

SANSA

The southern sky was black with smoke. It rose swirling off a hundred distant fires, its sooty fingers smudging out the stars. Across the Blackwater Rush, a line of flame burned nightly from horizon to horizon, while on this side the Imp had fired the whole riverfront: docks and warehouses, homes and brothels, everything outside the city walls.

Even in the Red Keep, the air tasted of ashes. When Sansa found Ser Dontos in the quiet of the godswood, he asked if she'd been crying. "It's only from the smoke," she lied. "It looks as though half the kingswood is burning."

"Lord Stannis wants to smoke out the Imp's savages." Dontos swayed as he spoke, one hand on the trunk of a chestnut tree. A wine stain discolored the red-and-yellow motley of his tunic. "They kill his scouts and raid his baggage train. And the wildlings have been lighting fires too. The Imp told the queen that Stannis had better train his horses to eat ash, since he would find no blade of grass. I heard him say so. I hear all sorts of things as a fool that I never heard when I was a knight. They talk as though I am not there, and"—he leaned close, breathing his winey breath right in her face—"the Spider pays in gold for any little trifle. I think Moon Boy has been his for years."

He is drunk again. My poor Florian he names himself, and so he is. But he is all I have. "Is it true Lord Stannis burned the godswood at Storm's End?"

Dontos nodded. "He made a great pyre of the trees as an offering to his new god. The red priestess made him do it. They say she rules him now, body and soul. He's vowed to burn the Great Sept of Baelor too, if he takes the city."

"Let him." When Sansa had first beheld the Great Sept with its marble walls and seven crystal towers, she'd thought it was the most beautiful

building in the world, but that had been before Joffrey beheaded her father on its steps. “I want it burned.”

“Hush, child, the gods will hear you.”

“Why should they? They never hear my prayers.”

“Yes they do. They sent me to you, didn’t they?”

Sansa picked at the bark of a tree. She felt light-headed, almost feverish. “They sent you, but what good have you done? You promised you would take me home, but I’m still here.”

Dontos patted her arm. “I’ve spoken to a certain man I know, a good friend to me... and you, my lady. He will hire a swift ship to take us to safety, when the time is right.”

“The time is right now,” Sansa insisted, “before the fighting starts. They’ve forgotten about me. I know we could slip away if we tried.”

“Child, child.” Dontos shook his head. “Out of the castle, yes, we could do that, but the city gates are more heavily guarded than ever, and the Imp has even closed off the river.”

It was true. The Blackwater Rush was as empty as Sansa had ever seen it. All the ferries had been withdrawn to the north bank, and the trading galleys had fled or been seized by the Imp to be made over for battle. The only ships to be seen were the king’s war galleys. They rowed endlessly up and down, staying to the deep water in the middle of the river and exchanging flights of arrows with Stannis’s archers on the south shore.

Lord Stannis himself was still on the march, but his vanguard had appeared two nights ago during the black of the moon. King’s Landing had woken to the sight of their tents and banners. They were five thousand, Sansa had heard, near as many as all the gold cloaks in the city. They flew the red or green apples of House Fossoway, the turtle of Estermont, and the fox-and-flowers of Florent, and their commander was Ser Guyard Morrigen, a famous southron knight who men now called Guyard the Green. His standard showed a crow in flight, its black wings spread wide against a storm-green sky. But it was the pale yellow banners that worried the city. Long ragged tails streamed behind them like flickering flames, and

in place of a lord's sigil they bore the device of a god: the burning heart of the Lord of Light.

"When Stannis comes, he'll have ten times as many men as Joffrey does, everyone says so."

Dontos squeezed her shoulder. "The size of his host does not matter, sweetling, so long as they are on the wrong side of the river. Stannis cannot cross without ships."

"He *has* ships. More than Joffrey."

"It's a long sail from Storm's End, the fleet will need to come up Massey's Hook and through the Gullet and across Blackwater Bay. Perhaps the good gods will send a storm to sweep them from the seas." Dontos gave a hopeful smile. "It is not easy for you, I know. You must be patient, child. When my friend returns to the city, we shall have our ship. Have faith in your Florian, and try not to be afraid."

Sansa dug her nails into her hand. She could feel the fear in her tummy, twisting and pinching, worse every day. Nightmares of the day Princess Myrcella had sailed still troubled her sleep; dark suffocating dreams that woke her in the black of night, struggling for breath. She could hear the people screaming at her, screaming without words, like animals. They had hemmed her in and thrown filth at her and tried to pull her off her horse, and would have done worse if the Hound had not cut his way to her side. They had torn the High Septon to pieces and smashed in Ser Aron's head with a rock. *Try not to be afraid!* he said.

