

SANSA

“The longer you keep him waiting, the worse it will go for you,” Sandor Clegane warned her.

Sansa tried to hurry, but her fingers fumbled at buttons and knots. The Hound was always rough-tongued, but something in the way he had looked at her filled her with dread. Had Joffrey found out about her meetings with Ser Dontos? *Please no*, she thought as she brushed out her hair. Ser Dontos was her only hope. *I have to look pretty, Joff likes me to look pretty, he's always liked me in this gown, this color*. She smoothed the cloth down. The fabric was tight across her chest.

When she emerged, Sansa walked on the Hound's left, away from the burned side of his face. “Tell me what I've done.”

“Not you. Your kingly brother.”

“Robb's a traitor.” Sansa knew the words by rote. “I had no part in whatever he did.” *Gods be good, don't let it be the Kingslayer*. If Robb had harmed Jaime Lannister, it would mean her life. She thought of Ser Ilyn, and how those terrible pale eyes stared pitilessly out of that gaunt pockmarked face.

The Hound snorted. “They trained you well, little bird.” He conducted her to the lower bailey, where a crowd had gathered around the archery butts. Men moved aside to let them through. She could hear Lord Gyles coughing. Loitering stablehands eyed her insolently, but Ser Horas Redwyne averted his gaze as she passed, and his brother Hobber pretended not to see her. A yellow cat was dying on the ground, mewling piteously, a crossbow quarrel through its ribs. Sansa stepped around it, feeling ill.

Ser Dontos approached on his broomstick horse; since he'd been too drunk to mount his destrier at the tourney, the king had decreed that henceforth he must always go horsed. “Be brave,” he whispered, squeezing her arm.

Joffrey stood in the center of the throng, winding an ornate crossbow. Ser Boros and Ser Meryn were with him. The sight of them was enough to tie her insides in knots.

“Your Grace.” She fell to her knees.

“Kneeling won’t save you now,” the king said. “Stand up. You’re here to answer for your brother’s latest treasons.”

“Your Grace, whatever my traitor brother has done, I had no part. You know that, I beg you, please—”

“Get her up!”

The Hound pulled her to her feet, not ungently.

“Ser Lancel,” Joff said, “tell her of this outrage.”

Sansa had always thought Lancel Lannister comely and well spoken, but there was neither pity nor kindness in the look he gave her. “Using some vile sorcery, your brother fell upon Ser Stafford Lannister with an army of wargs, not three days ride from Lannisport. Thousands of good men were butchered as they slept, without the chance to lift sword. After the slaughter, the northmen feasted on the flesh of the slain.”

Horror coiled cold hands around Sansa’s throat.

“You have nothing to say?” asked Joffrey.

“Your Grace, the poor child is shocked witless,” murmured Ser Dontos.

“Silence, fool.” Joffrey lifted his crossbow and pointed it at her face. “You Starks are as unnatural as those wolves of yours. I’ve not forgotten how your monster savaged me.”

“That was Arya’s wolf,” she said. “Lady never hurt you, but you killed her anyway.”

“No, your father did,” Joff said, “but I killed your father. I wish I’d done it myself. I killed a man last night who was bigger than your father. They came to the gate shouting my name and calling for bread like I was some *baker*, but I taught them better. I shot the loudest one right through the throat.”

“And he died?” With the ugly iron head of the quarrel staring her in the face, it was hard to think what else to say.

“Of course he died, he had my quarrel in his throat. There was a woman throwing rocks, I got her as well, but only in the arm.” Frowning, he lowered the crossbow. “I’d shoot you too, but if I do Mother says they’d kill my uncle Jaime. Instead you’ll just be punished and we’ll send word to your brother about what will happen to you if he doesn’t yield. Dog, hit her.”

