

SANSA

In the tower room at the heart of Maegor's Holdfast, Sansa gave herself to the darkness.

She drew the curtains around her bed, slept, woke weeping, and slept again. When she could not sleep she lay under her blankets shivering with grief. Servants came and went, bringing meals, but the sight of food was more than she could bear. The dishes piled up on the table beneath her window, untouched and spoiling, until the servants took them away again.

Sometimes her sleep was leaden and dreamless, and she woke from it more tired than when she had closed her eyes. Yet those were the best times, for when she dreamed, she dreamed of Father. Waking or sleeping, she saw him, saw the gold cloaks fling him down, saw Ser Ilyn striding forward, unsheathing Ice from the scabbard on his back, saw the moment... the moment when... she had wanted to look away, she had *wanted* to, her legs had gone out from under her and she had fallen to her knees, yet somehow she could not turn her head, and all the people were screaming and shouting, and her prince had smiled at her, he'd *smiled* and she'd felt safe, but only for a heartbeat, until he said those words, and her father's legs... that was what she remembered, his legs, the way they'd *jerked* when Ser Ilyn... when the sword...

Perhaps I will die too, she told herself, and the thought did not seem so terrible to her. If she flung herself from the window, she could put an end to her suffering, and in the years to come the singers would write songs of her grief. Her body would lie on the stones below, broken and innocent, shaming all those who had betrayed her. Sansa went so far as to cross the bedchamber and throw open the shutters... but then her courage left her, and she ran back to her bed, sobbing.

The serving girls tried to talk to her when they brought her meals, but she never answered them. Once Grand Maester Pycelle came with a box of flasks and bottles, to ask if she was ill. He felt her brow, made her undress, and touched her all over while her bedmaid held her down. When he left he

gave her a potion of honeywater and herbs and told her to drink a swallow every night. She drank it all right then and went back to sleep.

She dreamt of footsteps on the tower stair, an ominous scraping of leather on stone as a man climbed slowly toward her bedchamber, step by step. All she could do was huddle behind her door and listen, trembling, as he came closer and closer. It was Ser Ilyn Payne, she knew, coming for her with Ice in his hand, coming to take her head. There was no place to run, no place to hide, no way to bar the door. Finally the footsteps stopped and she knew he was just outside, standing there silent with his dead eyes and his long pocked face. That was when she realized she was naked. She crouched down, trying to cover herself with her hands, as her door began to swing open, creaking, the point of the greatsword poking through...

She woke murmuring, "Please, please, I'll be good, I'll be *good*, please don't," but there was no one to hear.

When they finally came for her in truth, Sansa never heard their footsteps. It was Joffrey who opened her door, not Ser Ilyn but the boy who had been her prince. She was in bed, curled up tight, her curtains drawn, and she could not have said if it was noon or midnight. The first thing she heard was the slam of the door. Then her bed hangings were yanked back, and she threw up a hand against the sudden light and saw them standing over her.

"You will attend me in court this afternoon," Joffrey said. "See that you bathe and dress as befits my betrothed." Sandor Clegane stood at his shoulder in a plain brown doublet and green mantle, his burned face hideous in the morning light. Behind them were two knights of the Kingsguard in long white satin cloaks.

Sansa drew her blanket up to her chin to cover herself. "No," she whimpered, "please... leave me be."

"If you won't rise and dress yourself, my Hound will do it for you," Joffrey said.

"I beg of you, my prince..."

"I'm king now. Dog, get her out of bed."

Sandor Clegane scooped her up around the waist and lifted her off the featherbed as she struggled feebly. Her blanket fell to the floor. Underneath she had only a thin bedgown to cover her nakedness. “Do as you’re bid, child,” Clegane said. “Dress.” He pushed her toward her wardrobe, almost gently.

Sansa backed away from them. “I did as the queen asked, I wrote the letters, I wrote what she told me. You promised you’d be merciful. Please, let me go home. I won’t do any treason, I’ll be good, I swear it, I don’t have traitor’s blood, I *don’t*. I only want to go home.” Remembering her courtesies, she lowered her head. “As it please you,” she finished weakly.

“It does *not* please me,” Joffrey said. “Mother says I’m still to marry you, so you’ll stay here, and you’ll obey.”

“I don’t *want* to marry you,” Sansa wailed. “You chopped off my father’s *head*!”

