Morgarth, who all but leapt from his horse at the touch of the Waynwood knight’s lance. *My father’s man*, Alayne smiled to herself. *One piece given to take a stronger one*. It was *cyvasse* on destrier after all.

The position changed with the arrival of Mya Stone.

Today the mule girl was not dressed in leathers, but in a black woolen dress with a sable trim and a matching shawl collar. Despite the cold, the bodice was cut deep to reveal the top of the bastard girl’s breasts. Her short black hair was combed and styled in a fashionable tumble. Her cheeks were pink, her lips red. The girl made Alayne feel homely by comparison, though her eyes were sullen and unsure.

“Mya,” Randa greeted her, rising. “We thank you for joining us. As Lord Petyr’s daughter has been given such a favorable seat, I thought it only fitting that the daughter of a king receive the same.”

Myranda reached over the railing of the lord’s box to squeeze the soft, clean hands of the mule girl. Mya only nodded, then took a seat on the high-backed chair beside Alayne’s.

“*Ser Lothor of House Brune, called the Apple-Eater, in service of House Arryn!*” the herald was announcing. When the applause finally quieted, he yelled “*The Orphan of Godsgrace!*” and it returned louder still.

The men saluted Robert with their lances, but Ser Lothor’s gaze never left Mya Stone. The Orphan was halfway to the south end of the field when Brune realized he was alone before the lord’s box. He snapped his visor shut and cantered south after his opponent—then realized his mistake, turned hastily about, and galloped back north. Littlefinger made a jape of it to Nestor Royce, but Alayne saw him rub his temples.

The rest went as her father must have feared. The trumpet was sounded and the horses spurred, but Ser Lothor’s horse set off a moment late. The Orphan struck the center of Brune’s shield, while Ser Lothor only grazed the Orphan’s shoulder. They wheeled around and took up new lances for the second pass, but Alayne was already thinking of the morrow. *It will be the Orphan who will face Ser Roland.*

As Lothor Brune lay on the ground, the Orphan dropped what was left of his lance and galloped once more through the sea of pavilions to his lonely tent.

“Off goes the Hermit of Godsgrace,” remarked Lord Nestor, “and your bag of your dragons, eh?”

Her father forced a laugh. “I wish Lord Belmore joy of them until our next wager.” Only Alayne saw how tight his knuckles clenched as he gripped the rail between them.

If her father’s scheme had sprung a leak, the rest of the day saw it half-sunk. Ser Edmund Waxley broke three lances to Ser Symond’s two; the Knight of Ninestars would not find his glory amongst the Winged Knights. Nor would Andrew Tollett, nor Harlan Hunter. In the space of an afternoon her six had dwindled to three.

The only welcome result of the afternoon was Harry’s victory over Ser Byron the Beautiful, though that outcome had been certain from the start. The hedge knight’s skill in the joust exceeded even his comeliness: during each charge, he deftly dropped his lance to miss both knight and shield, whilst guiding his own shield directly to Harry’s tip. In just five passes, he made Harry look almost accomplished.

When the knight who wore her favor trotted before the lord’s box, bats flapped restlessly in Alayne’s stomach. She smiled for him, then said a silent prayer to the Mother.

“*Ser Lyn of House Corbray, heir to Heart’s Home,*” boomed the herald. “*Ser Daemon of House Sunderland, son of Lord Triston Sunderland.*”

“The Sistermen have such drab helms,” Randa remarked, glancing sidelong at Alayne. She had recognized the ribbon, then. “He could use a plume. Mayhaps a piece of kelp?”

Nestor Royce laughed. “Soon his helm will have ornament enough, I think. The tip of Ser Lyn’s lance!”

“How many Sistermen does it take to saddle a mount?” Sweetrobin joined in. “Nine! Eight to fetch the saddle and one to haul up the fish!” Lord Nestor and Myranda laughed with him politely, though the fool Benjicot had told this jape the night before in the Great Hall. Alayne forced smiled as well.