“Let me beat her!” Ser Dontos shoved forward, tin armor clattering. He was armed with a “morningstar” whose head was a melon. *My Florian*. She could have kissed him, blotchy skin and broken veins and all. He trotted his broomstick around her, shouting “Traitor, traitor” and whacking her over the head with the melon. Sansa covered herself with her hands, staggering every time the fruit pounded her, her hair sticky by the second blow. People were laughing. The melon flew to pieces. *Laugh, Joffrey*, she prayed as the juice ran down her face and the front of her blue silk gown. *Laugh and be satisfied*.

Joffrey did not so much as snigger. “Boros. Meryn.”

Ser Meryn Trant seized Dontos by the arm and flung him brusquely away. The red-faced fool went sprawling, broomstick, melon, and all. Ser Boros seized Sansa.

“Leave her face,” Joffrey commanded. “I like her pretty.”

Boros slammed a fist into Sansa’s belly, driving the air out of her. When she doubled over, the knight grabbed her hair and drew his sword, and for one hideous instant she was certain he meant to open her throat. As he laid the flat of the blade across her thighs, she thought her legs might break from the force of the blow. Sansa screamed. Tears welled in her eyes. *It will be over soon*. She soon lost count of the blows.

“Enough,” she heard the Hound rasp.

“No it isn’t,” the king replied. “Boros, make her naked.”

Boros shoved a meaty hand down the front of Sansa’s bodice and gave a hard yank. The silk came tearing away, baring her to the waist. Sansa

covered her breasts with her hands. She could hear sniggers, far off and cruel. “Beat her bloody,” Joffrey said, “we’ll see how her brother fancies —”

“What is the meaning of this?”

The Imp’s voice cracked like a whip, and suddenly Sansa was free. She stumbled to her knees, arms crossed over her chest, her breath ragged. “Is this your notion of chivalry, Ser Boros?” Tyrion Lannister demanded angrily. His pet sellsword stood with him, and one of his wildlings, the one with the burned eye. “What sort of knight beats helpless maids?”

“The sort who serves his king, Imp.” Ser Boros raised his sword, and Ser Meryn stepped up beside him, his blade scraping clear of its scabbard.

“Careful with those,” warned the dwarf’s sellsword. “You don’t want to get blood all over those pretty white cloaks.”

“Someone give the girl something to cover herself with,” the Imp said. Sandor Clegane unfastened his cloak and tossed it at her. Sansa clutched it against her chest, fists bunched hard in the white wool. The coarse weave was scratchy against her skin, but no velvet had ever felt so fine.

“This girl’s to be your queen,” the Imp told Joffrey. “Have you no regard for her honor?”

“I’m punishing her.”

“For what crime? She did not fight her brother’s battle.”

“She has the blood of a wolf.”

“And you have the wits of a goose.”

“You can’t talk to me that way. The king can do as he likes.”

“Aerys Targaryen did as he liked. Has your mother ever told you what happened to him?”

Ser Boros Blount *harrumphed*. “No man threatens His Grace in the presence of the Kingsguard.”

Tyrion Lannister raised an eyebrow. “I am not threatening the king, ser, I am educating my nephew. Bronn, Timett, the next time Ser Boros opens

his mouth, kill him.” The dwarf smiled. “Now *that* was a threat, ser. See the difference?”

Ser Boros turned a dark shade of red. “The queen will hear of this!”

“No doubt she will. And why wait? Joffrey, shall we send for your mother?”

The king flushed.

“Nothing to say, Your Grace?” his uncle went on. “Good. Learn to use your ears more and your mouth less, or your reign will be shorter than I am. Wanton brutality is no way to win your people’s love... or your queen’s.”

“Fear is better than love, Mother says.” Joffrey pointed at Sansa. “*She* fears me.”

The Imp sighed. “Yes, I see. A pity Stannis and Renly aren’t twelve-year-old girls as well. Bronn, Timett, bring her.”

Sansa moved as if in a dream. She thought the Imp’s men would take her back to her bedchamber in Maegor’s Holdfast, but instead they conducted her to the Tower of the Hand. She had not set foot inside that place since the day her father fell from grace, and it made her feel faint to climb those steps again.

