

SANSA

The morning of King Joffrey's name day dawned bright and windy, with the long tail of the great comet visible through the high scuttling clouds. Sansa was watching it from her tower window when Ser Arys Oakheart arrived to escort her down to the tourney grounds. "What do you think it means?" she asked him.

"Glory to your betrothed," Ser Arys answered at once. "See how it flames across the sky today on His Grace's name day, as if the gods themselves had raised a banner in his honor. The smallfolk have named it King Joffrey's Comet."

Doubtless that was what they told Joffrey; Sansa was not so sure. "I've heard servants calling it the Dragon's Tail."

"King Joffrey sits where Aegon the Dragon once sat, in the castle built by his son," Ser Arys said. "He is the dragon's heir—and crimson is the color of House Lannister, another sign. This comet is sent to herald Joffrey's ascent to the throne, I have no doubt. It means that he will triumph over his enemies."

Is it true? she wondered. *Would the gods be so cruel?* Her mother was one of Joffrey's enemies now, her brother Robb another. Her father had died by the king's command. Must Robb and her lady mother die next? The comet was red, but Joffrey was Baratheon as much as Lannister, and their sigil was a black stag on a golden field. Shouldn't the gods have sent Joff a golden comet?

Sansa closed the shutters and turned sharply away from the window. "You look very lovely today, my lady," Ser Arys said.

"Thank you, ser." Knowing that Joffrey would require her to attend the tourney in his honor, Sansa had taken special care with her face and clothes. She wore a gown of pale purple silk and a moonstone hair net that had been a gift from Joffrey. The gown had long sleeves to hide the bruises on her arms. Those were Joffrey's gifts as well. When they told him that Robb had

been proclaimed King in the North, his rage had been a fearsome thing, and he had sent Ser Boros to beat her.

“Shall we go?” Ser Arys offered his arm and she let him lead her from her chamber. If she must have one of the Kingsguard dogging her steps, Sansa preferred that it be him. Ser Boros was short-tempered, Ser Meryn cold, and Ser Mandon’s strange dead eyes made her uneasy, while Ser Preston treated her like a lackwit child. Arys Oakheart was courteous, and would talk to her cordially. Once he even objected when Joffrey commanded him to hit her. He *did* hit her in the end, but not hard as Ser Meryn or Ser Boros might have, and at least he had argued. The others obeyed without question... except for the Hound, but Joff never asked the Hound to punish her. He used the other five for that.

Ser Arys had light brown hair and a face that was not unpleasant to look upon. Today he made quite the dashing figure, with his white silk cloak fastened at the shoulder by a golden leaf, and a spreading oak tree worked upon the breast of his tunic in shining gold thread. “Who do you think will win the day’s honors?” Sansa asked as they descended the steps arm in arm.

“I will,” Ser Arys answered, smiling. “Yet I fear the triumph will have no savor. This will be a small field, and poor. No more than two score will enter the lists, including squires and freeriders. There is small honor in unhorsing green boys.”

The last tourney had been different, Sansa reflected. King Robert had staged it in her father’s honor. High lords and fabled champions had come from all over the realm to compete, and the whole city had turned out to watch. She remembered the splendor of it: the field of pavilions along the river with a knight’s shield hung before each door, the long rows of silken pennants waving in the wind, the gleam of sunlight on bright steel and gilded spurs. The days had rung to the sounds of trumpets and pounding hooves, and the nights had been full of feasts and song. Those had been the most magical days of her life, but they seemed a memory from another age now. Robert Baratheon was dead, and her father as well, beheaded for a traitor on the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor. Now there were three kings

in the land, and war raged beyond the Trident while the city filled with desperate men. Small wonder that they had to hold Joff's tournament behind the thick stone walls of the Red Keep.

"Will the queen attend, do you think?" Sansa always felt safer when Cersei was there to restrain her son.