The whole city was afraid. Sansa could see it from the castle walls. The smallfolk were hiding themselves behind closed shutters and barred doors as if that would keep them safe. The last time King's Landing had fallen, the Lannisters looted and raped as they pleased and put hundreds to the sword, even though the city had opened its gates. This time the Imp meant to fight, and a city that fought could expect no mercy at all.

Dontos was prattling on. "If I were still a knight, I should have to put on armor and man the walls with the rest. I ought to kiss King Joffrey's feet and thank him sweetly."

“If you thanked him for making you a fool, he’d make you a knight again,” Sansa said sharply.

Dontos chuckled. “My Jonquil’s a clever girl, isn’t she?”

“Joffrey and his mother say I’m stupid.”

“Let them. You’re safer that way, sweetling. Queen Cersei and the Imp and Lord Varys and their like, they all watch each other keen as hawks, and pay this one and that one to spy out what the others are doing, but no one ever troubles themselves about Lady Tanda’s daughter, do they?” Dontos covered his mouth to stifle a burp. “Gods preserve you, my little Jonquil.” He was growing weepy. The wine did that to him. “Give your Florian a little kiss now. A kiss for luck.” He swayed toward her.

Sansa dodged the wet groping lips, kissed him lightly on an unshaven cheek, and bid him good night. It took all her strength not to weep. She had been weeping too much of late. It was unseemly, she knew, but she could not seem to help herself; the tears would come, sometimes over a trifle, and nothing she did could hold them back.

The drawbridge to Maegor’s Holdfast was unguarded. The Imp had moved most of the gold cloaks to the city walls, and the white knights of the Kingsguard had duties more important than dogging her heels. Sansa could go where she would so long as she did not try to leave the castle, but there was nowhere she wanted to go.

She crossed over the dry moat with its cruel iron spikes and made her way up the narrow turnpike stair, but when she reached the door of her bedchamber she could not bear to enter. The very walls of the room made her feel trapped; even with the window opened wide it felt as though there were no air to breathe.

Turning back to the stair, Sansa climbed. The smoke blotted out the stars and the thin crescent of moon, so the roof was dark and thick with shadows. Yet from here she could see everything: the Red Keep’s tall towers and great cornerforts, the maze of city streets beyond, to south and west the river running black, the bay to the east, the columns of smoke and cinders, and fires, fires everywhere. Soldiers crawled over the city walls like ants with torches, and crowded the hoardings that had sprouted from

the ramparts. Down by the Mud Gate, outlined against the drifting smoke, she could make out the vague shape of the three huge catapults, the biggest anyone had ever seen, overtopping the walls by a good twenty feet. Yet none of it made her feel less fearful. A stab went through her, so sharp that Sansa sobbed and clutched at her belly. She might have fallen, but a shadow moved suddenly, and strong fingers grabbed her arm and steadied her.

She grabbed a merlon for support, her fingers scrabbling at the rough stone. “Let go of me,” she cried. “Let go.”

“The little bird thinks she has wings, does she? Or do you mean to end up crippled like that brother of yours?”

Sansa twisted in his grasp. “I wasn’t going to fall. It was only... you startled me, that’s all.”

“You mean I scared you. And still do.”

She took a deep breath to calm herself. “I thought I was alone, I...” She glanced away.

“The little bird still can’t bear to look at me, can she?” The Hound released her. “You were glad enough to see my face when the mob had you, though. Remember?”

Sansa remembered all too well. She remembered the way they had howled, the feel of the blood running down her cheek from where the stone had struck her, and the garlic stink on the breath of the man who had tried to pull her from her horse. She could still feel the cruel pinch of fingers on her wrist as she lost her balance and began to fall.

She’d thought she was going to die then, but the fingers had twitched, all five at once, and the man had shrieked loud as a horse. When his hand fell away, another hand, stronger, shoved her back into her saddle. The man with the garlicky breath was on the ground, blood pumping out the stump of his arm, but there were others all around, some with clubs in hand. The Hound leapt at them, his sword a blur of steel that trailed a red mist as it swung. When they broke and ran before him he had laughed, his terrible burned face for a moment transformed.

She made herself look at that face now, really look. It was only courteous, and a lady must never forget her courtesies. *The scars are not the worst part, nor even the way his mouth twitches. It's his eyes.* She had never seen eyes so full of anger. "I... I should have come to you after," she said haltingly. "To thank you, for... for saving me... you were so brave."

"Brave?" His laugh was half a snarl. "A dog doesn't need courage to chase off rats. They had me thirty to one, and not a man of them dared face me."

She hated the way he talked, always so harsh and angry. "Does it give you joy to scare people?"

"No, it gives me joy to kill people." His mouth twitched. "Wrinkle up your face all you like, but spare me this false piety. You were a high lord's get. Don't tell me Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell never killed a man."

