

SANSA

They had been singing in the sept all morning, since the first report of enemy sails had reached the castle. The sound of their voices mingled with the whicker of horses, the clank of steel, and the groaning hinges of the great bronze gates to make a strange and fearful music. *In the sept they sing for the Mother's mercy but on the walls it's the Warrior they pray to, and all in silence.* She remembered how Septa Mordane used to tell them that the Warrior and the Mother were only two faces of the same great god. *But if there is only one, whose prayers will be heard?*

Ser Meryn Trant held the blood bay for Joffrey to mount. Boy and horse alike wore gilded mail and enameled crimson plate, with matching golden lions on their heads. The pale sunlight flashed off the golds and reds every time Joff moved. *Bright, shining, and empty,* Sansa thought.

The Imp was mounted on a red stallion, armored more plainly than the king in battle gear that made him look like a little boy dressed up in his father's clothes. But there was nothing childish about the battle-axe slung below his shield. Ser Mandon Moore rode at his side, white steel icy bright. When Tyrion saw her he turned his horse her way. "Lady Sansa," he called from the saddle, "surely my sister has asked you to join the other highborn ladies in Maegor's?"

"She has, my lord, but King Joffrey sent for me to see him off. I mean to visit the sept as well, to pray."

"I won't ask for whom." His mouth twisted oddly; if that was a smile, it was the queerest she had ever seen. "This day may change all. For you as well as for House Lannister. I ought to have sent you off with Tommen, now that I think on it. Still, you should be safe enough in Maegor's, so long as—"

"*Sansa!*" The boyish shout rang across the yard; Joffrey had seen her. "Sansa, here!"

He calls me as if he were calling a dog, she thought.

“His Grace has need of you,” Tyrion Lannister observed. “We’ll talk again after the battle, if the gods permit.”

Sansa threaded her way through the file of gold-cloaked spearmen as Joffrey beckoned her closer. “It will be battle soon, everyone says so.”

“May the gods have mercy on us all.”

“My uncle’s the one who will need mercy, but I won’t give him any.” Joffrey drew his sword. The pommel was a ruby cut in the shape of a heart, set between a lion’s jaws. Three fullers were deeply incised in the blade. “My new blade, Hearteater.”

He’d owned a sword named Lion’s Tooth once, Sansa remembered. Arya had taken it from him and thrown it in a river. *I hope Stannis does the same with this one.* “It is beautifully wrought, Your Grace.”

“Bless my steel with a kiss.” He extended the blade down to her. “Go on, kiss it.”

He had never sounded more like a stupid little boy. Sansa touched her lips to the metal, thinking that she would kiss any number of swords sooner than Joffrey. The gesture seemed to please him, though. He sheathed the blade with a flourish. “You’ll kiss it again when I return, and taste my uncle’s blood.”

Only if one of your Kingsguard kills him for you. Three of the White Swords would go with Joffrey and his uncle: Ser Meryn, Ser Mandon, and Ser Osmund Kettleblack. “Will you lead your knights into battle?” Sansa asked, hoping.

“I would, but my uncle the Imp says my uncle Stannis will never cross the river. I’ll command the Three Whores, though. I’m going to see to the traitors myself.” The prospect made Joff smile. His plump pink lips always made him look pouty. Sansa had liked that once, but now it made her sick.

“They say my brother Robb always goes where the fighting is thickest,” she said recklessly. “Though he’s older than Your Grace, to be sure. A man grown.”

That made him frown. “I’ll deal with your brother after I’m done with my traitor uncle. I’ll gut him with Hearteater, you’ll see.” He wheeled his

horse about and spurred toward the gate. Ser Meryn and Ser Osmund fell in to his right and left, the gold cloaks following four abreast. The Imp and Ser Mandon Moore brought up the rear. The guards saw them off with off with shouts and cheers. When the last was gone, a sudden stillness settled over the yard, like the hush before a storm.

Through the quiet, the singing pulled at her. Sansa turned toward the sept. Two stableboys followed, and one of the guards whose watch was ended. Others fell in behind them.