"I fear not, my lady. The council is meeting, some urgent business." Ser Arys dropped his voice. "Lord Tywin has gone to ground at Harrenhal instead of bringing his army to the city as the queen commanded. Her Grace is furious." He fell silent as a column of Lannister guardsmen marched past, in crimson cloaks and lion-crested helms. Ser Arys was fond of gossip, but only when he was certain that no one was listening.

The carpenters had erected a gallery and lists in the outer bailey. It was a poor thing indeed, and the meager throng that had gathered to watch filled but half the seats. Most of the spectators were guardsmen in the gold cloaks of the City Watch or the crimson of House Lannister; of lords and ladies there were but a paltry few, the handful that remained at court. Grey-faced Lord Gyles Rosby was coughing into a square of pink silk. Lady Tanda was bracketed by her daughters, placid dull Lollys and acid-tongued Falyse. Ebon-skinned Jalabhar Xho was an exile who had no other refuge, Lady Ermesande a babe seated on her wet nurse's lap. The talk was she would soon be wed to one of the queen's cousins, so the Lannisters might claim her lands.

The king was shaded beneath a crimson canopy, one leg thrown negligently over the carved wooden arm of his chair. Princess Myrcella and Prince Tommen sat behind him. In the back of the royal box, Sandor Clegane stood at guard, his hands resting on his swordbelt. The white cloak of the Kingsguard was draped over his broad shoulders and fastened with a jeweled brooch, the snowy cloth looking somehow unnatural against his brown roughspun tunic and studded leather jerkin. "Lady Sansa," the Hound announced curtly when he saw her. His voice was as rough as the sound of a saw on wood. The burn scars on his face and throat made one side of his mouth twitch when he spoke.

Princess Myrcella nodded a shy greeting at the sound of Sansa's name, but plump little Prince Tommen jumped up eagerly. "Sansa, did you hear? I'm to ride in the tourney today. Mother said I could." Tommen was all of eight. He reminded her of her own little brother, Bran. They were of an age. Bran was back at Winterfell, a cripple, yet safe.

Sansa would have given anything to be with him. "I fear for the life of your foeman," she told Tommen solemnly.

"His foeman will be stuffed with straw," Joff said as he rose. The king was clad in a gilded breastplate with a roaring lion engraved upon its chest, as if he expected the war to engulf them at any moment. He was thirteen today, and tall for his age, with the green eyes and golden hair of the Lannisters.

"Your Grace," she said, dipping in a curtsy.

Ser Arys bowed. "Pray pardon me, Your Grace. I must equip myself for the lists."

Joffrey waved a curt dismissal while he studied Sansa from head to heels. "I'm pleased you wore my stones."

So the king had decided to play the gallant today. Sansa was relieved. "I thank you for them... and for your tender words. I pray you a lucky name day, Your Grace."

"Sit," Joff commanded, gesturing her to the empty seat beside his own. "Have you heard? The Beggar King is dead."

"Who?" For a moment Sansa was afraid he meant Robb.

"Viserys. The last son of Mad King Aerys. He's been going about the Free Cities since before I was born, calling himself a king. Well, Mother says the Dothraki finally crowned him. With molten gold." He laughed. "That's funny, don't you think? The dragon was their sigil. It's almost as good as if some wolf killed your traitor brother. Maybe I'll feed him to wolves after I've caught him. Did I tell you, I intend to challenge him to single combat?"

"I should like to see that, Your Grace." *More than you know.* Sansa kept her tone cool and polite, yet even so Joffrey's eyes narrowed as he

tried to decide whether she was mocking him. “Will you enter the lists today?” she asked quickly.

The king frowned. “My lady mother said it was not fitting, since the tourney is in my honor. Otherwise I would have been champion. Isn’t that so, dog?”

The Hound’s mouth twitched. “Against this lot? Why not?”

He had been the champion in her father’s tourney, Sansa remembered. “Will you joust today, my lord?” she asked him.

Clegane’s voice was thick with contempt. “Wouldn’t be worth the bother of arming myself. This is a tournament of gnats.”

The king laughed. “My dog has a fierce bark. Perhaps I should command him to fight the day’s champion. To the death.” Joffrey was fond of making men fight to the death.

