

## SANSA

When Ser Lancel Lannister told the queen that the battle was lost, she turned her empty wine cup in her hands and said, “Tell my brother, ser.” Her voice was distant, as if the news were of no great interest to her.

“Your brother’s likely dead.” Ser Lancel’s surcoat was soaked with the blood seeping out under his arm. When he had arrived in the hall, the sight of him had made some of the guests scream. “He was on the bridge of boats when it broke apart, we think. Ser Mandon’s likely gone as well, and no one can find the Hound. Gods be damned, Cersei, *why* did you have them fetch Joffrey back to the castle? The gold cloaks are throwing down their spears and running, hundreds of them. When they saw the king leaving, they lost all heart. The whole Blackwater’s awash with wrecks and fire and corpses, but we could have held if—”

Osney Kettleblack pushed past him. “There’s fighting on both sides of the river now, Y’Grace. It may be that some of Stannis’s lords are fighting each other, no one’s sure, it’s all confused over there. The Hound’s gone, no one knows where, and Ser Balon’s fallen back inside the city. The riverside’s theirs. They’re ramming at the King’s Gate again, and Ser Lancel’s right, your men are deserting the walls and killing their own officers. There’s mobs at the Iron Gate and the Gate of the Gods fighting to get out, and Flea Bottom’s one great drunken riot.”

*Gods be good, Sansa thought, it is happening, Joffrey’s lost his head and so have I. She looked for Ser Ilyn, but the King’s Justice was not to be seen. I can feel him, though. He’s close, I’ll not escape him, he’ll have my head.*

Strangely calm, the queen turned to his brother Osfryd. “Raise the drawbridge and bar the doors. No one enters or leaves Maegor’s without my leave.”

“What about them women who went to pray?”

“They chose to leave my protection. Let them pray; perhaps the gods will defend them. Where’s my son?”

“The castle gatehouse. He wanted to command the crossbowmen. There’s a mob howling outside, half of them gold cloaks who came with him when we left the Mud Gate.”

“Bring him inside Maegor’s *now*.”

“*No!*” Lancel was so angry he forgot to keep his voice down. Heads turned toward them as he shouted, “We’ll have the Mud Gate all over again. Let him stay where he is, he’s the *king*—”

“He’s my son.” Cersei Lannister rose to her feet. “You claim to be a Lannister as well, cousin, prove it. Osfryd, why are you standing there? *Now* means today.”

Osfryd Kettleblack hurried from the hall, his brother with him. Many of the guests were rushing out as well. Some of the women were weeping, some praying. Others simply remained at the tables and called for more wine. “Cersei,” Ser Lancel pleaded, “if we lose the castle, Joffrey will be killed in any case, you know that. Let him stay, I’ll keep him by me, I swear —”

“Get out of my way.” Cersei slammed her open palm into his wound. Ser Lancel cried out in pain and almost fainted as the queen swept from the room. She spared Sansa not so much as a glance. *She’s forgotten me. Ser Ilyn will kill me and she won’t even think about it.*

“Oh, gods,” an old woman wailed. “We’re lost, the battle’s lost, she’s running.” Several children were crying. *They can smell the fear.* Sansa found herself alone on the dais. Should she stay here, or run after the queen and plead for her life?

She never knew why she got to her feet, but she did. “Don’t be afraid,” she told them loudly. “The queen has raised the drawbridge. This is the safest place in the city. There’s thick walls, the moat, the spikes...”

“What’s happened?” demanded a woman she knew slightly, the wife of a lesser lordling. “What did Osney tell her? Is the king hurt, has the city fallen?”

“*Tell us,*” someone else shouted. One woman asked about her father, another her son.

Sansa raised her hands for quiet. “Joffrey’s come back to the castle. He’s not hurt. They’re still fighting, that’s all I know, they’re fighting bravely. The queen will be back soon.” The last was a lie, but she had to soothe them. She noticed the fools standing under the galley. “Moon Boy, make us laugh.”

Moon Boy did a cartwheel, and vaulted on top of a table. He grabbed up four wine cups and began to juggle them. Every so often one of them would come down and smash him in the head. A few nervous laughs echoed through the hall. Sansa went to Ser Lancel and knelt beside him. His wound was bleeding afresh where the queen had struck him. “Madness,” he gasped. “Gods, the Imp was right, was right...”

“Help him,” Sansa commanded two of the serving men. One just looked at her and ran, flagon and all. Other servants were leaving the hall as well, but she could not help that. Together, Sansa and the serving man got the wounded knight back on his feet. “Take him to Maester Frenken.” Lancel was one of *them*, yet somehow she still could not bring herself to wish him dead. *I am soft and weak and stupid, just as Joffrey says. I should be killing him, not helping him.*

The torches had begun to burn low, and one or two had flickered out. No one troubled to replace them. Cersei did not return. Ser Dontos climbed the dais while all eyes were on the other fool. “Go back to your bedchamber, sweet Jonquil,” he whispered. “Lock yourself in, you’ll be safer there. I’ll come for you when the battle’s done.”

