

## SANSA

The torches shimmered brightly against the hammered metal of the wall sconces, filling the Queen's Ballroom with silvery light. Yet there was still darkness in that hall. Sansa could see it in the pale eyes of Ser Ilyn Payne, who stood by the back door still as stone, taking neither food nor wine. She could hear it in Lord Gyles's racking cough, and the whispered voice of Osney Kettleblack when he slipped in to bring Cersei the tidings.

Sansa was finishing her broth when he came the first time, entering through the back. She glimpsed him talking to his brother Osfryd. Then he climbed the dais and knelt beside the high seat, smelling of horse, four long thin scratches on his cheek crusted with scabs, his hair falling down past his collar and into his eyes. For all his whispering, Sansa could not help but hear. "The fleets are locked in battle. Some archers got ashore, but the Hound's cut them to pieces, Y'Grace. Your brother's raising his chain, I heard the signal. Some drunkards down to Flea Bottom are smashing doors and climbing through windows. Lord Bywater's sent the gold cloaks to deal with them. Baelor's Sept is jammed full, everyone praying."

"And my son?"

"The king went to Baelor's to get the High Septon's blessing. Now he's walking the walls with the Hand, telling the men to be brave, lifting their spirits as it were."

Cersei beckoned to her page for another cup of wine, a golden vintage from the Arbor, fruity and rich. The queen was drinking heavily, but the wine only seemed to make her more beautiful; her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes had a bright, feverish heat to them as she looked down over the hall. *Eyes of wildfire*, Sansa thought.

Musicians played. Jugglers juggled. Moon Boy lurched about the hall on stilts making mock of everyone, while Ser Dontos chased serving girls on his broomstick horse. The guests laughed, but it was a joyless laughter, the sort of laughter that can turn into sobbing in half a heartbeat. *Their*

*bodies are here, but their thoughts are on the city walls, and their hearts as well.*

After the broth came a salad of apples, nuts, and raisins. At any other time, it might have made a tasty dish, but tonight all the food was flavored with fear. Sansa was not the only one in the hall without an appetite. Lord Gyles was coughing more than he was eating, Lollys Stokeworth sat hunched and shivering, and the young bride of one of Ser Lancel's knights began to weep uncontrollably. The queen commanded Maester Frenken to put her to bed with a cup of dreamwine. "Tears," she said scornfully to Sansa as the woman was led from the hall. "The woman's weapon, my lady mother used to call them. The man's weapon is a sword. And that tells us all you need to know, doesn't it?"

"Men must be very brave, though," said Sansa. "To ride out and face swords and axes, everyone trying to kill you..."

"Jaime told me once that he only feels truly alive in battle and in bed." She lifted her cup and took a long swallow. Her salad was untouched. "I would sooner face any number of swords than sit helpless like this, pretending to enjoy the company of this flock of frightened hens."

"You asked them here, Your Grace."

"Certain things are expected of a queen. They will be expected of you should you ever wed Joffrey. Best learn." The queen studied the wives, daughters, and mothers who filled the benches. "Of themselves the hens are nothing, but their cocks are important for one reason or another, and some may survive this battle. So it behooves me to give their women my protection. If my wretched dwarf of a brother should somehow manage to prevail, they will return to their husbands and fathers full of tales about how brave I was, how my courage inspired them and lifted their spirits, how I never doubted our victory even for a moment."

"And if the castle should fall?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Cersei did not wait for a denial. "If I'm not betrayed by my own guards, I may be able to hold here for a time. Then I can go to the walls and offer to yield to Lord Stannis in person. That will spare us the worst. But if Maegor's Holdfast should fall before Stannis

can come up, why then, most of my guests are in for a bit of rape, I'd say. And you should never rule out mutilation, torture, and murder at times like these."

Sansa was horrified. "These are women, unarmed, and gently born."

"Their birth protects them," Cersei admitted, "though not as much as you'd think. Each one's worth a good ransom, but after the madness of battle, soldiers often seem to want flesh more than coin. Even so, a golden shield is better than none. Out in the streets, the women won't be treated near as tenderly. Nor will our servants. Pretty things like that serving wench of Lady Tanda's could be in for a lively night, but don't imagine the old and the infirm and the ugly will be spared. Enough drink will make blind washerwomen and reeking pig girls seem as comely as you, sweetling.

