

SANSA

Sansa rode to the Hand's tourney with Septa Mordane and Jeyne Poole, in a litter with curtains of yellow silk so fine she could see right through them. They turned the whole world gold. Beyond the city walls, a hundred pavilions had been raised beside the river, and the common folk came out in the thousands to watch the games. The splendor of it all took Sansa's breath away; the shining armor, the great chargers caparisoned in silver and gold, the shouts of the crowd, the banners snapping in the wind... and the knights themselves, the knights most of all.

"It is better than the songs," she whispered when they found the places that her father had promised her, among the high lords and ladies. Sansa was dressed beautifully that day, in a green gown that brought out the auburn of her hair, and she knew they were looking at her and smiling.

They watched the heroes of a hundred songs ride forth, each more fabulous than the last. The seven knights of the Kingsguard took the field, all but Jaime Lannister in scaled armor the color of milk, their cloaks as white as freshfallen snow. Ser Jaime wore the white cloak as well, but beneath it he was shining gold from head to foot, with a lion's-head helm and a golden sword. Ser Gregor Clegane, the Mountain That Rides, thundered past them like an avalanche. Sansa remembered Lord Yohn Royce, who had guested at Winterfell two years before. "His armor is bronze, thousands and thousands of years old, engraved with magic runes that ward him against harm," she whispered to Jeyne. Septa Mordane pointed out Lord Jason Mallister, in indigo chased with silver, the wings of an eagle on his helm. He had cut down three of Rhaegar's bannermen on the Trident. The girls giggled over the warrior priest Thoros of Myr, with his flapping red robes and shaven head, until the septa told them that he had once scaled the walls of Pyke with a flaming sword in hand.

Other riders Sansa did not know; hedge knights from the Fingers and Highgarden and the mountains of Dorne, unsung freeriders and new-made squires, the younger sons of high lords and the heirs of lesser houses.

Younger men, most had done no great deeds as yet, but Sansa and Jeyne agreed that one day the Seven Kingdoms would resound to the sound of their names. Ser Balon Swann. Lord Bryce Caron of the Marches. Bronze Yohn's heir, Ser Andar Royce, and his younger brother Ser Robar, their silvered steel plate filigreed in bronze with the same ancient runes that warded their father. The twins Ser Horas and Ser Hobber, whose shields displayed the grape cluster sigil of the Redwynes, burgundy on blue. Patrek Mallister, Lord Jason's son. Six Freys of the Crossing: Ser Jared, Ser Hosteen, Ser Danwell, Ser Emmon, Ser Theo, Ser Perwyn, sons and grandsons of old Lord Walder Frey, and his bastard son Martyn Rivers as well.

Jeyne Poole confessed herself frightened by the look of Jalabhar Xho, an exile prince from the Summer Isles who wore a cape of green and scarlet feathers over skin as dark as night, but when she saw young Lord Beric Dondarrion, with his hair like red gold and his black shield slashed by lightning, she pronounced herself willing to marry him on the instant.

The Hound entered the lists as well, and so too the king's brother, handsome Lord Renly of Storm's End. Jory, Alyn, and Harwin rode for Winterfell and the north. "Jory looks a beggar among these others," Septa Mordane sniffed when he appeared. Sansa could only agree. Jory's armor was blue-grey plate without device or ornament, and a thin grey cloak hung from his shoulders like a soiled rag. Yet he acquitted himself well, unhorsing Horas Redwyne in his first joust and one of the Freys in his second. In his third match, he rode three passes at a freerider named Luthor Brune whose armor was as drab as his own. Neither man lost his seat, but Brune's lance was steadier and his blows better placed, and the king gave him the victory. Alyn and Harwin fared less well; Harwin was unhorsed in his first tilt by Ser Meryn of the Kingsguard, while Alyn fell to Ser Balon Swann.

The jousting went all day and into the dusk, the hooves of the great warhorses pounding down the lists until the field was a ragged wasteland of torn earth. A dozen times Jeyne and Sansa cried out in unison as riders crashed together, lances exploding into splinters while the commons

screamed for their favorites. Jeyne covered her eyes whenever a man fell, like a frightened little girl, but Sansa was made of sterner stuff. A great lady knew how to behave at tournaments. Even Septa Mordane noted her composure and nodded in approval.