“He was a traitor. I never promised to spare him, only that I’d be merciful, and I was. If he hadn’t been your father, I would have had him torn or flayed, but I gave him a clean death.”

Sansa stared at him, seeing him for the first time. He was wearing a padded crimson doublet patterned with lions and a cloth-of-gold cape with a high collar that framed his face. She wondered how she could ever have thought him handsome. His lips were as soft and red as the worms you found after a rain, and his eyes were vain and cruel. “I hate you,” she whispered.

King Joffrey’s face hardened. “My mother tells me that it isn’t fitting that a king should strike his wife. Ser Meryn.”

The knight was on her before she could think, yanking back her hand as she tried to shield her face and backhanding her across the ear with a gloved fist. Sansa did not remember failing, yet the next she knew she was sprawled on one knee amongst the rushes. Her head was ringing. Ser Meryn Trant stood over her, with blood on the knuckles of his white silk glove.

“Will you obey now, or shall I have him chastise you again?”

Sansa's ear felt numb. She touched it, and her fingertips came away wet and red. "I... as... as you command, my lord."

"*Your Grace*," Joffrey corrected her. "I shall look for you in court." He turned and left.

Ser Meryn and Ser Arys followed him out, but Sandor Clegane lingered long enough to yank her roughly to her feet. "Save yourself some pain, girl, and give him what he wants."

"What... what does he want? Please, tell me."

"He wants you to smile and smell sweet and be his lady love," the Hound rasped. "He wants to hear you recite all your pretty little words the way the septa taught you. He wants you to love him... and fear him."

After he was gone, Sansa sank back onto the rushes, staring at the wall until two of her bedmaids crept timidly into the chamber. "I will need hot water for my bath, please," she told them, "and perfume, and some powder to hide this bruise." The right side of her face was swollen and beginning to ache, but she knew Joffrey would want her to be beautiful.

The hot water made her think of Winterfell, and she took strength from that. She had not washed since the day her father died, and she was startled at how filthy the water became. Her maids sluiced the blood off her face, scrubbed the dirt from her back, washed her hair and brushed it out until it sprang back in thick auburn curls. Sansa did not speak to them, except to give them commands; they were Lannister servants, not her own, and she did not trust them. When the time came to dress, she chose the green silk gown that she had worn to the tourney. She recalled how gallant Joff had been to her that night at the feast. Perhaps it would make him remember as well, and treat her more gently.

She drank a glass of buttermilk and nibbled at some sweet biscuits as she waited, to settle her stomach. It was midday when Ser Meryn returned. He had donned his white armor; a shirt of enameled scales chased with gold, a tall helm with a golden sunburst crest, greaves and gorget and gauntlet and boots of gleaming plate, a heavy wool cloak clasped with a golden lion. His visor had been removed from his helm, to better show his dour face; pouchy bags under his eyes, a wide sour mouth, rusty hair

spotted with grey. “My lady,” he said, bowing, as if he had not beaten her bloody only three hours past. “His Grace has instructed me to escort you to the throne room.”

“Did he instruct you to hit me if I refused to come?”

“Are you refusing to come, my lady?” The look he gave her was without expression. He did not so much as glance at the bruise he had left her.

He did not hate her, Sansa realized; neither did he love her. He felt nothing for her at all. She was only a... a *thing* to him. “No,” she said, rising. She wanted to rage, to hurt him as he’d hurt her, to warn him that when she was queen she would have him exiled if he ever dared strike her again... but she remembered what the Hound had told her, so all she said was, “I shall do whatever His Grace commands.”

“As I do,” he replied.

“Yes... but you are no true knight, Ser Meryn.”

Sandor Clegane would have laughed at that, Sansa knew. Other men might have cursed her, warned her to keep silent, even begged for her forgiveness. Ser Meryn Trant did none of these. Ser Meryn Trant simply did not care.

The balcony was deserted save for Sansa. She stood with her head bowed, fighting to hold back her tears, while below Joffrey sat on his Iron Throne and dispensed what it pleased him to call justice. Nine cases out of ten seemed to bore him; those he allowed his council to handle, squirming restlessly while Lord Baelish, Grand Maester Pycelle, or Queen Cersei resolved the matter. When he did choose to make a ruling, though, not even his queen mother could sway him.