At the signal, the knights’ steeds sped forward. When the lances struck, Ser Lyn’s burst into a thousand shards while Daemon’s slid off its target still intact. The knights turned their horses about, Lyn was passed a new lance, they charged again. This time, both lances broke with an echoing crack.

One more break and Ser Lyn advances, Alayne prayed. Daemon will make it through the day intact.

As the third charge commenced, however, Lyn Corbray’s saddle shifted beneath him and his body slid sideways toward the tilt barrier. He dropped his shield and leaned forward, grasping for his mount’s crinet. Daemon’s lance caught him in the shoulder and drove him into the mud.

A cacophony of gasps, groans, and applause rippled through the crowd. Petyr was grinning through gritted teeth, mindful even now of his feigned enmity with the knight. Ser Lyn was not so restrained. Once he found his feet, he stormed back to the groom charged with saddling his horse and struck him briskly with his gauntlet. The boy’s nose spurted blood as he fell to the ground.

It was near dusk when the second day of tilting concluded, and another dinner was held to honor the triumphant six-and-ten. “Ser Mychel,” Alayne whispered. “Ser Roland. Harry the Heir.” A terse prayer, now, and what remained was yet uncertain. On the morrow, Mychel would ride against one of the elder Sunderlands, Roland would tilt with the fierce Orphan, and Harry would face ... a real opponent.

Alayne was not surprised when her father wasn’t seen at the meal. *He is working to salvage what he can of this.* She didn’t know why Lord Nestor and Maester Colemon were not there either, though.

Before the first course was served, Hunter’s maester whispered in the ear of Lord Gilwood, who spoke to Lord Symond, who talked with Lady Anya in turn. Once Lady Anya conferred with Myranda Royce, it was a matter of time, and not much of it, before everyone in the Great Hall heard the news.

Two ravens, black as their tidings, had reached the Gates of the Moon.

The news from King’s Landing was tragic. Kevan Lannister, the Hand of the King, had been murdered, as had the Grand Maester. Lord Mace Tyrell, the queen’s father, was now acting as Tommen’s Hand.

“I can understand the Hand, but why kill the old maester?” Ser Karl of the Lake asked Everett Moore.

“I bet the old man knew the truth,” said Ser Everett. “Just look at those tapestries and the bastard mule girl. It’s plain as day.”

As alarming as the news from the Red Keep had been, it was the second raven, the one from Harrenhal, that stirred more chatter and commotion. Ser Bonifer Hasty, the castellan of her father’s seat, had rebelled against the crown, naming himself Lord of Harrenhal and declaring himself for a King Aegon Targaryen, whose sellsword army suddenly controlled most of the stormlands.

The news was dizzying to Alayne. *Aegon*, she thought. *But what of Ser Jon and the Dornish Princess?* She wondered whether this invasion would spoil what remained of her own plans, ruin her betrothal, prevent a march on Winterfell.

She decided to play spymaster that night in her father's absence. As the wine was brought out, she made pleasant chatter with the serving girls, then passed them copper stars for what they could overhear.

"If he is not Lord of Harrenhal, to what does he owe his title?" Lord Grafton was heard to ask of Symond Templeton.

"He will never surrender the title of Lord Protector," Lord Gilwood Hunter had worried. "He has no seat to return to."

"W-w-won't the c-crown take the c-c-castle back?" Wallace Waynwood had wondered of Mads Melcolm.

"With what men?" Ser Mads had replied. "They must needs first check the Golden Company's advance. Their northern allies are repelling Stannis; their fleet is dealing with the ironmen; there's no one to lay a winter siege."

"It will fall to Riverrun to retake Harrenhal," Donnel Waynwood declared to a table of knights within Alayne's own hearing. "Emmon Frey will take the castle and any other lands he wants and he will never give them back. Then he will sue for peace with whichever king prevails."

"Brune. The tract the crown promised you—it's in the riverlands, aye?" asked Alester Upcliff, arching an eyebrow.

