

SANSA

They came for Sansa on the third day.

She chose a simple dress of dark grey wool, plainly cut but richly embroidered around the collar and sleeves. Her fingers felt thick and clumsy as she struggled with the silver fastenings without the benefit of servants. Jeyne Poole had been confined with her, but Jeyne was useless. Her face was puffy from all her crying, and she could not seem to stop sobbing about her father.

“I’m certain your father is well,” Sansa told her when she had finally gotten the dress buttoned right. “I’ll ask the queen to let you see him.” She thought that kindness might lift Jeyne’s spirits, but the other girl just looked at her with red, swollen eyes and began to cry all the harder. She was such a *child*.

Sansa had wept too, the first day. Even within the stout walls of Maegor’s Holdfast, with her door closed and barred, it was hard not to be terrified when the killing began. She had grown up to the sound of steel in the yard, and scarcely a day of her life had passed without hearing the clash of sword on sword, yet somehow knowing that the fighting was real made all the difference in the world. She heard it as she had never heard it before, and there were other sounds as well, grunts of pain, angry curses, shouts for help, and the moans of wounded and dying men. In the songs, the knights never screamed nor begged for mercy.

So she wept, pleading through her door for them to tell her what was happening, calling for her father, for Septa Mordane, for the king, for her gallant prince. If the men guarding her heard her pleas, they gave no answer. The only time the door opened was late that night, when they thrust Jeyne Poole inside, bruised and shaking. “*They’re killing everyone*,” the steward’s daughter had shrieked at her. She went on and on. The Hound had broken down her door with a warhammer, she said. There were bodies on the stair of the Tower of the Hand, and the steps were slick with blood.

Sansa dried her own tears as she struggled to comfort her friend. They went to sleep in the same bed, cradled in each other's arms like sisters.

The second day was even worse. The room where Sansa had been confined was at the top of the highest tower of Maegor's Holdfast. From its window, she could see that the heavy iron portcullis in the gatehouse was down, and the drawbridge drawn up over the deep dry moat that separated the keep-within-a-keep from the larger castle that surrounded it. Lannister guardsmen prowled the walls with spears and crossbows to hand. The fighting was over, and the silence of the grave had settled over the Red Keep. The only sounds were Jeyne Poole's endless whimpers and sobs.

They were fed—hard cheese and fresh-baked bread and milk to break their fast, roast chicken and greens at midday, and a late supper of beef and barley stew—but the servants who brought the meals would not answer Sansa's questions. That evening, some women brought her clothes from the Tower of the Hand, and some of Jeyne's things as well, but they seemed nearly as frightened as Jeyne, and when she tried to talk to them, they fled from her as if she had the grey plague. The guards outside the door still refused to let them leave the room.

"Please, I need to speak to the queen again," Sansa told them, as she told everyone she saw that day. "She'll want to talk to me, I know she will. Tell her I want to see her, please. If not the queen, then Prince Joffrey, if you'd be so kind. We're to marry when we're older."

At sunset on the second day, a great bell began to ring. Its voice was deep and sonorous, and the long slow clanging filled Sansa with a sense of dread. The ringing went on and on, and after a while they heard other bells answering from the Great Sept of Baelor on Visenya's Hill. The sound rumbled across the city like thunder, warning of the storm to come.

"What is it?" Jeyne asked, covering her ears. "Why are they ringing the bells?"

"The king is dead." Sansa could not say how she knew it, yet she did. The slow, endless clanging filled their room, as mournful as a dirge. Had some enemy stormed the castle and murdered King Robert? Was that the meaning of the fighting they had heard?

She went to sleep wondering, restless, and fearful. Was her beautiful Joffrey the king now? Or had they killed him too? She was afraid for him, and for her father. If only they would tell her what was happening...

That night Sansa dreamt of Joffrey on the throne, with herself seated beside him in a gown of woven gold. She had a crown on her head, and everyone she had ever known came before her, to bend the knee and say their courtesies.

The next morning, the morning of the third day, Ser Boros Blount of the Kingsguard came to escort her to the queen.

Ser Boros was an ugly man with a broad chest and short, bandy legs. His nose was flat, his cheeks baggy with jowls, his hair grey and brittle. Today he wore white velvet, and his snowy cloak was fastened with a lion brooch. The beast had the soft sheen of gold, and his eyes were tiny rubies. "You look very handsome and splendid this morning, Ser Boros," Sansa told him. A lady remembered her courtesies, and she was resolved to be a lady no matter what.

"And you, my lady," Ser Boros said in a flat voice. "Her Grace awaits. Come with me."