The Kingslayer rode brilliantly. He overthrew Ser Andar Royce and the Marcher Lord Bryce Caron as easily as if he were riding at rings, and then took a hard-fought match from white-haired Barristan Selmy, who had won his first two tilts against men thirty and forty years his junior.

Sandor Clegane and his immense brother, Ser Gregor the Mountain, seemed unstoppable as well, riding down one foe after the next in ferocious style. The most terrifying moment of the day came during Ser Gregor's second joust, when his lance rode up and struck a young knight from the Vale under the gorget with such force that it drove through his throat, killing him instantly. The youth fell not ten feet from where Sansa was seated. The point of Ser Gregor's lance had snapped off in his neck, and his life's blood flowed out in slow pulses, each weaker than the one before. His armor was shiny new; a bright streak of fire ran down his outstretched arm, as the steel caught the light. Then the sun went behind a cloud, and it was gone. His cloak was blue, the color of the sky on a clear summer's day, trimmed with a border of crescent moons, but as his blood seeped into it, the cloth darkened and the moons turned red, one by one.

Jeyne Poole wept so hysterically that Septa Mordane finally took her off to regain her composure, but Sansa sat with her hands folded in her lap, watching with a strange fascination. She had never seen a man die before. She ought to be crying too, she thought, but the tears would not come. Perhaps she had used up all her tears for Lady and Bran. It would be different if it had been Jory or Ser Rodrik or Father, she told herself. The young knight in the blue cloak was nothing to her, some stranger from the Vale of Arryn whose name she had forgotten as soon as she heard it. And now the world would forget his name too, Sansa realized; there would be no songs sung for him. That was sad.

After they carried off the body, a boy with a spade ran onto the field and shoveled dirt over the spot where he had fallen, to cover up the blood.

Then the jousts resumed.

Ser Balon Swann also fell to Gregor, and Lord Renly to the Hound. Renly was unhorsed so violently that he seemed to fly backward off his charger, legs in the air. His head hit the ground with an audible crack that made the crowd gasp, but it was just the golden antler on his helm. One of the tines had snapped off beneath him. When Lord Renly climbed to his feet, the commons cheered wildly, for King Robert's handsome young brother was a great favorite. He handed the broken tine to his conqueror with a gracious bow. The Hound snorted and tossed the broken antler into the crowd, where the commons began to punch and claw over the little bit of gold, until Lord Renly walked out among them and restored the peace. By then Septa Mordane had returned, alone. Jeyne had been feeling ill, she explained; she had helped her back to the castle. Sansa had almost forgotten about Jeyne.

Later a hedge knight in a checkered cloak disgraced himself by killing Beric Dondarrion's horse, and was declared forfeit. Lord Beric shifted his saddle to a new mount, only to be knocked right off it by Thoros of Myr. Ser Aron Santagar and Lothor Brune tilted thrice without result; Ser Aron fell afterward to Lord Jason Mallister, and Brune to Yohn Royce's younger son, Robar.

In the end it came down to four; the Hound and his monstrous brother Gregor, Jaime Lannister the Kingslayer, and Ser Loras Tyrell, the youth they called the Knight of Flowers.

Ser Loras was the youngest son of Mace Tyrell, the Lord of Highgarden and Warden of the South. At sixteen, he was the youngest rider on the field, yet he had unhorsed three knights of the Kingsguard that morning in his first three jousts. Sansa had never seen anyone so beautiful. His plate was intricately fashioned and enameled as a bouquet of a thousand different flowers, and his snow-white stallion was draped in a blanket of red and white roses. After each victory, Ser Loras would remove his helm and ride slowly round the fence, and finally pluck a single white rose from the blanket and toss it to some fair maiden in the crowd.

His last match of the day was against the younger Royce. Ser Robar's ancestral runes proved small protection as Ser Loras split his shield and drove him from his saddle to crash with an awful clangor in the dirt. Robar lay moaning as the victor made his circuit of the field. Finally they called for a litter and carried him off to his tent, dazed and unmoving. Sansa never saw it. Her eyes were only for Ser Loras. When the white horse stopped in front of her, she thought her heart would burst.

To the other maidens he had given white roses, but the one he plucked for her was red. "Sweet lady," he said, "no victory is half so beautiful as you." Sansa took the flower timidly, struck dumb by his gallantry. His hair was a mass of lazy brown curls, his eyes like liquid gold. She inhaled the sweet fragrance of the rose and sat clutching it long after Ser Loras had ridden off.