"That was his duty. He never liked it."

"Is that what he told you?" Clegane laughed again. "Your father lied. Killing is the sweetest thing there is." He drew his longsword. "*Here's* your truth. Your precious father found that out on Baelor's steps. Lord of Winterfell, Hand of the King, Warden of the North, the mighty Eddard Stark, of a line eight thousand years old... but Ilyn Payne's blade went through his neck all the same, didn't it? Do you remember the dance he did when his head came off his shoulders?"

Sansa hugged herself, suddenly cold. "Why are you always so hateful? I was *thanking* you..."

"Just as if I was one of those true knights you love so well, yes. What do you think a knight is *for*, girl? You think it's all taking favors from ladies and looking fine in gold plate? Knights are for *killing*." He laid the edge of his longsword against her neck, just under her ear. Sansa could feel the sharpness of the steel. "I killed my first man at twelve. I've lost count of how many I've killed since then. High lords with old names, fat rich men dressed in velvet, knights puffed up like bladders with their honors, yes, and women and children too—they're all meat, and I'm the butcher. Let them have their lands and their gods and their gold. Let them have their *sers*." Sandor Clegane spat at her feet to show what he thought of that. "So long as

I have this,” he said, lifting the sword from her throat, “there’s no man on earth I need fear.”

Except your brother, Sansa thought, but she had better sense than to say it aloud. *He is a dog, just as he says. A half-wild, mean-tempered dog that bites any hand that tries to pet him, and yet will savage any man who tries to hurt his masters.* “Not even the men across the river?”

Clegane’s eyes turned toward the distant fires. “All this burning.” He sheathed his sword. “Only cowards fight with fire.”

“Lord Stannis is no coward.”

“He’s not the man his brother was either. Robert never let a little thing like a river stop him.”

“What will you do when he crosses?”

“Fight. Kill. Die, maybe.”

“Aren’t you afraid? The gods might send you down to some terrible hell for all the evil you’ve done.”

“What evil?” He laughed. “What gods?”

“The gods who made us all.”

“All?” he mocked. “Tell me, little bird, what kind of god makes a monster like the Imp, or a halfwit like Lady Tanda’s daughter? If there are gods, they made sheep so wolves could eat mutton, and they made the weak for the strong to play with.”

“True knights protect the weak.”

He snorted. “There are no true knights, no more than there are gods. If you can’t protect yourself, die and get out of the way of those who can. Sharp steel and strong arms rule this world, don’t ever believe any different.”

Sansa backed away from him. “You’re awful.”

“I’m honest. It’s the world that’s awful. Now fly away, little bird, I’m sick of you peeping at me.”

Wordless, she fled. She was afraid of Sandor Clegane... and yet, some part of her wished that Ser Dontos had a little of the Hound’s ferocity. *There*

are gods, she told herself, and there are true knights too. All the stories can't be lies.

That night Sansa dreamed of the riot again. The mob surged around her, shrieking, a maddened beast with a thousand faces. Everywhere she turned she saw faces twisted into monstrous inhuman masks. She wept and told them she had never done them hurt, yet they dragged her from her horse all the same. “No,” she cried, “no, please, don’t, *don’t*,” but no one paid her any heed. She shouted for Ser Dontos, for her brothers, for her dead father and her dead wolf, for gallant Ser Loras who had given her a red rose once, but none of them came. She called for the heroes from the songs, for Florian and Ser Ryam Redwyne and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight, but no one heard. Women swarmed over her like weasels, pinching her legs and kicking her in the belly, and someone hit her in the face and she felt her teeth shatter. Then she saw the bright glimmer of steel. The knife plunged into her belly and tore and tore and tore, until there was nothing left of her down there but shiny wet ribbons.

When she woke, the pale light of morning was slanting through her window, yet she felt as sick and achy as if she had not slept at all. There was something sticky on her thighs. When she threw back the blanket and saw the blood, all she could think was that her dream had somehow come true. She remembered the knives inside her, twisting and ripping. She squirmed away in horror, kicking at the sheets and falling to the floor, breathing raggedly, naked, bloodied, and afraid.

But as she crouched there, on her hands and knees, understanding came. “No, please,” Sansa whimpered, “please, no.” She didn’t want this happening to her, not now, not here, not now, not now, not now, not now.

Madness took hold of her. Pulling herself up by the bedpost, she went to the basin and washed between her legs, scrubbing away all the stickiness. By the time she was done, the water was pink with blood. When her maidservants saw it they would *know*. Then she remembered the bedclothes. She rushed back to the bed and stared in horror at the dark red stain and the tale it told. All she could think was that she had to get rid of it,

or else they'd see. She couldn't let them see, or they'd marry her to Joffrey and make her lay with him.