There were guards outside her door, Lannister men-at-arms in crimson cloaks and lion-crested helms. Sansa made herself smile at them pleasantly and bid them a good morning as she passed. It was the first time she had been allowed outside the chamber since Ser Arys Oakheart had led her there two mornings past. "To keep you safe, my sweet one," Queen Cersei had told her. "Joffrey would never forgive me if anything happened to his precious."

Sansa had expected that Ser Boros would escort her to the royal apartments, but instead he led her out of Maegor's Holdfast. The bridge was down again. Some workmen were lowering a man on ropes into the depths of the dry moat. When Sansa peered down, she saw a body impaled on the huge iron spikes below. She averted her eyes quickly, afraid to ask, afraid to look too long, afraid he might be someone she knew.

They found Queen Cersei in the council chambers, seated at the head of a long table littered with papers, candles, and blocks of sealing wax. The

room was as splendid as any that Sansa had ever seen. She stared in awe at the carved wooden screen and the twin sphinxes that sat beside the door.

“Your Grace,” Ser Boros said when they were ushered inside by another of the Kingsguard, Ser Mandon of the curiously dead face, “I’ve brought the girl.”

Sansa had hoped Joffrey might be with her. Her prince was not there, but three of the king’s councillors were. Lord Petyr Baelish sat on the queen’s left hand, Grand Maester Pycelle at the end of the table, while Lord Varys hovered over them, smelling flowery. All of them were clad in black, she realized with a feeling of dread. Mourning clothes...

The queen wore a high-collared black silk gown, with a hundred dark red rubies sewn into her bodice, covering her from neck to bosom. They were cut in the shape of teardrops, as if the queen were weeping blood. Cersei smiled to see her, and Sansa thought it was the sweetest and saddest smile she had ever seen. “Sansa, my sweet child,” she said, “I know you’ve been asking for me. I’m sorry that I could not send for you sooner. Matters have been very unsettled, and I have not had a moment. I trust my people have been taking good care of you?”

“Everyone has been very sweet and pleasant, Your Grace, thank you ever so much for asking,” Sansa said politely. “Only, well, no one will talk to us or tell us what’s happened...”

“Us?” Cersei seemed puzzled.

“We put the steward’s girl in with her,” Ser Boros said. “We did not know what else to do with her.”

The queen frowned. “Next time, you will ask,” she said, her voice sharp. “The gods only know what sort of tales she’s been filling Sansa’s head with.”

“Jeyne’s scared,” Sansa said. “She won’t stop crying. I promised her I’d ask if she could see her father.”

Old Grand Maester Pycelle lowered his eyes.

“Her father is well, isn’t he?” Sansa said anxiously. She knew there had been fighting, but surely no one would harm a steward. Vayon Poole did not

even wear a sword.

Queen Cersei looked at each of the councillors in turn. “I won’t have Sansa fretting needlessly. What shall we do with this little friend of hers, my lords?”

Lord Petyr leaned forward. “I’ll find a place for her.”

“Not in the city,” said the queen.

“Do you take me for a fool?”

The queen ignored that. “Ser Boros, escort this girl to Lord Petyr’s apartments and instruct his people to keep her there until he comes for her. Tell her that Littlefinger will be taking her to see her father, that ought to calm her down. I want her gone before Sansa returns to her chamber.”

“As you command, Your Grace,” Ser Boros said. He bowed deeply, spun on his heel, and took his leave, his long white cloak stirring the air behind him.

Sansa was confused. “I don’t understand,” she said. “Where is Jeyne’s father? Why can’t Ser Boros take her to him instead of Lord Petyr having to do it?” She had promised herself she would be a lady, gentle as the queen and as strong as her mother, the Lady Catelyn, but all of a sudden she was scared again. For a second she thought she might cry. “Where are you sending her? She hasn’t done anything wrong, she’s a good girl.”

“She’s upset you,” the queen said gently. “We can’t be having that. Not another word, now. Lord Baelish will see that Jeyne’s well taken care of, I promise you.” She patted the chair beside her. “Sit down, Sansa. I want to talk to you.”

Sansa seated herself beside the queen. Cersei smiled again, but that did not make her feel any less anxious. Varys was wringing his soft hands together, Grand Maester Pycelle kept his sleepy eyes on the papers in front of him, but she could feel Littlefinger staring. Something about the way the small man looked at her made Sansa feel as though she had no clothes on. Goose bumps pimply her skin.

“Sweet Sansa,” Queen Cersei said, laying a soft hand on her wrist. “Such a beautiful child. I do hope you know how much Joffrey and I love

you.”