Ser Lothor nodded to his reflection in the ale.

"Welcome back to the company of landless knights." Gregor Egen raised his own cup in a toast.

Ser Donnel was not finished. "Once Emmon has taken Littefinger's seat, he is certain to move on Darry," he told them.

"Is Darry not held by a Lady Frey already?" asked Lymond Lynderly. "Merrett Frey's wife, or perhaps his daughter? They are of the same house."

"Emmon has no love for his half-brothers or their children either," said Donnel impatiently. "And Merrett's daughter is a lonely widow of ten-and-eight. Her kin marched north to worship trees. When spring comes, they will be lords or corpses. In either case, they will not come to her aid."

"That's for the rivermen to sort out," said Ser Gulian.

"Are those the words of your house?" Ser Donnel gave a mocking laugh. "Look at this lot of hedge knights and second sons. You all have a place to lay your head tonight, but will you on the morrow? In a year? In ten? Will you find lords with open hands when you can no longer swing a sword or lift a lance? We laugh at crippled Ossifer today, but that is the fate of each and every one of us."

The knights around him shifted in their seats uncomfortably, save Ser Hector, who smirked and poured himself another drink. The maester who came with House Hunter was listening, but Ser Donnel paid him and Alayne no mind.

"In the riverlands, the Freys are going to war. It's not just Emmon Frey. At the Twins, the heir feuds with his brother. And when brother kills brother, the ones left standing are the sisters." Donnel's smile was savage, baring his teeth. "The unwed daughters, the widows, the orphaned maids, they will all need

husbands to sire them whelps. And they will choose from the men who come to defend their lands. If the crown will not send those men, who will?"

Alayne's ears wanted to hear more of the knights' chatter. Her bladder had a different desire. *I should not have had the second glass of wine.* She was forced to excuse herself to find the privy. The gods were good and Maddy was near to help her with her dress.

When she had finished, she found Ser Harrold waiting for her in the corridor, a grin on his face. "Lady Alayne, I am sorry to have spurned your offer. Will you show me to my chambers after all?" Ignoring the servant, he took Alayne by the hand and walked, but did not lead her to the Falcon Tower. Instead they found a room that sat unused, a room to be alone in.

Once he had shut the door, Harry's eyes met Alayne's. He put a hand under Alayne's chin, tilting her face upward. Then he pressed his lips to hers. Her heart beat wildly, though not so wildly as the wings of the bat she must have swallowed. She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck. It reminded her of her first kiss, a dim memory. Then his tongue was in her mouth and his hands on her back, pulling her in.

This is what it is to be kissed, Alayne thought, *truly kissed.*

The knight slid his right hand from Alayne's back to her hip, then up her ribs until it was cupping her breast. She pulled her head back with an uncomfortable laugh. "My lord, we should return to the feast."

Harry chortled, eyes glimmering with confidence. "Should we, my lady? You said you wanted to know how I joust." He took her hand and placed it against himself. "Today I showed Ser Byron. It would be unfair not to show you."

Alayne's eyes opened wide. "Ser, I am a maid. You ... *We* must wait till we are wed." She pulled her hand free and turned to leave.

With one long stride he caught her and grabbed her above the elbow. "Well, you've made me chase you." Suddenly she was on the ground, breathless, and he was climbing onto her. "Have you played long enough at innocence, bastard girl, or should I tear your clothes for you as well?"

"Stop! Please, stop!" she shouted as he rubbed his body against hers. He clasped one hand over her mouth to quiet her. The other began to unlace his breeches.

"Hush, girl," he said. "We will only seal our betrothal. Now let me see this pointy beard of yours." He finished with his laces and reached between her legs.

"No!" Alayne let out a muffled scream.

"Leave her be, cousin!"

Harry froze at the command. There in the door stood Sweetrobin, Ser Lothor behind him. "Else I'll make you fly!" he added, as menacing as the boy of eight could make himself. "I am the Lord of the Eyrie and I *demand* Alayne come with me and read me a story!"