Some serving girls took charge of her, mouthing meaningless comforts to stop her shaking. One stripped off the ruins of her gown and smallclothes, and another bathed her and washed the sticky juice from her face and her hair. As they scrubbed her down with soap and sluiced warm water over her head, all she could see were the faces from the bailey.

Knights are sworn to defend the weak, protect women, and fight for the right, but none of them did a thing. Only Ser Dontos had tried to help, and he was no longer a knight, no more than the Imp was, nor the Hound... the Hound hated knights... *I hate them too*, Sansa thought. *They are no true knights, not one of them.*

After she was clean, plump ginger-headed Maester Frenken came to see her. He bid her lie facedown on the mattress while he spread a salve across the angry red welts that covered the backs of her legs. Afterward he mixed

her a draught of dreamwine, with some honey so it might go down easier. “Sleep a bit, child. When you wake, all this will seem a bad dream.”

No it won't, you stupid man, Sansa thought, but she drank the dreamwine anyway, and slept.

It was dark when she woke again, not quite knowing where she was, the room both strange and strangely familiar. As she rose, a stab of pain went through her legs and brought it all back. Tears filled her eyes. Someone had laid out a robe for her beside the bed. Sansa slipped it on and opened the door. Outside stood a hard-faced woman with leathery brown skin, three necklaces looped about her scrawny neck. One was gold and one was silver and one was made of human ears. “Where does she think she’s going?” the woman asked, leaning on a tall spear.

“The godswood.” She had to find Ser Dontos, beg him to take her home *now* before it was too late.

“The halfman said you’re not to leave,” the woman said. “Pray here, the gods will hear.”

Meekly, Sansa dropped her eyes and retreated back inside. She realized suddenly why this place seemed so familiar. *They’ve put me in Arya’s old bedchamber, from when Father was the Hand of the King. All her things are gone and the furnishings have been moved around, but it’s the same...*

A short time later, a serving girl brought a platter of cheese and bread and olives, with a flagon of cold water. “Take it away,” Sansa commanded, but the girl left the food on a table. She *was* thirsty, she realized. Every step sent knives through her thighs, but she made herself cross the room. She drank two cups of water, and was nibbling on an olive when the knock came.

Anxiously, she turned toward the door, smoothed down the folds of her robe. “Yes?”

The door opened, and Tyrion Lannister stepped inside. “My lady. I trust I am not disturbing you?”

“Am I your prisoner?”

“My guest.” He was wearing his chain of office, a necklace of linked golden hands. “I thought we might talk.”

“As my lord commands.” Sansa found it hard not to stare; his face was so ugly it held a queer fascination for her.

“The food and garments are to your satisfaction?” he asked. “If there is anything else you need, you have only to ask.”

“You are most kind. And this morning... it was very good of you to help me.”

“You have a right to know why Joffrey was so wroth. Six nights gone, your brother fell upon my uncle Stafford, encamped with his host at a village called Oxcross not three days ride from Casterly Rock. Your northerners won a crushing victory. We received word only this morning.”

Robb will kill you all, she thought, exulting. “It’s... terrible, my lord. My brother is a vile traitor.”

The dwarf smiled wanly. “Well, he’s no fawn, he’s made that clear enough.”

“Ser Lancel said Robb led an army of wargs...”

The Imp gave a disdainful bark of laughter. “Ser Lancel’s a wineskin warrior who wouldn’t know a warg from a wart. Your brother had his direwolf with him, but I suspect that’s as far as it went. The northmen crept into my uncle’s camp and cut his horse lines, and Lord Stark sent his wolf among them. Even war-trained destriers went mad. Knights were trampled to death in their pavilions, and the rabble woke in terror and fled, casting aside their weapons to run the faster. Ser Stafford was slain as he chased after a horse. Lord Rickard Karstark drove a lance through his chest. Ser Rubert Brax is also dead, along with Ser Lymond Vikary, Lord Crakehall, and Lord Jast. Half a hundred more have been taken captive, including Jast’s sons and my nephew Martyn Lannister. Those who survived are spreading wild tales and swearing that the old gods of the north march with your brother.”