*Someone will come for me, Sansa thought, but will it be you, or will it be Ser Ilyn?* For a mad moment she thought of begging Dontos to defend her. He had been a knight too, trained with the sword and sworn to defend the weak. *No. He has not the courage, or the skill. I would only be killing him as well.*

It took all the strength she had in her to walk slowly from the Queen’s Ballroom when she wanted so badly to run. When she reached the steps, she *did* run, up and around until she was breathless and dizzy. One of the guards

knocked into her on the stair. A jeweled wine cup and a pair of silver candlesticks spilled out of the crimson cloak he'd wrapped them in and went clattering down the steps. He hurried after them, paying Sansa no mind once he decided she was not going to try and take his loot.

Her bedchamber was black as pitch. Sansa barred the door and fumbled through the dark to the window. When she ripped back the drapes, her breath caught in her throat.

The southern sky was aswirl with glowing, shifting colors, the reflections of the great fires that burned below. Baleful green tides moved against the bellies of the clouds, and pools of orange light spread out across the heavens. The reds and yellows of common flame warred against the emeralds and jades of wildfire, each color flaring and then fading, birthing armies of short-lived shadows to die again an instant later. Green dawns gave way to orange dusks in half a heartbeat. The air itself smelled *burnt*, the way a soup kettle sometimes smelled if it was left on the fire too long and all the soup boiled away. Embers drifted through the night air like swarms of fireflies.

Sansa backed away from the window, retreating toward the safety of her bed. *I'll go to sleep*, she told herself, *and when I wake it will be a new day, and the sky will be blue again. The fighting will be done and someone will tell me whether I'm to live or die.* "Lady," she whimpered softly, wondering if she would meet her wolf again when she was dead.

Then something stirred behind her, and a hand reached out of the dark and grabbed her wrist.

Sansa opened her mouth to scream, but another hand clamped down over her face, smothering her. His fingers were rough and callused, and sticky with blood. "Little bird. I knew you'd come." The voice was a drunken rasp.

Outside, a swirling lance of jade light spit at the stars, filling the room with green glare. She saw him for a moment, all black and green, the blood on his face dark as tar, his eyes glowing like a dog's in the sudden glare. Then the light faded and he was only a hulking darkness in a stained white cloak.

“If you scream I’ll kill you. Believe that.” He took his hand from her mouth. Her breath was coming ragged. The Hound had a flagon of wine on her bedside table. He took a long pull. “Don’t you want to ask who’s winning the battle, little bird?”

“Who?” she said, too frightened to defy him.

The Hound laughed. “I only know who’s lost. Me.”

*He is drunker than I’ve ever seen him. He was sleeping in my bed. What does he want here?* “What have you lost?”

“All.” The burnt half of his face was a mask of dried blood. “Bloody dwarf. Should have killed him. Years ago.”

“He’s dead, they say.”

“Dead? No. Bugger that. I don’t want him dead.” He cast the empty flagon aside. “I want him *burned*. If the gods are good, they’ll burn him, but I won’t be here to see. I’m going.”

“Going?” She tried to wriggle free, but his grasp was iron.

“The little bird repeats whatever she hears. *Going*, yes.”

“Where will you go?”

“Away from here. Away from the fires. Go out the Iron Gate, I suppose. North somewhere, anywhere.”

“You won’t get out,” Sansa said. “The queen’s closed up Maegor’s, and the city gates are shut as well.”

“Not to me. I have the white cloak. And I have *this*.” He patted the pommel of his sword. “The man who tries to stop me is a dead man. Unless he’s on fire.” He laughed bitterly.

“Why did you come here?”

“You promised me a song, little bird. Have you forgotten?”

She didn’t know what he meant. She couldn’t sing for him now, here, with the sky aswirl with fire and men dying in their hundreds and their thousands. “I can’t,” she said. “Let me go, you’re scaring me.”

“Everything scares you. Look at me. *Look* at me.”

The blood masked the worst of his scars, but his eyes were white and wide and terrifying. The burnt corner of his mouth twitched and twitched again. Sansa could smell him; a stink of sweat and sour wine and stale vomit, and over it all the reek of blood, blood, blood.

“I could keep you safe,” he rasped. “They’re all afraid of me. No one would hurt you again, or I’d kill them.” He yanked her closer, and for a moment she thought he meant to kiss her. He was too strong to fight. She closed her eyes, wanting it to be over, but nothing happened. “Still can’t bear to look, can you?” she heard him say. He gave her arm a hard wrench, pulling her around and shoving her down onto the bed. “I’ll have that song. Florian and Jonquil, you said.” His dagger was out, poised at her throat. “Sing, little bird. Sing for your little life.”