His eyes on Brune, Harry swore, rose, tucked his manhood back into his breeches. When she found her own feet, Alayne ran past the boy in the door and kept on running.

She locked the door to her chamber, sat with her back against the door and closed her eyes.

Sometime later, when her breathing had slowed, Alayne thought about what to do. Should she tell Petyr? *Lothor has told him by now.* What about Anya Waynwood? Perhaps Harry would break their betrothal. *But I will see the Winged Knights every day.* What was to become of her plan, her future?

Harry the Arse. Brune's words. Petyr's man had saved her again. Harry was more than an arse, though. He was a monster. *My father could not have foreseen this.*

Could he?

Sansa wept and thought of Winterfell.

Alayne decided it had never happened.

The next morning she woke from restless sleep. Her shoulders ached, her eyes were dry. She had no appetite, so she did not rise for breakfast. Instead she lay just as she was, exhausted. When her eyes opened again, she thought of Sweetrobin. *Her presence soothes Lord Robert.* Reluctantly she bestirred herself.

She found her little lord in the lord's box beside Nestor and Myranda Royce, all looking cheerful. Petyr Baelish was oddly absent.

"Where is my lord father?" asked Alayne.

"Lord father?" asked Randa. "Can we really call him that anymore? He still has dominion over those rocks and sheep in the Fingers, I suppose. Though it's queer—with all the chaos in the realm, the only talk this morning was of the debauchery last night."

Alayne's eyes widened. *Does she know? What tale did Harry tell?*

"You did not hear? Mychel Redfort was caught abed with Mya Stone. Lady Redfort will not be too pleased about that, nor Bronze Yohn either."

Alayne stared. "Mychel and Mya," she said slowly. "Do you think this will affect his tilt today?"

"I pray you did not make a wager," Randa laughed. "My girl, the tilt is done. Ser Aubrey Sunderlands' rod cast Mychel far from the skiff."

Numbly, Alayne looked to where the sun hung in the sky. It was past noon; she had overslept by hours. Myranda and Sweetrobin told her of what else she'd missed: Ser Aubrey's brother Gareth had also won his tilt, as had Lymond Lynderly and Alester Upcliff; Ben Coldwater had fallen to the hedge knight Targon the Halfwild; Harlan Hunter's brother Eustace had earned a place among the lord's protectors, though Alayne thought he could use protectors of his own.

"What of Ser Roland Waynwood?" she asked.

Here Lord Nestor broke in. "The Dornishman charged three times and broke three lances. I have never seen such a fine performance in the lists! If he'd had a hundred Dornishmen like that at the Trident, the Mad King would sit the throne still."

Soon Sweetrobin needed the privy, so Lord Nestor escorted him back to the castle, leaving Myranda alone in the box. She moved over to Petyr's empty seat beside Alayne.

"Remind me again, Alayne," Randa asked. "How many years have you?"

"Four-and-ten," Alayne replied.

"You do have a youthful look," Myranda said. "Perhaps it was being ripped from your mother's womb so early. Lord Baelish had charge of the Gulltown port scarce more than fourteen years ago, according to my father's records. Your mother could have carried you but three moons."

It was a mistake to make myself older. "He ... visited beforehand. It was love that drove him to seek the post, that he might return."

"Yes, and it was Lady Lysa's love that got it for him, from what I hear," said Myranda.

"My father had many admirers."

"Aye," said Myranda. "As did our lady." Her brown eyes narrowed. "Marillion's crime was a heinous one. It *fell* to the Royces, Keepers of the Gates of the Moon, to clean up the mess he made, you know."

Alayne had not wanted to think of that. "I pray she was buried with ... the honors due her house."