Sansa had never seen the sept so crowded, nor so brightly lit; great shafts of rainbow-colored sunlight slanted down through the crystals in the high windows, and candles burned on every side, their little flames twinkling like stars. The Mother's altar and the Warrior's swam in light, but Smith and Crone and Maid and Father had their worshipers as well, and there were even a few flames dancing below the Stranger's half-human face... for what was Stannis Baratheon, if not the Stranger come to judge them? Sansa visited each of the Seven in turn, lighting a candle at each altar, and then found herself a place on the benches between a wizened old washer woman and a boy no older than Rickon, dressed in the fine linen tunic of a knight's son. The old woman's hand was bony and hard with callus, the boy's small and soft, but it was good to have someone to hold on to. The air was hot and heavy, smelling of incense and sweat, crystal-kissed and candle-bright; it made her dizzy to breathe it.

She knew the hymn; her mother had taught it to her once, a long time ago in Winterfell. She joined her voice to theirs.

*Gentle Mother, font of mercy,
save our sons from war, we pray,
stay the swords and stay the arrows,
let them know a better day.*

*Gentle Mother, strength of women,
help our daughters through this fray,
soothe the wrath and tame the fury,
teach us all a kinder way.*

Across the city, thousands had jammed into the Great Sept of Baelor on Visenya's Hill, and they would be singing too, their voices swelling out over the city, across the river, and up into the sky. *Surely the gods must hear us*, she thought.

Sansa knew most of the hymns, and followed along on those she did not know as best she could. She sang along with grizzled old serving men and anxious young wives, with serving girls and soldiers, cooks and falconers, knights and knaves, squires and spit boys and nursing mothers. She sang with those inside the castle walls and those without, sang with all the city. She sang for mercy, for the living and the dead alike, for Bran and Rickon and Robb, for her sister Arya and her bastard brother Jon Snow, away off on the Wall. She sang for her mother and her father, for her grandfather Lord Hoster and her uncle Edmure Tully, for her friend Jeyne Poole, for old drunken King Robert, for Septa Mordane and Ser Dontos and Jory Cassel and Maester Luwin, for all the brave knights and soldiers who would die today, and for the children and the wives who would mourn them, and finally, toward the end, she even sang for Tyrion the Imp and for the Hound. *He is no true knight but he saved me all the same*, she told the Mother. *Save him if you can, and gentle the rage inside him*.

But when the septon climbed on high and called upon the gods to protect and defend their true and noble king, Sansa got to her feet. The aisles were jammed with people. She had to shoulder through while the septon called upon the Smith to lend strength to Joffrey's sword and shield, the Warrior to give him courage, the Father to defend him in his need. *Let his sword break and his shield shatter*, Sansa thought coldly as she shoved out through the doors, *let his courage fail him and every man desert him*.

A few guards paced along on the gatehouse battlements, but otherwise the castle seemed empty. Sansa stopped and listened. Away off, she could hear the sounds of battle. The singing almost drowned them out, but the sounds were there if you had the ears to hear: the deep moan of warhorns, the creak and thud of catapults flinging stones, the splashes and splinterings, the crackle of burning pitch and *thrum* of scorpions loosing

their yard-long iron-headed shafts... and beneath it all, the cries of dying men.

It was another sort of song, a terrible song. Sansa pulled the hood of her cloak up over her ears, and hurried toward Maegor's Holdfast, the castle-within-a-castle where the queen had promised they would all be safe. At the foot of the drawbridge, she came upon Lady Tanda and her two daughters. Falyse had arrived yesterday from Castle Stokeworth with a small troop of soldiers. She was trying to coax her sister onto the bridge, but Lollys clung to her maid, sobbing, "I don't want to, I don't want to, I don't want to."

"The battle is *begun*," Lady Tanda said in a brittle voice.

"I don't want to, I don't want to."

There was no way Sansa could avoid them. She greeted them courteously. "May I be of help?"

Lady Tanda flushed with shame. "No, my lady, but we thank you kindly. You must forgive my daughter, she has not been well."

"I don't want to." Lollys clutched at her maid, a slender, pretty girl with short dark hair who looked as though she wanted nothing so much as to shove her mistress into the dry moat, onto those iron spikes. "Please, please, I don't want to."

Sansa spoke to her gently. "We'll all be thrice protected inside, and there's to be food and drink and song as well."

Lollys gaped at her, mouth open. She had dull brown eyes that always seemed to be wet with tears. "I don't want to."