*"Me?"*

"*Try* not to sound so like a mouse, Sansa. You're a woman now, remember? And betrothed to my firstborn." The queen sipped at her wine. "Were it anyone else outside the gates, I might hope to beguile him. But this is Stannis Baratheon. I'd have a better chance of seducing his horse." She noticed the look on Sansa's face, and laughed. "Have I shocked you, my lady?" She leaned close. "You little fool. Tears are not a woman's only weapon. You've got another one between your legs, and you'd best learn to use it. You'll find men use their swords freely enough. Both kinds of swords."

Sansa was spared the need to reply when two Kettleblacks reentered the hall. Ser Osmund and his brothers had become great favorites about the castle; they were always ready with a smile and a jest, and got on with grooms and huntsmen as well as they did with knights and squires. With the serving wenches they got on best of all, it was gossiped. Of late Ser Osmund had taken Sandor Clegane's place by Joffrey's side, and Sansa had heard the women at the washing well saying he was as strong as the Hound, only younger and faster. If that was so, she wondered why she had never once heard of these Kettleblacks before Ser Osmund was named to the Kingsguard.

Osney was all smiles as he knelt beside the queen. “The hulks have gone up, Y’Grace. The whole Blackwater’s awash with wildfire. A hundred ships burning, maybe more.”

“And my son?”

“He’s at the Mud Gate with the Hand and the Kingsguard, Y’Grace. He spoke to the archers on the hoardings before, and gave them a few tips on handling a crossbow, he did. All agree, he’s a right brave boy.”

“He’d best remain a right *live* boy.” Cersei turned to his brother Osfryd, who was taller, sterner, and wore a drooping black mustache. “Yes?”

Osfryd had donned a steel halfhelm over his long black hair, and the look on his face was grim, “Y’Grace,” he said quietly, “the boys caught a groom and two maidservants trying to sneak out a postern with three of the king’s horses.”

“The night’s first traitors,” the queen said, “but not the last, I fear. Have Ser Ilyn see to them, and put their heads on pikes outside the stables as a warning.” As they left, she turned to Sansa. “Another lesson you should learn, if you hope to sit beside my son. Be gentle on a night like this and you’ll have treasons popping up all about you like mushrooms after a hard rain. The only way to keep your people loyal is to make certain they fear you more than they do the enemy.”

“I will remember, Your Grace,” said Sansa, though she had always heard that love was a surer route to the people’s loyalty than fear. *If I am ever a queen, I’ll make them love me.*

Crabclaw pies followed the salad. Then came mutton roasted with leeks and carrots, served in trenchers of hollowed bread. Lollys ate too fast, got sick, and retched all over herself and her sister. Lord Gyles coughed, drank, coughed, drank, and passed out. The queen gazed down in disgust to where he sprawled with his face in his trencher and his hand in a puddle of wine. “The gods must have been mad to waste manhood on the likes of him, and I must have been mad to demand his release.”

Osfryd Kettleblack returned, crimson cloak swirling. “There’s folks gathering in the square, Y’Grace, asking to take refuge in the castle. Not a

mob, rich merchants and the like.”

“Command them to return to their homes,” the queen said. “If they won’t go, have our crossbowmen kill a few. No sorties; I won’t have the gates opened for any reason.”

“As you command.” He bowed and moved off.

The queen’s face was hard and angry. “Would that I could take a sword to their necks myself.” Her voice was starting to slur. “When we were little, Jaime and I were so much alike that even our lord father could not tell us apart. Sometimes as a lark we would dress in each other’s clothes and spend a whole day each as the other. Yet even so, when Jaime was given his first sword, there was none for me. ‘What do I get?’ I remember asking. We were so much alike, I could never understand why they treated us so *differently*. Jaime learned to fight with sword and lance and mace, while I was taught to smile and sing and please. He was heir to Casterly Rock, while I was to be sold to some stranger like a horse, to be ridden whenever my new owner liked, beaten whenever he liked, and cast aside in time for a younger filly. Jaime’s lot was to be glory and power, while mine was birth and moonblood.”