"Oh, we did our best," Myranda assured her vaguely, "with what the scavengers hadn't taken, anyway. Our men gathered up a braid of auburn hair, some sapphires and moon-stones, a velvet dress colored cream and pink and red. And ... the rest. So many pieces, so many things in pairs. Two arms, so pale and lovely. A couple of legs; knees and feet to match. There were of course twin lungs, kidneys, matching eyes of blue—as lovely as your own. And three shoes."

Alayne blinked. "Three?"

Randa grinned. "Half again two, one shy of four. I made the count twice, then thrice."

"I do not understand," Alayne lied.

"As I did not. I knew Lady Lysa well, and I never observed her to have three feet. So someone must have been with her at the Moon Door before she fell. But who?"

"Marillion." Alayne's left hand clenched the arm of her chair.

"Ah, but the shoe was far too small. Marillion had the voice of a young lady, but not the feet, as I remember him."

As still as stone. "Perhaps ... Eagles are known to carry things long leagues—"

"Up to the Eyrie and into your chambers?" asked Myranda dryly. "That's where Carrot, my mule boy, found the shoe's mate." She stared at Alayne, unblinking. "Sansa Stark, *enough*. You are the very image of the aunt you murdered, however dark you dye your hair, and you named Lord Eddard's bastard for me on the mountain."

Jon, the raven had shrieked. *Beware. I should have fled while I could.* The Wall was safe, far away at the ends of the earth, so close to home. “What do you want?”

“Harry, of course,” said Myranda. “And the prize Littlefinger stole from my father when he took Lady Lysa to wife—the Vale itself. Your clever plan to keep Harry here will work. As it happens, you have me to thank for much of it. Ser Lyn’s saddle? My doing. Corbray was Bronze Yohn’s man, bought and paid for. He would have knocked Harry flat whatever he’d told you. Now Harry will face that green Sisterman instead, the boy with your ribbon.”

“But Harry is ...” Alayne wanted to say what he truly was. “*My betrothed.*”

“He will not be for much longer. Lady Anya knew what this tourney was, as I did. Her own son Donnel provided that mystery knight, but I helped him defeat Ser Lothor; thanks to me, Anya’s grandson Roland was spared your brotherhood of winged wards. In her gratitude, she has agreed to arrange my betrothal to Harry once you are gone.”

“Gone?” Alayne could barely speak. “Randa, we are friends.”

“We are,” said Myranda. “And I am showing you mercy, Lady Stark, more than you showed Lady Lysa. You and your lover Petyr will leave on the morrow for Gulltown. From there you can sail to Braavos or wherever you choose, so long as it is across the Narrow Sea. Live with the Dothraki, if you like.”

As Myranda stood to retake her seat, Sansa rose too, hoping to frame some reply, some offer, some plea. When the words did not come, she dropped back into her chair like a sack of gold, trying to think despite the drumming of horses’ hooves on hard-packed soil. *My face must not betray me.* She had to speak with Lord Littlefinger, with her father. It was the only way.

After what seemed an eternity, Petyr arrived in the lord’s box, a grim look upon his face. With him came Lord Nestor and Sweetrobin.

“You missed much this morning,” Petyr said, sitting beside Alayne. “I imagine you have heard the news about Mychel and Roland. It matters not. Nor does Hasty and that ruin in the riverlands. What matters is the Vale army, and Harry was always the key to that. We’ll work out our next move once he defeats this Sunderland boy.”

“Father ...” Alayne began. Her throat was dry. She wanted to tell him of what Harry had done, of what Myranda had said, of what she had heard from within the wardrobe, but no words came. *He will blame me*, Alayne thought, *for all of this.* She had said too much to Randa, had spoken the wrong words to Harry. *Even the favor was my doing.*

When the final tilt was called, Ser Harrold Hardyng and Ser Daemon Sunderland rode up on their mounts for their salute to Lord Robert. This time Harry’s lance did not move. Cheers and whoops hailed “The Young Falcon!” as the knights trotted to position.