“Then... there was no sorcery?”

Lannister snorted. “Sorcery is the sauce fools spoon over failure to hide the flavor of their own incompetence. My mutton-headed uncle had not even troubled to post sentries, it would seem. His host was raw—apprentice boys, miners, fieldhands, fisherfolk, the sweepings of Lannisport. The only mystery is how your brother reached him. Our forces still hold the stronghold at the Golden Tooth, and they swear he did not pass.” The dwarf gave an irritated shrug. “Well, Robb Stark is my father’s bane. Joffrey is mine. Tell me, what do you feel for my kingly nephew?”

“I love him with all my heart,” Sansa said at once.

“Truly?” He did not sound convinced. “Even now?”

“My love for His Grace is greater than it has ever been.”

The Imp laughed aloud. “Well, someone has taught you to lie well. You may be grateful for that one day, child. You *are* a child still, are you not? Or have you flowered?”

Sansa blushed. It was a rude question, but the shame of being stripped before half the castle made it seem like nothing. “No, my lord.”

“That’s all to the good. If it gives you any solace, I do not intend that you ever wed Joffrey. No marriage will reconcile Stark and Lannister after all that has happened, I fear. More’s the pity. The match was one of King Robert’s better notions, if Joffrey hadn’t mucked it up.”

She knew she ought to say something, but the words caught in her throat.

“You grow very quiet,” Tyrion Lannister observed. “Is this what you want? An end to your betrothal?”

“I...” Sansa did not know what to say. *Is it a trick? Will he punish me if I tell the truth?* She stared at the dwarf’s brutal bulging brow, the hard black eye and the shrewd green one, the crooked teeth and wiry beard. “I only want to be loyal.”

“Loyal,” the dwarf mused, “and far from any Lannisters. I can scarce blame you for that. When I was your age, I wanted the same thing.” He smiled. “They tell me you visit the godswood every day. What do you pray for, Sansa?”

I pray for Robb's victory and Joffrey's death... and for home. For Winterfell. "I pray for an end to the fighting."

"We'll have that soon enough. There will be another battle, between your brother Robb and my lord father, and that will settle the issue."

Robb will beat him, Sansa thought. He beat your uncle and your brother Jaime, he'll beat your father too.

It was as if her face were an open book, so easily did the dwarf read her hopes. "Do not take Oxcross too much to heart, my lady," he told her, not unkindly. "A battle is not a war, and my lord father is assuredly not my uncle Stafford. The next time you visit the godswood, pray that your brother has the wisdom to bend the knee. Once the north returns to the king's peace, I mean to send you home." He hopped down off the window seat and said, "You may sleep here tonight. I'll give you some of my own men as a guard, some Stone Crows perhaps—"

"No," Sansa blurted out, aghast. If she was locked in the Tower of the Hand, guarded by the dwarf's men, how would Ser Dontos ever spirit her away to freedom?

"Would you prefer Black Ears? I'll give you Chella if a woman would make you more at ease."

"Please, no, my lord, the wildlings frighten me."

He grinned. "Me as well. But more to the point, they frighten Joffrey and that nest of sly vipers and lickspittle dogs he calls a Kingsguard. With Chella or Timett by your side, no one would dare offer you harm."

"I would sooner return to my own bed." A lie came to her suddenly, but it seemed so *right* that she blurted it out at once. "This tower was where my father's men were slain. Their ghosts would give me terrible dreams, and I would see their blood wherever I looked."

Tyrian Lannister studied her face. "I am no stranger to nightmares, Sansa. Perhaps you are wiser than I knew. Permit me at least to escort you safely back to your own chambers."