Snatching up her knife, Sansa hacked at the sheet, cutting out the stain. *If they ask me about the hole, what will I say?* Tears ran down her face. She pulled the torn sheet from the bed, and the stained blanket as well. *I'll have to burn them.* She balled up the evidence, stuffed it in the fireplace, drenched it in oil from her bedside lamp, and lit it afire. Then she realized that the blood had soaked through the sheet into the featherbed, so she bundled that up as well, but it was big and cumbersome, hard to move. Sansa could get only half of it into the fire. She was on her knees, struggling to shove the mattress into the flames as thick grey smoke eddied around her and filled the room, when the door burst open and she heard her maid gasp.

In the end it took three of them to pull her away. And it was all for nothing. The bedclothes were burnt, but by the time they carried her off her thighs were bloody again. It was as if her own body had betrayed her to Joffrey, unfurling a banner of Lannister crimson for all the world to see.

When the fire was out, they carried off the singed featherbed, fanned away the worst of the smoke, and brought up a tub. Women came and went, muttering and looking at her strangely. They filled the tub with scalding hot water, bathed her and washed her hair and gave her a cloth to wear between her legs. By then Sansa was calm again, and ashamed for her folly. The smoke had ruined most of her clothing. One of the women went away and came back with a green wool shift that was almost her size. "It's not as pretty as your own things, but it will serve," she announced when she'd pulled it down over Sansa's head. "Your shoes weren't burned, so at least you won't need to go barefoot to the queen."

Cersei Lannister was breaking her fast when Sansa was ushered into her solar. "You may sit," the queen said graciously. "Are you hungry?" She gestured at the table. There was porridge, honey, milk, boiled eggs, and crisp fried fish.

The sight of the food made Sansa feel ill. Her tummy was tied in a knot. "No, thank you, Your Grace."

“I don’t blame you. Between Tyrion and Lord Stannis, everything I eat tastes of ash. And now you’re setting fires as well. What did you hope to accomplish?”

Sansa lowered her head. “The blood frightened me.”

“The blood is the seal of your womanhood. Lady Catelyn might have prepared you. You’ve had your first flowering, no more.”

Sansa had never felt less flowery. “My lady mother told me, but I... I thought it would be different.”

“Different how?”

“I don’t know. Less... less messy, and more magical.”

Queen Cersei laughed. “Wait until you birth a child, Sansa. A woman’s life is nine parts mess to one part magic, you’ll learn that soon enough... and the parts that look like magic often turn out to be messiest of all.” She took a sip of milk. “So now you are a woman. Do you have the least idea of what that means?”

“It means that I am now fit to be wedded and bedded,” said Sansa, “and to bear children for the king.”

The queen gave a wry smile. “A prospect that no longer entices you as it once did, I can see. I will not fault you for that. Joffrey has always been difficult. Even his birth... I labored a day and a half to bring him forth. You cannot imagine the pain, Sansa. I screamed so loudly that I fancied Robert might hear me in the kingswood.”

“His Grace was not with you?”

“Robert? Robert was hunting. That was his custom. Whenever my time was near, my royal husband would flee to the trees with his huntsmen and hounds. When he returned he would present me with some pelts or a stag’s head, and I would present him with a baby.

“Not that I *wanted* him to stay, mind you. I had Grand Maester Pycelle and an army of midwives, and I had my brother. When they told Jaime he was not allowed in the birthing room, he smiled and asked which of them proposed to keep him out.

“Joffrey will show you no such devotion, I fear. You could thank your sister for that, if she weren’t dead. He’s never been able to forget that day on the Trident when you saw her shame him, so he shames you in turn. You’re stronger than you seem, though. I expect you’ll survive a bit of humiliation. I did. You may never love the king, but you’ll love his children.”

“I love His Grace with all my heart,” Sansa said.

The queen sighed. “You had best learn some new lies, and quickly. Lord Stannis will not like that one, I promise you.”

“The new High Septon said that the gods will never permit Lord Stannis to win, since Joffrey is the rightful king.”

A half smile flickered across the queen’s face. “Robert’s trueborn son and heir. Though Joff would cry whenever Robert picked him up. His Grace did not like that. His bastards had always gurgled at him happily, and sucked his finger when he put it in their little baseborn mouths. Robert wanted smiles and cheers, always, so he went where he found them, to his friends and his whores. Robert wanted to be loved. My brother Tyrion has the same disease. Do you want to be loved, Sansa?”

“Everyone wants to be loved.”

“I see flowering hasn’t made you any brighter,” said Cersei. “Sansa, permit me to share a bit of womanly wisdom with you on this very special day. Love is poison. A sweet poison, yes, but it will kill you all the same.”