The trumpet sounded and the two green boys put spur to horse. As black horse raced toward white, Daemon’s lance slipped from his grasp and dropped to the ground. Then Harry’s shattered on the side of the Sisterman’s helm. “*Oh!*” moaned the crowd, but Daemon was still ahorse when he reached the south

end of the lists. He removed his helm and called for a fresh lance from his squire. The Sunderland boy looked to Alayne, donned his helm once more, and began his charge. This time both lances broke.

Alayne clapped loudly, ignoring an odd look from her father. Beyond him, she saw Sweetrobin leaning forward in anticipation, repeating a word under his breath: "*Fly ... fly ... fly.*" His eyes fixed themselves on Harry, unblinking, as if he were in a trance.

The knights made their third charge, lances couched. This time Harry's horse seemed to stumble.

CRACK.

Harry's lance missed Daemon completely, while Daemon's exploded into a cloud of splinters, raining wood upon the lists. The horses halted once again at the ends of the field.

Now they are tied, Alayne thought. *One more charge and ...*

Harry teetered a little in his saddle, paused, then fell hard to the dirt. His horse whickered nervously and turned to circle around him. On its caparison, some white diamonds had turned to red. When she stood for a better view of the fallen knight, Alayne could see blood oozing out from between cuisse and codpiece, from the thigh some wooden shard had found.

Maesters Colemon and Willamen were dashing onto the field, Strong Sam Stone behind them. Alayne only stared at the scene dully.

After a few minutes, she turned to her right. "Father. *Father.* What will we do?"

Petyr Baelish's grey-green eyes did not look her way. They did not seem to be looking at anything.

"Petyr!" Alayne yelled. He did not answer. "Littlefinger!"

Eyes as cold as ice met hers at last. Then he stood and left without a word.

Alayne sank into her seat. She felt numb. *Widowhood will become you,* Lord Baelish had told her, though she and Harry had never wed. She had no tears, not this time. Not for Harrold, nor for Winterfell. Had she wanted this?

Hours passed. Lords Grafton and Belmore paid their respects. A few of the knights offered her condolences.

"Your betrothed died bravely, my lady," remarked Edmund Breakstone. "Like his ancestor Humfrey at Ashford."

Ben Coldwater buried his face in his hand. "That was Humfrey Beesbury, you dolt."

At some point, Donnel Waynwood's squire brought her a blanket. The boy's overcoat was quartered with the broken wheel of Waynwood and twin towers.

"Thank you," she said, thinking of Ser Donnel's words to the table of knights. "What is your name?"

"Sandor."

The name felt funny to Alayne. “Like the ... song?”

The boy smiled. “Yes, my lady.”

“Can you sing it for me?” She remembered how Marillion would sing of Sandor of the mist.

“My voice is of a frog, my lady.”

“I am certain it will suit.”

The boy looked about shyly to see that no one else was listening. Then he nodded.

*A boy wanders the mist of morn,
For refuge he does roam.
O'er lonely hills poor Sandor climbs,
Mayhaps for a new home.*

There would be no melee; Lord Nestor said it would be unseemly. In its stead would be a simple ceremony to name Lord Robert's champions to the Brotherhood of Winged Knights. They had planned to do this on the morrow, to erect a platform, to weld wings to each knight's helm, to set a lavish feast with wine and music and splendor. None of that would happen now, no more than anything else they'd planned. Most of their guests were leaving the next morning: best be home before the snows came, they said

And so, in a grassy field beside the Gates of the Moon, a circle of gloomy spectators gathered around Lord Robert and his chosen few. *Seven*, Alayne thought. *The gods have had their way after all.* Sweetrobin had denied Ser Daemon the honor, at Petyr's insistence. The resulting holy sum would appease Septon Vayon's piety, even if the presence of a stranger among the seven gave him pause.

Mixed into the crowd were the competitors who'd fallen, donning silver cloaks fixed with lapis wings. Ser Ben and Ser Andrew whispered between them, quibbling over who'd shown the finest jousting form. Ser Shadrich said a few words into the ear of Ser Morgarth, who glanced furtively at Alayne. Ser Lyn brooded in silence, Lady Forlorn at his hip. Even Ossifer Lipps had hobbled from his pavilion, standing with the help of a crutch and Ser Owen. Littlefinger too had emerged at last, though he had not chosen to take part in the ceremony. He stood beside Lord Grafton, stone-faced.