“You’d be one knight the poorer.” The Hound had never taken a knight’s vows. His brother was a knight, and he hated his brother.

A blare of trumpets sounded. The king settled back in his seat and took Sansa’s hand. Once that would have set her heart to pounding, but that was before he had answered her plea for mercy by presenting her with her father’s head. His touch filled her with revulsion now, but she knew better than to show it. She made herself sit very still.

“*Ser Meryn Trant of the Kingsguard*,” a herald called.

Ser Meryn entered from the west side of the yard, clad in gleaming white plate chased with gold and mounted on a milk-white charger with a flowing grey mane. His cloak streamed behind him like a field of snow. He carried a twelve-foot lance.

“*Ser Hobber of House Redwyne, of the Arbor*,” the herald sang. Ser Hobber trotted in from the east, riding a black stallion caparisoned in burgundy and blue. His lance was striped in the same colors, and his shield bore the grape cluster sigil of his House. The Redwyne twins were the queen’s unwilling guests, even as Sansa was. She wondered whose notion it had been for them to ride in Joffrey’s tourney. Not their own, she thought.

At a signal from the master of revels, the combatants couched their lances and put their spurs to their mounts. There were shouts from the watching guardsmen and the lords and ladies in the gallery. The knights came together in the center of the yard with a great shock of wood and steel. The white lance and the striped one exploded in splinters within a second of each other. Hobber Redwyne reeled at the impact, yet somehow managed to keep his seat. Wheeling their horses about at the far end of the lists, the knights tossed down their broken lances and accepted replacements from the squires. Ser Horas Redwyne, Ser Hobber's twin, shouted encouragement to his brother.

But on their second pass Ser Meryn swung the point of his lance to strike Ser Hobber in the chest, driving him from the saddle to crash resoundingly to the earth. Ser Horas cursed and ran out to help his battered brother from the field.

"Poorly ridden," declared King Joffrey.

"*Ser Balon Swann, of Stonehelm in the Red Watch,*" came the herald's cry. Wide white wings ornamented Ser Balon's greathelm, and black and white swans fought on his shield. "*Morros of House Slynt, heir to Lord Janos of Harrenhal.*"

"Look at that upjumped oaf," Joff hooted, loud enough for half the yard to hear. Morros, a mere squire and a new-made squire at that, was having difficulty managing lance and shield. The lance was a knight's weapon, Sansa knew, the Slynts lowborn. Lord Janos had been no more than commander of the City Watch before Joffrey had raised him to Harrenhal and the council.

I hope he falls and shames himself, she thought bitterly. *I hope Ser Balon kills him.* When Joffrey proclaimed her father's death, it had been Janos Slynt who seized Lord Eddard's severed head by the hair and raised it on high for king and crowd to behold, while Sansa wept and screamed.

Morros wore a checkered black-and-gold cloak over black armor inlaid with golden scrollwork. On his shield was the bloody spear his father had chosen as the sigil of their new-made house. But he did not seem to know what to do with the shield as he urged his horse forward, and Ser Balon's

point struck the blazon square. Morros dropped his lance, fought for balance, and lost. One foot caught in a stirrup as he fell, and the runaway charger dragged the youth to the end of the lists, head bouncing against the ground. Joff hooted derision. Sansa was appalled, wondering if the gods had heard her vengeful prayer. But when they disentangled Morros Slynt from his horse, they found him bloodied but alive. “Tommen, we picked the wrong foe for you,” the king told his brother. “The straw knight jousts better than that one.”

Next came Ser Horas Redwyne’s turn. He fared better than his twin, vanquishing an elderly knight whose mount was bedecked with silver griffins against a striped blue-and-white field. Splendid as he looked, the old man made a poor contest of it. Joffrey curled his lip. “This is a feeble show.”

“I warned you,” said the Hound. “Gnats.”

The king was growing bored. It made Sansa anxious. She lowered her eyes and resolved to keep quiet, no matter what. When Joffrey Baratheon’s mood darkened, any chance word might set off one of his rages.