When Sansa finally looked up, a man was standing over her, staring. He was short, with a pointed beard and a silver streak in his hair, almost as old as her father. "You must be one of her daughters," he said to her. He had grey-green eyes that did not smile when his mouth did. "You have the Tully look."

"I'm Sansa Stark," she said, ill at ease. The man wore a heavy cloak with a fur collar, fastened with a silver mockingbird, and he had the effortless manner of a high lord, but she did not know him. "I have not had the honor, my lord."

Septa Mordane quickly took a hand. "Sweet child, this is Lord Petyr Baelish, of the king's small council."

"Your mother was *my* queen of beauty once," the man said quietly. His breath smelled of mint. "You have her hair." His fingers brushed against her cheek as he stroked one auburn lock. Quite abruptly he turned and walked away.

By then, the moon was well up and the crowd was tired, so the king decreed that the last three matches would be fought the next morning, before the melee. While the commons began their walk home, talking of the day's jousts and the matches to come on the morrow, the court moved to the riverside to begin the feast. Six monstrous huge aurochs had been roasting

for hours, turning slowly on wooden spits while kitchen boys basted them with butter and herbs until the meat crackled and spit. Tables and benches had been raised outside the pavilions, piled high with sweetgrass and strawberries and fresh-baked bread.

Sansa and Septa Mordane were given places of high honor, to the left of the raised dais where the king himself sat beside his queen. When Prince Joffrey seated himself to her right, she felt her throat tighten. He had not spoken a word to her since the awful thing had happened, and she had not dared to speak to him. At first she thought she hated him for what they'd done to Lady, but after Sansa had wept her eyes dry, she told herself that it had not been Joffrey's doing, not truly. The queen had done it; she was the one to hate, her and Arya. Nothing bad would have happened except for Arya.

She could not hate Joffrey tonight. He was too beautiful to hate. He wore a deep blue doublet studded with a double row of golden lion's heads, and around his brow a slim coronet made of gold and sapphires. His hair was as bright as the metal. Sansa looked at him and trembled, afraid that he might ignore her or, worse, turn hateful again and send her weeping from the table.

Instead Joffrey smiled and kissed her hand, handsome and gallant as any prince in the songs, and said, "Ser Loras has a keen eye for beauty, sweet lady."

"He was too kind," she demurred, trying to remain modest and calm, though her heart was singing. "Ser Loras is a true knight. Do you think he will win tomorrow, my lord?"

"No," Joffrey said. "My dog will do for him, or perhaps my uncle Jaime. And in a few years, when I am old enough to enter the lists, I shall do for them all." He raised his hand to summon a servant with a flagon of iced summerwine, and poured her a cup. She looked anxiously at Septa Mordane, until Joffrey leaned over and filled the septa's cup as well, so she nodded and thanked him graciously and said not another word.

The servants kept the cups filled all night, yet afterward Sansa could not recall ever tasting the wine. She needed no wine. She was drunk on the

magic of the night, giddy with glamour, swept away by beauties she had dreamt of all her life and never dared hope to know. Singers sat before the king's pavilion, filling the dusk with music. A juggler kept a cascade of burning clubs spinning through the air. The king's own fool, the pie-faced simpleton called Moon Boy, danced about on stilts, all in motley, making mock of everyone with such deft cruelty that Sansa wondered if he was simple after all. Even Septa Mordane was helpless before him; when he sang his little song about the High Septon, she laughed so hard she spilled wine on herself.

And Joffrey was the soul of courtesy. He talked to Sansa all night, showering her with compliments, making her laugh, sharing little bits of court gossip, explaining Moon Boy's japes. Sansa was so captivated that she quite forgot all her courtesies and ignored Septa Mordane, seated to her left.

All the while the courses came and went. A thick soup of barley and venison. Salads of sweetgrass and spinach and plums, sprinkled with crushed nuts. Snails in honey and garlic. Sansa had never eaten snails before; Joffrey showed her how to get the snail out of the shell, and fed her the first sweet morsel himself. Then came trout fresh from the river, baked in clay; her prince helped her crack open the hard casing to expose the flaky white flesh within. And when the meat course was brought out, he served her himself, slicing a queen's portion from the joint, smiling as he laid it on her plate. She could see from the way he moved that his right arm was still troubling him, yet he uttered not a word of complaint.