“You *do*?” Sansa said, breathless. Littlefinger was forgotten. Her prince loved her. Nothing else mattered.

The queen smiled. “I think of you almost as my own daughter. And I know the love you bear for Joffrey.” She gave a weary shake of her head. “I am afraid we have some grave news about your lord father. You must be brave, child.”

Her quiet words gave Sansa a chill. “What is it?”

“Your father is a traitor, dear,” Lord Varys said.

Grand Maester Pycelle lifted his ancient head. “With my own ears, I heard Lord Eddard swear to our beloved King Robert that he would protect the young princes as if they were his own sons. And yet the moment the king was dead, he called the small council together to steal Prince Joffrey’s rightful throne.”

“No,” Sansa blurted. “He wouldn’t do that. He *wouldn’t!*”

The queen picked up a letter. The paper was torn and stiff with dried blood, but the broken seal was her father’s, the direwolf stamped in pale wax. “We found this on the captain of your household guard, Sansa. It is a letter to my late husband’s brother Stannis, inviting him to take the crown.”

“Please, Your Grace, there’s been a mistake.” Sudden panic made her dizzy and faint. “Please, send for my father, he’ll tell you, he would never write such a letter, the king was his friend.”

“Robert thought so,” said the queen. “This betrayal would have broken his heart. The gods are kind, that he did not live to see it.” She sighed. “Sansa, sweetling, you must see what a dreadful position this has left us in. You are innocent of any wrong, we all know that, and yet you are the daughter of a traitor. How can I allow you to marry my son?”

“But I *love* him,” Sansa wailed, confused and frightened. What did they mean to do to her? What had they done to her father? It was not supposed to happen this way. She had to wed Joffrey, they were betrothed, he was promised to her, she had even dreamed about it. It wasn’t fair to take him away from her on account of whatever her father might have done.

“How well I know that, child,” Cersei said, her voice so kind and sweet. “Why else should you have come to me and told me of your father’s plan to send you away from us, if not for love?”

“It *was* for love,” Sansa said in a rush. “Father wouldn’t even give me leave to say farewell.” She was the good girl, the obedient girl, but she had felt as wicked as Arya that morning, sneaking away from Septa Mordane, defying her lord father. She had never done anything so willful before, and she would never have done it then if she hadn’t loved Joffrey as much as she did. “He was going to take me back to Winterfell and marry me to some hedge knight, even though it was Joff I wanted. I told him, but he wouldn’t listen.” The king had been her last hope. The king could *command* Father to let her stay in King’s Landing and marry Prince Joffrey, Sansa knew he could, but the king had always frightened her. He was loud and rough-voiced and drunk as often as not, and he would probably have just sent her back to Lord Eddard, if they even let her see him. So she went to the queen instead, and poured out her heart, and Cersei had listened and thanked her sweetly... only then Ser Arys had escorted her to the high room in Maegor’s Holdfast and posted guards, and a few hours later, the fighting had begun outside. “Please,” she finished, “you *have* to let me marry Joffrey, I’ll be ever so good a wife to him, you’ll see. I’ll be a queen just like you, I promise.”

Queen Cersei looked to the others. “My lords of the council, what do you say to her plea?”

“The poor child,” murmured Varys. “A love so true and innocent, Your Grace, it would be cruel to deny it... and yet, what can we do? Her father stands condemned.” His soft hands washed each other in a gesture of helpless distress.

“A child born of traitor’s seed will find that betrayal comes naturally to her,” said Grand Maester Pycelle. “She is a sweet thing now, but in ten years, who can say what treasons she may hatch?”

“*No*,” Sansa said, horrified. “I’m not, I’d never... I wouldn’t betray Joffrey, I love him, I swear it, I do.”

“Oh, so poignant,” said Varys. “And yet, it is truly said that blood runs truer than oaths.”

“She reminds me of the mother, not the father,” Lord Petyr Baelish said quietly. “Look at her. The hair, the eyes. She is the very image of Cat at the same age.”

The queen looked at her, troubled, and yet Sansa could see kindness in her clear green eyes. “Child,” she said, “if I could truly believe that you were not like your father, why nothing should please me more than to see you wed to my Joffrey. I know he loves you with all his heart.” She sighed. “And yet, I fear that Lord Varys and the Grand Maester have the right of it. The blood will tell. I have only to remember how your sister set her wolf on my son.”

“I’m not like Arya,” Sansa blurted. “She has the traitor’s blood, not me. I’m *good*, ask Septa Mordane, she’ll tell you, I only want to be Joffrey’s loyal and loving wife.”