A thief was brought before him and he had Ser Ilyn chop his hand off, right there in court. Two knights came to him with a dispute about some land, and he decreed that they should duel for it on the morrow. “To the *death*,” he added. A woman fell to her knees to plead for the head of a man executed as a traitor. She had loved him, she said, and she wanted to see

him decently buried. "If you loved a traitor, you must be a traitor too," Joffrey said. Two gold cloaks dragged her off to the dungeons.

Frog-faced Lord Slynt sat at the end of the council table wearing a black velvet doublet and a shiny cloth-of-gold cape, nodding with approval every time the king pronounced a sentence. Sansa stared hard at his ugly face, remembering how he had thrown down her father for Ser Ilyn to behead, wishing she could hurt him, wishing that some hero would throw him down and cut off his head. But a voice inside her whispered, *There are no heroes*, and she remembered what Lord Petyr had said to her, here in this very hall. "Life is not a song, sweetling," he'd told her. "You may learn that one day to your sorrow." *In life, the monsters win*, she told herself, and now it was the Hound's voice she heard, a cold rasp, metal on stone. "Save yourself some pain, girl, and give him what he wants."

The last case was a plump tavern singer, accused of making a song that ridiculed the late King Robert. Joffrey commanded them to fetch his woodharp and ordered him to perform the song for the court. The singer wept and swore he would never sing that song again, but the king insisted. It was sort of a funny song, all about Robert fighting with a pig. The pig was the boar who'd killed him, Sansa knew, but in some verses it almost sounded as if he were singing about the queen. When the song was done, Joffrey announced that he'd decided to be merciful. The singer could keep either his fingers or his tongue. He would have a day to make his choice. Janos Slynt nodded.

That was the final business of the afternoon, Sansa saw with relief, but her ordeal was not yet done. When the herald's voice dismissed the court, she fled the balcony, only to find Joffrey waiting for her at the base of the curving stairs. The Hound was with him, and Ser Meryn as well. The young king examined her critically, top to bottom. "You look much better than you did."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Sansa said. Hollow words, but they made him nod and smile.

"Walk with me," Joffrey commanded, offering her his arm. She had no choice but to take it. The touch of his hand would have thrilled her once; now it made her flesh crawl. "My name day will be here soon," Joffrey said

as they slipped out the rear of the throne room. “There will be a great feast, and gifts. What are you going to give me?”

“I... I had not thought, my lord.”

“*Your Grace*,” he said sharply. “You truly are a stupid girl, aren’t you? My mother says so.”

“She does?” After all that had happened, his words should have lost their power to hurt her, yet somehow they had not. The queen had always been so kind to her.

“Oh, yes. She worries about our children, whether they’ll be stupid like you, but I told her not to trouble herself.” The king gestured, and Ser Meryn opened a door for them.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she murmured. *The Hound was right, she thought, I am only a little bird, repeating the words they taught me.* The sun had fallen below the western wall, and the stones of the Red Keep glowed dark as blood.

“I’ll get you with child as soon as you’re able,” Joffrey said as he escorted her across the practice yard. “If the first one is stupid, I’ll chop off your head and find a smarter wife. When do you think you’ll be able to have children?”

Sansa could not look at him, he shamed her so. “Septa Mordane says most... most highborn girls have their flowering at twelve or thirteen.”

Joffrey nodded. “This way.” He led her into the gatehouse, to the base of the steps that led up to the battlements.

Sansa jerked back away from him, trembling. Suddenly she knew where they were going. “*No*,” she said, her voice a frightened gasp. “Please, no, don’t make me, I beg you...”

Joffrey pressed his lips together. “I want to show you what happens to traitors.”

Sansa shook her head wildly. “I won’t. I *won’t*.”

“I can have Ser Meryn drag you up,” he said. “You won’t like that. You had better do what I say.” Joffrey reached for her, and Sansa cringed away from him, backing into the Hound.

“Do it, girl,” Sandor Clegane told her, pushing her back toward the king. His mouth twitched on the burned side of his face and Sansa could almost hear the rest of it. *He’ll have you up there no matter what, so give him what he wants.*

She forced herself to take King Joffrey’s hand. The climb was something out of a nightmare; every step was a struggle, as if she were pulling her feet out of ankle-deep mud, and there were more steps than she would have believed, a thousand thousand steps, and horror waiting on the ramparts.