As the sun set behind the mountains, the crowd hushed for the naming of Lord Robert's knights.

“Ser Gareth Sunderland, son of Triston Sunderland,” Lord Nestor spoke. “Do you swear to shield Lord Robert of House Arryn, keep his counsel, and if need be give your life for his, in the names of the Father, the Mother, the Warrior, the Smith, the Crone, and the Maiden?”

The knight knelt. “I swear.”

The rest were named in turn. *Ser Gareth*, Alayne saw, *Ser Lymond*. *Ser Alester*, *Ser Targon*, *Ser Aubrey*, *Ser Eustace*. Only adequate knights, from what she had seen, and not a valuable ward amongst them.

Finally it was the mystery knight's turn. Excitement washed through the murmuring crowd as the time came to learn the Orphan of Godsgrace's true identity.

He approached Lord Robert, knelt, and removed his helm.

The Lord of the Eyrie's face shone brighter than Alayne had ever seen. The boy squealed and ran to the knight, burying his face in a shoulder. Muffled as it was, his laughter still rang through the field. He laughed and laughed, drawing smiles and chuckles from all around. Sweetrobin was breathless, holding on to the old man hard.

In time, though, the laughter shifted. The boy wheezed between yelps once, then again. He breathed hard, harder still. What followed were tears. Robert sobbed, quietly at first, like a pattering of rain. Soon, the squall was upon them. As the boy weeped, his body shuttered and shook, though it was no spell.

"I miss her, uncle," the boy wailed. "I miss her."

The crowd stood silent in the cold dusk around the howling of their little lord.

The cries of the orphan.

The grey-haired knight was still a while, not seeming to know what he should do. Then he raised a hand to the boy's head and stroked his hair.

When the boy's tears began to subside, the old knight stood. "I have returned from Riverrun, where my nephew opened his gates to Emmon Frey rather than see his son launched over them. As I see it, when Edmure renounced his seat, it rightfully passed to his nephew Robert. I beseech the honorable knights here to do their duty and claim the castle in the name of their lord."

No one spoke. Sweetrobin turned from his great-uncle to reveal swollen eyes and a red face, wet with tears and snot.

It was Donnel Waynwood who stepped forward to break the silence. "Ser Brynden. Don't you mean that we should claim the castle for our *king*?" Ser Donnel unsheathed his sword and placed it at Sweetrobin's feet, kneeling. "King Robert of Mountain and Vale!"

Alayne spied Maester Willamen whispering in Gilwood Hunter's ear. The lord nodded, then stepped forward and said, "The treachery at Harrenhal must be dealt with as well. It falls to us to bring justice to the riverlands." He took a place beside Ser Donnel and bent the knee. "King of Mountain and Vale!"

"The King of the Trident!" Hector Hardyng added, placing his sword next to Donnel's, his knee on the earth. "King of Mountain, Vale, and Rivers!" Their swords were joined by a blade of Valyrian steel as Lyn Corbray knelt beside Ser Hector.

Ser Eustace Hunter was next, followed by Ser Gregor Egen and Ser Luke Grafton. The three Sunderland brothers joined them, then the rest of the winged brothers. "King of Mountain, Vale and Rivers!" they proclaimed him, their swords a heap.

The Blackfish met the young lord's gaze, nodded, knelt. The baffled boy sniffled and turned to see the remaining Waynwoods kneel, then Harlan Hunter, Samwell Stone, Lords Grafton and Belmore.

When Alayne looked at Littlefinger, a strange smile had erupted across his face. He too bent the knee.

Soon all, lords and ladies, knights and squires, servants and commoners alike were kneeling before Robert Arryn.

Their little king.