She felt the weight of Cersei’s eyes as the queen studied her face. “I believe you mean it, child.” She turned to face the others. “My lords, it seems to me that if the rest of her kin were to remain loyal in this terrible time, that would go a long way toward laying our fears to rest.”

Grand Maester Pycelle stroked his huge soft beard, his wide brow furrowed in thought. “Lord Eddard has three sons.”

“Mere boys,” Lord Petyr said with a shrug. “I should be more concerned with Lady Catelyn and the Tullys.”

The queen took Sansa’s hand in both of hers. “Child, do you know your letters?”

Sansa nodded nervously. She could read and write better than any of her brothers, although she was hopeless at sums.

“I am pleased to hear that. Perhaps there is hope for you and Joffrey still...”

“What do you want me to do?”

“You must write your lady mother, and your brother, the eldest... what is his name?”

“Robb,” Sansa said.

“The word of your lord father’s treason will no doubt reach them soon. Better that it should come from you. You must tell them how Lord Eddard betrayed his king.”

Sansa wanted Joffrey desperately, but she did not think she had the courage to do as the queen was asking. “But he never... I don’t... Your Grace, I wouldn’t know what to say...”

The queen patted her hand. “We will tell you what to write, child. The important thing is that you urge Lady Catelyn and your brother to keep the king’s peace.”

“It will go hard for them if they don’t,” said Grand Maester Pycelle. “By the love you bear them, you must urge them to walk the path of wisdom.”

“Your lady mother will no doubt fear for you dreadfully,” the queen said. “You must tell her that you are well and in our care, that we are treating you gently and seeing to your every want. Bid them to come to King’s Landing and pledge their fealty to Joffrey when he takes his throne. If they do that... why, then we shall know that there is no taint in your blood, and when you come into the flower of your womanhood, you shall wed the king in the Great Sept of Baelor, before the eyes of gods and men.”

...wed the king... The words made her breath come faster, yet still Sansa hesitated. “Perhaps... if I might see my father, talk to him about...”

“Treason?” Lord Varys hinted.

“You disappoint me, Sansa,” the queen said, with eyes gone hard as stones. “We’ve told you of your father’s crimes. If you are truly as loyal as you say, why should you want to see him?”

“I... I only meant...” Sansa felt her eyes grow wet. “He’s not... please, he hasn’t been... hurt, or... or...”

“Lord Eddard has not been harmed,” the queen said.

“But... what’s to become of him?”

“That is a matter for the king to decide,” Grand Maester Pycelle announced ponderously.

The *king!* Sansa blinked back her tears. Joffrey was the king now, she thought. Her gallant prince would never hurt her father, no matter what he might have done. If she went to him and pleaded for mercy, she was certain he'd listen. He *had* to listen, he loved her, even the queen said so. Joff would need to punish Father, the lords would expect it, but perhaps he could send him back to Winterfell, or exile him to one of the Free Cities across the narrow sea. It would only have to be for a few years. By then she and Joffrey would be married. Once she was queen, she could persuade Joff to bring Father back and grant him a pardon.

Only... if Mother or Robb did anything treasonous, called the banners or refused to swear fealty or *anything*, it would all go wrong. Her Joffrey was good and kind, she knew it in her heart, but a king had to be stern with rebels. She had to make them understand, she *had* to!

"I'll... I'll write the letters," Sansa told them.

With a smile as warm as the sunrise, Cersei Lannister leaned close and kissed her gently on the cheek. "I knew you would. Joffrey will be so proud when I tell him what courage and good sense you've shown here today."

In the end, she wrote four letters. To her mother, the Lady Catelyn Stark, and to her brothers at Winterfell, and to her aunt and her grandfather as well, Lady Lysa Arryn of the Eyrie, and Lord Hoster Tully of Riverrun. By the time she had done, her fingers were cramped and stiff and stained with ink. Varys had her father's seal. She warmed the pale white beeswax over a candle, poured it carefully, and watched as the eunuch stamped each letter with the direwolf of House Stark.

Jeyne Poole and all her things were gone when Ser Mandon Moore returned Sansa to the high tower of Maegor's Holdfast. No more weeping, she thought gratefully. Yet somehow it seemed colder with Jeyne gone, even after she'd built a fire. She pulled a chair close to the hearth, took down one of her favorite books, and lost herself in the stories of Florian and Jonquil, of Lady Shella and the Rainbow Knight, of valiant Prince Aemon and his doomed love for his brother's queen.

It was not until later that night, as she was drifting off to sleep, that Sansa realized she had forgotten to ask about her sister.