Later came sweetbreads and pigeon pie and baked apples fragrant with cinnamon and lemon cakes frosted in sugar, but by then Sansa was so stuffed that she could not manage more than two little lemon cakes, as much as she loved them. She was wondering whether she might attempt a third when the king began to shout.

King Robert had grown louder with each course. From time to time Sansa could hear him laughing or roaring a command over the music and the clangor of plates and cutlery, but they were too far away for her to make out his words.

Now everybody heard him. “*No*,” he thundered in a voice that drowned out all other speech. Sansa was shocked to see the king on his feet, red of face, reeling. He had a goblet of wine in one hand, and he was drunk as a man could be. “You do not tell me what to do, woman,” he screamed at Queen Cersei. “I am king here, do you understand? I rule here, and if I say that I will fight tomorrow, *I will fight!*”

Everyone was staring. Sansa saw Ser Barristan, and the king’s brother Renly, and the short man who had talked to her so oddly and touched her hair, but no one made a move to interfere. The queen’s face was a mask, so bloodless that it might have been sculpted from snow. She rose from the table, gathered her skirts around her, and stormed off in silence, servants trailing behind.

Jaime Lannister put a hand on the king’s shoulder, but the king shoved him away hard. Lannister stumbled and fell. The king guffawed. “The great knight. I can still knock you in the dirt. Remember that, Kingslayer.” He slapped his chest with the jeweled goblet, splashing wine all over his satin tunic. “Give me my hammer and not a man in the realm can stand before me!”

Jaime Lannister rose and brushed himself off. “As you say, Your Grace.” His voice was stiff.

Lord Renly came forward, smiling. “You’ve spilled your wine, Robert. Let me bring you a fresh goblet.”

Sansa started as Joffrey laid his hand on her arm. “It grows late,” the prince said. He had a queer look on his face, as if he were not seeing her at all. “Do you need an escort back to the castle?”

“No,” Sansa began. She looked for Septa Mordane, and was startled to find her with her head on the table, snoring soft and ladylike snores. “I mean to say... yes, thank you, that would be most kind. I am tired, and the way is so dark. I should be glad for some protection.”

Joffrey called out, “*Dog!*”

Sandor Clegane seemed to take form out of the night, so quickly did he appear. He had exchanged his armor for a red woolen tunic with a leather

dog's head sewn on the front. The light of the torches made his burned face shine a dull red. "Yes, Your Grace?" he said.

"Take my betrothed back to the castle, and see that no harm befalls her," the prince told him brusquely. And without even a word of farewell, Joffrey strode off, leaving her there.

Sansa could *feel* the Hound watching her. "Did you think Joff was going to take you himself?" He laughed. He had a laugh like the snarling of dogs in a pit. "Small chance of that." He pulled her unresisting to her feet. "Come, you're not the only one needs sleep. I've drunk too much, and I may need to kill my brother tomorrow." He laughed again.

Suddenly terrified, Sansa pushed at Septa Mordane's shoulder, hoping to wake her, but she only snored the louder. King Robert had stumbled off and half the benches were suddenly empty. The feast was over, and the beautiful dream had ended with it.

The Hound snatched up a torch to light their way. Sansa followed close beside him. The ground was rocky and uneven; the flickering light made it seem to shift and move beneath her. She kept her eyes lowered, watching where she placed her feet. They walked among the pavilions, each with its banner and its armor hung outside, the silence weighing heavier with every step. Sansa could not bear the sight of him, he frightened her so, yet she had been raised in all the ways of courtesy. A true lady would not notice his face, she told herself. "You rode gallantly today, Ser Sandor," she made herself say.

Sandor Clegane snarled at her. "Spare me your empty little compliments, girl... and your *ser*'s. I am no knight. I spit on them and their vows. My brother is a knight. Did you see him ride today?"

"Yes," Sansa whispered, trembling. "He was..."

"Gallant?" the Hound finished.

He was mocking her, she realized. "No one could withstand him," she managed at last, proud of herself. It was no lie.

Sandor Clegane stopped suddenly in the middle of a dark and empty field. She had no choice but to stop beside him. "Some septa trained you

well. You're like one of those birds from the Summer Isles, aren't you? A pretty little talking bird, repeating all the pretty little words they taught you to recite."

"That's unkind." Sansa could feel her heart fluttering in her chest. "You're frightening me. I want to go now."