"You *have* to," her sister Falyse said sharply, "and that is the end of it. Shae, help me." They each took an elbow, and together half dragged and half carried Lollys across the bridge. Sansa followed with their mother. "She's been sick," Lady Tanda said. *If a babe can be termed a sickness*, Sansa thought. It was common gossip that Lollys was with child.

The two guards at the door wore the lion-crested helms and crimson cloaks of House Lannister, but Sansa knew they were only dressed-up sellswords. Another sat at the foot of the stair—a real guard would have

been standing, not sitting on a step with his halberd across his knees—but he rose when he saw them and opened the door to usher them inside.

The Queen's Ballroom was not a tenth the size of the castle's Great Hall, only half as big as the Small Hall in the Tower of the Hand, but it could still seat a hundred, and it made up in grace what it lacked in space. Beaten silver mirrors backed every wall sconce, so the torches burned twice as bright; the walls were paneled in richly carved wood, and sweet-smelling rushes covered the floors. From the gallery above drifted down the merry strains of pipes and fiddle. A line of arched windows ran along the south wall, but they had been closed off with heavy draperies. Thick velvet hangings admitted no thread of light, and would muffle the sound of prayer and war alike. *It makes no matter*, Sansa thought. *The war is with us.*

Almost every highborn woman in the city sat at the long trestle tables, along with a handful of old men and young boys. The women were wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters. Their men had gone out to fight Lord Stannis. Many would not return. The air was heavy with the knowledge. As Joffrey's betrothed, Sansa had the seat of honor on the queen's right hand. She was climbing the dais when she saw the man standing in the shadows by the back wall. He wore a long hauberk of oiled black mail, and held his sword before him: her father's greatsword, Ice, near as tall as he was. Its point rested on the floor, and his hard bony fingers curled around the crossguard on either side of the grip. Sansa's breath caught in her throat. Ser Ilyn Payne seemed to sense her stare. He turned his gaunt, pox-ravaged face toward her.

"What is *he* doing here?" she asked Osfryd Kettleblack. He captained the queen's new red cloak guard.

Osfryd grinned. "Her Grace expects she'll have need of him before the night's done."

Ser Ilyn was the King's Justice. There was only one service he might be needed for. *Whose head does she want?*

"All rise for Her Grace, Cersei of House Lannister, Queen Regent and Protector of the Realm," the royal steward cried.

Cersei's gown was snowy linen, white as the cloaks of the Kingsguard. Her long dagged sleeves showed a lining of gold satin. Masses of bright yellow hair tumbled to her bare shoulders in thick curls. Around her slender neck hung a rope of diamonds and emeralds. The white made her look strangely innocent, almost maidenly, but there were points of color on her cheeks.

"Be seated," the queen said when she had taken her place on the dais, "and be welcome." Osfryd Kettleblack held her chair; a page performed the same service for Sansa. "You look pale, Sansa," Cersei observed. "Is your red flower still blooming?"

"Yes."

"How apt. The men will bleed out there, and you in here." The queen signaled for the first course to be served.

"Why is Ser Ilyn here?" Sansa blurted out.

The queen glanced at the mute headsman. "To deal with treason, and to defend us if need be. He was a knight before he was a headsman." She pointed her spoon toward the end of the hall, where the tall wooden doors had been closed and barred. "When the axes smash down those doors, you may be glad of him."

I would be gladder if it were the Hound, Sansa thought. Harsh as he was, she did not believe Sandor Clegane would let any harm come to her. "Won't your guards protect us?"

"And who will protect us from my guards?" The queen gave Osfryd a sideways look. "Loyal sellswords are rare as virgin whores. If the battle is lost my guards will trip on those crimson cloaks in their haste to rip them off. They'll steal what they can and flee, along with the serving men, washer women, and stableboys, all out to save their own worthless hides. Do you have any notion what happens when a city is sacked, Sansa? No, you wouldn't, would you? All you know of life you learned from singers, and there's such a dearth of good sacking songs."

"True knights would never harm women and children." The words rang hollow in her ears even as she said them.

“True knights.” The queen seemed to find that wonderfully amusing.
“No doubt you’re right. So why don’t you just eat your broth like a good girl and wait for Symeon Star-Eyes and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight to come rescue you, sweetling. I’m sure it won’t be very long now.”