“*Lothor Brune, freerider in the service of Lord Baelish,*” cried the herald. “*Ser Dontos the Red, of House Hollard.*”

The freerider, a small man in dented plate without device, duly appeared at the west end of the yard, but of his opponent there was no sign. Finally a chestnut stallion trotted into view in a swirl of crimson and scarlet silks, but Ser Dontos was not on it. The knight appeared a moment later, cursing and staggering, clad in breastplate and plumed helm and nothing else. His legs were pale and skinny, and his manhood flopped about obscenely as he chased after his horse. The watchers roared and shouted insults. Catching his horse by the bridle, Ser Dontos tried to mount, but the animal would not stand still and the knight was so drunk that his bare foot kept missing the stirrup.

By then the crowd was howling with laughter... all but the king. Joffrey had a look in his eyes that Sansa remembered well, the same look he’d had at the Great Sept of Baelor the day he pronounced death on Lord Eddard Stark. Finally Ser Dontos the Red gave it up for a bad job, sat down

in the dirt, and removed his plumed helm. “I lose,” he shouted. “Fetch me some wine.”

The king stood. “A cask from the cellars! I’ll see him drowned in it.”

Sansa heard herself gasp. “*No*, you can’t.”

Joffrey turned his head. “What did you say?”

Sansa could not believe she had spoken. Was she mad? To tell him *no* in front of half the court? She hadn’t meant to say anything, only... Ser Dontos was drunk and silly and useless, but he meant no harm.

“Did you say I *can*’t? Did you?”

“Please,” Sansa said, “I only meant... it would be ill luck, Your Grace... to, to kill a man on your name day.”

“You’re lying,” Joffrey said. “I ought to drown you with him, if you care for him so much.”

“I don’t care for him, Your Grace.” The words tumbled out desperately. “Drown him or have his head off, only... kill him on the morrow, if you like, but please... not today, not on your name day. I couldn’t bear for you to have ill luck... terrible luck, even for kings, the singers all say so...”

Joffrey scowled. He knew she was lying, she could see it. He would make her bleed for this.

“The girl speaks truly,” the Hound rasped. “What a man sows on his name day, he reaps throughout the year.” His voice was flat, as if he did not care a whit whether the king believed him or no. Could it be *true*? Sansa had not known. It was just something she’d said, desperate to avoid punishment.

Unhappy, Joffrey shifted in his seat and flicked his fingers at Ser Dontos. “Take him away. I’ll have him killed on the morrow, the fool.”

“He is,” Sansa said. “A fool. You’re so clever, to see it. He’s better fitted to be a fool than a knight, isn’t he? You ought to dress him in motley and make him clown for you. He doesn’t deserve the mercy of a quick death.”

The king studied her a moment. “Perhaps you’re not so stupid as Mother says.” He raised his voice. “Did you hear my lady, Dontos? From this day on, you’re my new fool. You can sleep with Moon Boy and dress in motley.”

Ser Dontos, sobered by his near brush with death, crawled to his knees. “Thank you, Your Grace. And you, my lady. Thank you.”

As a brace of Lannister guardsmen led him off, the master of revels approached the box. “Your Grace,” he said, “shall I summon a new challenger for Brune, or proceed with the next tilt?”

“Neither. These are gnats, not knights. I’d have them all put to death, only it’s my name day. The tourney is done. Get them all out of my sight.”

The master of revels bowed, but Prince Tommen was not so obedient. “I’m supposed to ride against the straw man.”

“Not today.”

“But I want to ride!”

“I don’t care what you want.”

“Mother *said* I could ride.”

“She said,” Princess Myrcella agreed.

“Mother *said*,” mocked the king. “Don’t be childish.”

“We’re children,” Myrcella declared haughtily. “We’re *supposed* to be childish.”

The Hound laughed. “She has you there.”

Joffrey was beaten. “Very well. Even my brother couldn’t tilt any worse than these others. Master, bring out the quintain, Tommen wants to be a gnat.”