"*No one could withstand him,*" the Hound rasped. "That's truth enough. No one could ever withstand Gregor. That boy today, his second joust, oh, that was a pretty bit of business. You saw that, did you? Fool boy, he had no business riding in this company. No money, no squire, no one to help him with that armor. That gorget wasn't fastened proper. You think Gregor didn't notice that? You think Ser Gregor's lance rode up by chance, do you? Pretty little talking girl, you believe that, you're empty-headed as a bird for true. Gregor's lance goes where Gregor wants it to go. Look at me. *Look at me!*" Sandor Clegane put a huge hand under her chin and forced her face up. He squatted in front of her, and moved the torch close. "There's a pretty for you. Take a good long stare. You know you want to. I've watched you turning away all the way down the kingsroad. Piss on that. Take your look."

His fingers held her jaw as hard as an iron trap. His eyes watched hers. Drunken eyes, sullen with anger. She had to look.

The right side of his face was gaunt, with sharp cheekbones and a grey eye beneath a heavy brow. His nose was large and hooked, his hair thin, dark. He wore it long and brushed it sideways, because no hair grew on the *other* side of that face.

The left side of his face was a ruin. His ear had been burned away; there was nothing left but a hole. His eye was still good, but all around it was a twisted mass of scar, slick black flesh hard as leather, pocked with craters and fissured by deep cracks that gleamed red and wet when he moved. Down by his jaw, you could see a hint of bone where the flesh had been seared away.

Sansa began to cry. He let go of her then, and snuffed out the torch in the dirt. "No pretty words for that, girl? No little compliment the septa taught you?" When there was no answer, he continued. "Most of them, they think it was some battle. A siege, a burning tower, an enemy with a torch.

One fool asked if it was dragonsbreath.” His laugh was softer this time, but just as bitter. “I’ll tell you what it was, girl,” he said, a voice from the night, a shadow leaning so close now that she could smell the sour stench of wine on his breath. “I was younger than you, six, maybe seven. A woodcarver set up shop in the village under my father’s keep, and to buy favor he sent us gifts. The old man made marvelous toys. I don’t remember what I got, but it was Gregor’s gift I wanted. A wooden knight, all painted up, every joint pegged separate and fixed with strings, so you could make him fight. Gregor is five years older than me, the toy was nothing to him, he was already a squire, near six foot tall and muscled like an ox. So I took his knight, but there was no joy to it, I tell you. I was scared all the while, and true enough, he found me. There was a brazier in the room. Gregor never said a word, just picked me up under his arm and shoved the side of my face down in the burning coals and held me there while I screamed and screamed. You saw how strong he is. Even then, it took three grown men to drag him off me. The septons preach about the seven hells. What do they know? Only a man who’s been burned knows what hell is truly like.

“My father told everyone my bedding had caught fire, and our maester gave me ointments. *Ointments!* Gregor got his ointments too. Four years later, they anointed him with the seven oils and he recited his knightly vows and Rhaegar Targaryen tapped him on the shoulder and said, ‘Arise, Ser Gregor.’”

The rasping voice trailed off. He squatted silently before her, a hulking black shape shrouded in the night, hidden from her eyes. Sansa could hear his ragged breathing. She was sad for him, she realized. Somehow, the fear had gone away.

The silence went on and on, so long that she began to grow afraid once more, but she was afraid for him now, not for herself. She found his massive shoulder with her hand. “He was no true knight,” she whispered to him.

The Hound threw back his head and roared. Sansa stumbled back, away from him, but he caught her arm. “No,” he growled at her, “no, little bird, he was no true knight.”

The rest of the way into the city, Sandor Clegane said not a word. He led her to where the carts were waiting, told a driver to take them back to the Red Keep, and climbed in after her. They rode in silence through the King's Gate and up torchlit city streets. He opened the postern door and led her into the castle, his burned face twitching and his eyes brooding, and he was one step behind her as they climbed the tower stairs. He took her safe all the way to the corridor outside her bedchamber.

"Thank you, my lord," Sansa said meekly.

The Hound caught her by the arm and leaned close. "The things I told you tonight," he said, his voice sounding even rougher than usual. "If you ever tell Joffrey... your sister, your father... any of them..."

"I won't," Sansa whispered. "I promise."

It was not enough. "If you ever tell *anyone*," he finished, "I'll kill you."