From the high battlements of the gatehouse, the whole world spread out below them. Sansa could see the Great Sept of Baelor on Visenya’s hill, where her father had died. At the other end of the Street of the Sisters stood the fire-blackened ruins of the Dragonpit. To the west, the swollen red sun was half-hidden behind the Gate of the Gods. The salt sea was at her back, and to the south was the fish market and the docks and the swirling torrent of the Blackwater Rush. And to the north...

She turned that way, and saw only the city, streets and alleys and hills and bottoms and more streets and more alleys and the stone of distant walls. Yet she knew that beyond them was open country, farms and fields and forests, and beyond that, north and north and north again, stood Winterfell.

“What are you looking at?” Joffrey said. “This is what I wanted you to see, right here.”

A thick stone parapet protected the outer edge of the rampart, reaching as high as Sansa’s chin, with crenellations cut into it every five feet for archers. The heads were mounted between the crenels, along the top of the wall, impaled on iron spikes so they faced out over the city. Sansa had noted them the moment she’d stepped out onto the wallwalk, but the river and the bustling streets and the setting sun were ever so much prettier. *He can make me look at the heads, she told herself, but he can’t make me see them.*

“This one is your father,” he said. “This one here. Dog, turn it around so she can see him.”

Sandor Clegane took the head by the hair and turned it. The severed head had been dipped in tar to preserve it longer. Sansa looked at it calmly, not seeing it at all. It did not really look like Lord Eddard, she thought; it did not even look *real*. “How long do I have to look?”

Joffrey seemed disappointed. “Do you want to see the rest?” There was a long row of them.

“If it please Your Grace.”

Joffrey marched her down the wallwalk, past a dozen more heads and two empty spikes. “I’m saving those for my uncle Stannis and my uncle Renly,” he explained. The other heads had been dead and mounted much longer than her father. Despite the tar, most were long past being recognizable. The king pointed to one and said, “That’s your septa there,” but Sansa could not even have told that it was a woman. The jaw had rotted off her face, and birds had eaten one ear and most of a cheek.

Sansa had wondered what had happened to Septa Mordane, although she supposed she had known all along. “Why did you kill *her*?” she asked. “She was godsworn...”

“She was a traitor.” Joffrey looked pouty; somehow she was upsetting him. “You haven’t said what you mean to give me for my name day. Maybe I should give you something instead, would you like that?”

“If it please you, my lord,” Sansa said.

When he smiled, she knew he was mocking her. “Your brother is a traitor too, you know.” He turned Septa Mordane’s head back around. “I remember your brother from Winterfell. My dog called him the lord of the wooden sword. Didn’t you, dog?”

“Did I?” the Hound replied. “I don’t recall.”

Joffrey gave a petulant shrug. “Your brother defeated my uncle Jaime. My mother says it was treachery and deceit. She wept when she heard. Women are all weak, even her, though she pretends she isn’t. She says we need to stay in King’s Landing in case my other uncles attack, but I don’t care. After my name day feast, I’m going to raise a host and kill your brother myself. That’s what I’ll give you, Lady Sansa. Your brother’s head.”

A kind of madness took over her then, and she heard herself say, “Maybe my brother will give me *your* head.”

Joffrey scowled. “You must never mock me like that. A true wife does not mock her lord. Ser Meryn, teach her.”

This time the knight grasped her beneath the jaw and held her head still as he struck her. He hit her twice, left to right, and harder, right to left. Her lip split and blood ran down her chin, to mingle with the salt of her tears.

“You shouldn’t be crying all the time,” Joffrey told her. “You’re more pretty when you smile and laugh.”

Sansa made herself smile, afraid that he would have Ser Meryn hit her again if she did not, but it was no good, the king still shook his head. “Wipe off the blood, you’re all messy.”

The outer parapet came up to her chin, but along the inner edge of the walk was nothing, nothing but a long plunge to the bailey seventy or eighty feet below. All it would take was a shove, she told herself. He was standing right there, right *there*, smirking at her with those fat wormlips. You could do it, she told herself. *You could. Do it right now.* It wouldn’t even matter if she went over with him. It wouldn’t matter at all.

“Here, girl.” Sandor Clegane knelt before her, *between* her and Joffrey. With a delicacy surprising in such a big man, he dabbed at the blood welling from her broken lip.

The moment was gone. Sansa lowered her eyes. “Thank you,” she said when he was done. She was a good girl, and always remembered her courtesies.