Tommen gave a shout of joy and ran off to be readied, his chubby little legs pumping hard. “Luck,” Sansa called to him.

They set up the quintain at the far end of the lists while the prince’s pony was being saddled. Tommen’s opponent was a child-sized leather warrior stuffed with straw and mounted on a pivot, with a shield in one hand and a padded mace in the other. Someone had fastened a pair of

antlers to the knight's head. Joffrey's father King Robert had worn antlers on his helm, Sansa remembered... but so did his uncle Lord Renly, Robert's brother, who had turned traitor and crowned himself king.

A pair of squires buckled the prince into his ornate silver-and-crimson armor. A tall plume of red feathers sprouted from the crest of his helm, and the lion of Lannister and crowned stag of Baratheon frolicked together on his shield. The squires helped him mount, and Ser Aron Santagar, the Red Keep's master-at-arms, stepped forward and handed Tommen a blunted silver longsword with a leaf-shaped blade, crafted to fit an eight-year-old hand.

Tommen raised the blade high. "Casterly Rock!" he shouted in a high boyish voice as he put his heels into his pony and started across the hard-packed dirt at the quintain. Lady Tanda and Lord Gyles started a ragged cheer, and Sansa added her voice to theirs. The king brooded in silence.

Tommen got his pony up to a brisk trot, waved his sword vigorously, and struck the knight's shield a solid blow as he went by. The quintain spun, the padded mace flying around to give the prince a mighty whack in the back of his head. Tommen spilled from the saddle, his new armor rattling like a bag of old pots as he hit the ground. His sword went flying, his pony cantered away across the bailey, and a great gale of derision went up. King Joffrey laughed longest and loudest of all.

"Oh," Princess Myrcella cried. She scrambled out of the box and ran to her little brother.

Sansa found herself possessed of a queer giddy courage. "You should go with her," she told the king. "Your brother might be hurt."

Joffrey shrugged. "What if he is?"

"You should help him up and tell him how well he rode." Sansa could not seem to stop herself.

"He got knocked off his horse and fell in the dirt," the king pointed out. "That's not riding well."

"Look," the Hound interrupted. "The boy has courage. He's going to try again."

They were helping Prince Tommen mount his pony. *If only Tommen were the elder instead of Joffrey*, Sansa thought. *I wouldn't mind marrying Tommen.*

The sounds from the gatehouse took them by surprise. Chains rattled as the portcullis was drawn upward, and the great gates opened to the creak of iron hinges. "Who told them to open the gate?" Joff demanded. With the troubles in the city, the gates of the Red Keep had been closed for days.

A column of riders emerged from beneath the portcullis with a clink of steel and a clatter of hooves. Clegane stepped close to the king, one hand on the hilt of his longsword. The visitors were dented and haggard and dusty, yet the standard they carried was the lion of Lannister, golden on its crimson field. A few wore the red cloaks and mail of Lannister men-at-arms, but more were freeriders and sellswords, armored in oddments and bristling with sharp steel... and there were others, monstrous savages out of one of Old Nan's tales, the scary ones Bran used to love. They were clad in shabby skins and boiled leather, with long hair and fierce beards. Some wore bloodstained bandages over their brows or wrapped around their hands, and others were missing eyes, ears, and fingers.

In their midst, riding on a tall red horse in a strange high saddle that cradled him back and front, was the queen's dwarf brother Tyrion Lannister, the one they called the Imp. He had let his beard grow to cover his pushed-in face, until it was a bristly tangle of yellow and black hair, coarse as wire. Down his back flowed a shadowskin cloak, black fur striped with white. He held the reins in his left hand and carried his right arm in a white silk sling, but otherwise looked as grotesque as Sansa remembered from when he had visited Winterfell. With his bulging brow and mismatched eyes, he was still the ugliest man she had ever chanced to look upon.