“But you were queen of all the Seven Kingdoms,” Sansa said.

“When it comes to swords, a queen is only a woman after all.”

Cersei’s wine cup was empty. The page moved to fill it again, but she turned it over and shook her head. “No more. I must keep a clear head.”

The last course was goat cheese served with baked apples. The scent of cinnamon filled the hall as Osney Kettleblack slipped in to kneel once more between them. “Y’Grace,” he murmured. “Stannis has landed men on the tourney grounds, and there’s more coming across. The Mud Gate’s under attack, and they’ve brought a ram to the King’s Gate. The Imp’s gone out to drive them off.”

“That will fill them with fear,” the queen said dryly. “He hasn’t taken Joff, I hope.”

“No, Y’Grace, the king’s with my brother at the Whores, flinging Antler Men into the river.”

“With the Mud Gate under assault? Folly. Tell Ser Osmund I want him out of there at once, it’s too dangerous. Fetch him back to the castle.”

“The Imp said—”

“It’s what *I* said that ought concern you.” Cersei’s eyes narrowed. “Your brother will do as he’s told, or I’ll see to it that he leads the next sortie himself, and you’ll go with him.”

After the meal had been cleared away, many of the guests asked leave to go to the sept. Cersei graciously granted their request. Lady Tanda and her daughters were among those who fled. For those who remained, a singer was brought forth to fill the hall with the sweet music of the high harp. He sang of Jonquil and Florian, of Prince Aemon the Dragonknight and his love for his brother’s queen, of Nymeria’s ten thousand ships. They were beautiful songs, but terribly sad. Several of the women began to weep, and Sansa felt her own eyes growing moist.

“Very good, dear.” The queen leaned close. “You want to practice those tears. You’ll need them for King Stannis.”

Sansa shifted nervously. “Your Grace?”

“Oh, spare me your hollow courtesies. Matters must have reached a desperate strait out there if they need a dwarf to lead them, so you might as well take off your mask. I know all about your little treasons in the godswood.”

“The godswood?” *Don’t look at Ser Dontos, don’t, don’t*, Sansa told herself. *She doesn’t know, no one knows, Dontos promised me, my Florian would never fail me.* “I’ve done no treasons. I only visit the godswood to pray.”

“For Stannis. Or your brother, it’s all the same. Why else seek your father’s gods? You’re praying for our defeat. What would you call that, if not treason?”

“I pray for Joffrey,” she insisted nervously.

“Why, because he treats you so sweetly?” The queen took a flagon of sweet plum wine from a passing serving girl and filled Sansa’s cup.

“Drink,” she commanded coldly. “Perhaps it will give you the courage to deal with truth for a change.”

Sansa lifted the cup to her lips and took a sip. The wine was cloyingly sweet, but very strong.

“You can do better than that,” Cersei said. “Drain the cup, Sansa. Your queen commands you.” It almost gagged her, but Sansa emptied the cup, gulping down the thick sweet wine until her head was swimming.

“More?” Cersei asked.

“No. Please.”

The queen looked displeased. “When you asked about Ser Ilyn earlier, I lied to you. Would you like to hear the truth, Sansa? Would you like to know why he’s really here?”

She did not dare answer, but it did not matter. The queen raised a hand and beckoned, never waiting for a reply. Sansa had not even seen Ser Ilyn return to the hall, but suddenly there he was, striding from the shadows behind the dais as silent as a cat. He carried Ice unsheathed. Her father had always cleaned the blade in the godswood after he took a man’s head, Sansa recalled, but Ser Ilyn was not so fastidious. There was blood drying on the rippling steel, the red already fading to brown. “Tell Lady Sansa why I keep you by us,” said Cersei.

Ser Ilyn opened his mouth and emitted a choking rattle. His pox-scarred face had no expression.

“He’s here for us, he says,” the queen said. “Stannis may take the city and he may take the throne, but I will not suffer him to judge me. I do not mean for him to have us alive.”

“Us?”

“You heard me. So perhaps you had best pray again, Sansa, and for a different outcome. The Starks will have no joy from the fall of House Lannister, I promise you.” She reached out and touched Sansa’s hair, brushing it lightly away from her neck.