Her throat was dry and tight with fear, and every song she had ever known had fled from her mind. *Please don’t kill me*, she wanted to scream, *please don’t*. She could feel him twisting the point, pushing it into her throat, and she almost closed her eyes again, but then she remembered. It was not the song of Florian and Jonquil, but it was a song. Her voice sounded small and thin and tremulous in her ears.

*Gentle Mother, font of mercy,  
save our sons from war; we pray,  
stay the swords and stay the arrows,  
let them know a better day.  
Gentle Mother, strength of women,  
help our daughters through this fray,  
soothe the wrath and tame the fury,  
teach us all a kinder way.*

She had forgotten the other verses. When her voice trailed off, she feared he might kill her, but after a moment the Hound took the blade from her throat, never speaking.

Some instinct made her lift her hand and cup his cheek with her fingers. The room was too dark for her to see him, but she could feel the stickiness of the blood, and a wetness that was not blood. “Little bird,” he said once more, his voice raw and harsh as steel on stone. Then he rose from the bed.

Sansa heard cloth ripping, followed by the softer sound of retreating footsteps.

When she crawled out of bed, long moments later, she was alone. She found his cloak on the floor, twisted up tight, the white wool stained by blood and fire. The sky outside was darker by then, with only a few pale green ghosts dancing against the stars. A chill wind was blowing, banging the shutters. Sansa was cold. She shook out the torn cloak and huddled beneath it on the floor, shivering.

How long she stayed there she could not have said, but after a time she heard a bell ringing, far off across the city. The sound was a deep-throated bronze booming, coming faster with each knell. Sansa was wondering what it might mean when a second bell joined in, and a third, their voices calling across the hills and hollows, the alleys and towers, to every corner of King's Landing. She threw off the cloak and went to her window.

The first faint hint of dawn was visible in the east, and the Red Keep's own bells were ringing now, joining in the swelling river of sound that flowed from the seven crystal towers of the Great Sept of Baelor. They had rung the bells when King Robert died, she remembered, but this was different, no slow dolorous death knell but a joyful thunder. She could hear men shouting in the streets as well, and something that could only be cheers.

It was Ser Dontos who brought her the word. He staggered through her open door, wrapped her in his flabby arms, and whirled her around and around the room, whooping so incoherently that Sansa understood not a word of it. He was as drunk as the Hound had been, but in him it was a dancing happy drunk. She was breathless and dizzy when he let her down. "What is it?" She clutched at a bedpost. "What's happened? Tell me!"

"It's done! Done! Done! The city is saved. Lord Stannis is dead, Lord Stannis is fled, no one knows, no one cares, his host is broken, the danger's done. Slaughtered, scattered, or gone over, they say. Oh, the bright banners! The banners, Jonquil, the banners! Do you have any wine? We ought to drink to this day, yes. It means you're safe, don't you see?"

*"Tell me what's happened!"* Sansa shook him.

Ser Dontos laughed and hopped from one leg to the other, almost falling. “They came up through the ashes while the river was burning. The river, Stannis was neck deep in the river, and they took him from the rear. Oh, to be a knight again, to have been part of it! His own men hardly fought, they say. Some ran but more bent the knee and went over, shouting for Lord Renly! What must Stannis have thought when he heard that? I had it from Osney Kettleblack who had it from Ser Osmund, but Ser Balon’s back now and his men say the same, and the gold cloaks as well. We’re delivered, sweetling! They came up the roseroad and along the riverbank, through all the fields Stannis had burned, the ashes puffing up around their boots and turning all their armor grey, but oh! the *banners* must have been bright, the golden rose and golden lion and all the others, the Marbrand tree and the Rowan, Tarly’s huntsman and Redwyne’s grapes and Lady Oakheart’s leaf. All the westermen, all the power of Highgarden and Casterly Rock! Lord Tywin himself had their right wing on the north side of the river, with Randyll Tarly commanding the center and Mace Tyrell the left, but the vanguard won the fight. They plunged through Stannis like a lance through a pumpkin, every man of them howling like some demon in steel. And do you know who led the vanguard? Do you? Do you? *Do you?*”

“Robb?” It was too much to be hoped, but...

“It was *Lord Renly*! Lord Renly in his green armor, with the fires shimmering off his golden antlers! Lord Renly with his tall spear in his hand! They say he killed Ser Guyard Morrigen himself in single combat, and a dozen other great knights as well. It was Renly, it was Renly, it was Renly! Oh! the banners, darling Sansa! Oh! to be a knight!”