Yet Tommen put his spurs into his pony and galloped headlong across the yard, shouting with glee. One of the savages, a huge shambling man so hairy that his face was all but lost beneath his whiskers, scooped the boy out of his saddle, armor and all, and deposited him on the ground beside his uncle. Tommen's breathless laughter echoed off the walls as Tyrion clapped him on the backplate, and Sansa was startled to see that the two were of a

height. Myrcella came running after her brother, and the dwarf picked her up by the waist and spun her in a circle, squealing.

When he lowered her back to the ground, the little man kissed her lightly on the brow and came waddling across the yard toward Joffrey. Two of his men followed close behind him; a black-haired black-eyed sellsword who moved like a stalking cat, and a gaunt youth with an empty socket where one eye should have been. Tommen and Myrcella trailed after them.

The dwarf went to one knee before the king. “Your Grace.”

“You,” Joffrey said.

“Me,” the Imp agreed, “although a more courteous greeting might be in order, for an uncle and an elder.”

“They said you were dead,” the Hound said.

The little man gave the big one a look. One of his eyes was green, one was black, and both were cool. “I was speaking to the king, not to his cur.”

“*I’m* glad you’re not dead,” said Princess Myrcella.

“We share that view, sweet child.” Tyrion turned to Sansa. “My lady, I am sorry for your losses. Truly, the gods are cruel.”

Sansa could not think of a word to say to him. How could he be sorry for her losses? Was he mocking her? It wasn’t the gods who’d been cruel, it was Joffrey.

“I am sorry for your loss as well, Joffrey,” the dwarf said.

“What loss?”

“Your royal father? A large fierce man with a black beard; you’ll recall him if you try. He was king before you.”

“Oh, *him*. Yes, it was very sad, a boar killed him.”

“Is that what ‘they’ say, Your Grace?”

Joffrey frowned. Sansa felt that she ought to say something. What was it that Septa Mordane used to tell her? *A lady’s armor is courtesy*, that was it. She donned her armor and said, “I’m sorry my lady mother took you captive, my lord.”

“A great many people are sorry for that,” Tyrion replied, “and before I am done, some may be a deal sorrier... yet I thank you for the sentiment. Joffrey, where might I find your mother?”

“She’s with my council,” the king answered. “Your brother Jaime keeps losing battles.” He gave Sansa an angry look, as if it were her fault. “He’s been taken by the Starks and we’ve lost Riverrun and now her stupid brother is calling himself a king.”

The dwarf smiled crookedly. “All sorts of people are calling themselves kings these days.”

Joff did not know what to make of that, though he looked suspicious and out of sorts. “Yes. Well. I am pleased you’re not dead, Uncle. Did you bring me a gift for my name day?”

“I did. My wits.”

“I’d sooner have Robb Stark’s head,” Joff said with a sly glance at Sansa. “Tommen, Myrcella, come.”

Sandor Clegane lingered behind a moment. “I’d guard that tongue of yours, little man,” he warned, before he strode off after his liege.

Sansa was left with the dwarf and his monsters. She tried to think of what else she might say. “You hurt your arm,” she managed at last.

“One of your northmen hit me with a morningstar during the battle on the Green Fork. I escaped him by falling off my horse.” His grin turned into something softer as he studied her face. “Is it grief for your lord father that makes you so sad?”

“My father was a traitor,” Sansa said at once. “And my brother and lady mother are traitors as well.” That reflex she had learned quickly. “I am loyal to my beloved Joffrey.”

“No doubt. As loyal as a deer surrounded by wolves.”

“Lions,” she whispered, without thinking. She glanced about nervously, but there was no one close enough to hear.

Lannister reached out and took her hand, and gave it a squeeze. “I am only a little lion, child, and I vow, I shall not savage you.” Bowing, he said

“But now you must excuse me. I have urgent business with queen and council.”

Sansa watched him walk off, his body swaying heavily from side to side with every step, like something from a grotesquerie. *He speaks more gently than Joffrey*, she thought, *but the queen spoke to me gently too. He’s still a Lannister, her brother and Joff’s uncle, and no friend.* Once she had loved Prince Joffrey with all her heart, and admired and trusted his mother, the queen. They had repaid that love and trust with her father’s head. Sansa would never make that mistake again.