



SANSA

Far across the city, a bell began to toll.

Sansa felt as though she were in a dream. “Joffrey is dead,” she told the trees, to see if that would wake her.

He had not been dead when she left the throne room. He had been on his knees, though, clawing at his throat, tearing at his own skin as he fought to breathe. The sight of it had been too terrible to watch, and she had turned and fled, sobbing. Lady Tanda had been fleeing as well. “You have a good heart, my lady,” she said to Sansa. “Not every maid would weep so for a man who set her aside and wed her to a dwarf.”

A good heart. I have a good heart. Hysterical laughter rose up her gullet, but Sansa choked it back down. The bells were ringing, slow and mournful. Ringing, ringing, ringing. They had rung for King Robert the same way. Joffrey was dead, he was dead, he was dead, dead, dead. Why was she crying, when she wanted to dance? Were they tears of joy?

She found her clothes where she had hidden them, the night before last. With no maids to help her, it took her longer than it should have to undo the laces of her gown. Her hands were strangely clumsy, though she was not as frightened as she ought to have been. “The gods are cruel to take him so young and handsome, at his own wedding feast,” Lady Tanda had said to her.

The gods are just, thought Sansa. Robb had died at a wedding feast as well. It was Robb she wept for. *Him and Margaery*. Poor Margaery, twice wed and twice widowed. Sansa slid her arm from a sleeve, pushed down the gown, and wriggled out of it. She balled it up and shoved it into the bole of an oak, shook out the clothing she had hidden there. *Dress warmly*, Ser Dontos had told her, *and dress dark*. She had no blacks, so she chose a dress of thick brown wool. The bodice was decorated with freshwater pearls, though. *The cloak will cover them*. The cloak was a deep green, with a large hood. She slipped the dress over her head, and donned the cloak, though she left the hood down for the moment. There were shoes as well, simple and sturdy, with flat heels and square toes. *The gods heard my prayer*, she thought. She felt so numb and dreamy. *My skin has turned to porcelain, to ivory, to steel*. Her hands moved stiffly, awkwardly, as if they had never let down her hair before. For a moment she wished Shae was there, to help her with the net.

When she pulled it free, her long auburn hair cascaded down her back and across her shoulders. The web of spun silver hung from her fingers, the fine metal glimmering softly, the stones black in the moonlight. *Black amethysts from Asshai*. One of them was missing. Sansa lifted the net for a closer look. There was a dark smudge in the silver socket where the stone had fallen out.

A sudden terror filled her. Her heart hammered against her ribs, and for an instant she held her breath. *Why am I so scared, it's only an amethyst, a black amethyst from Asshai, no more than that. It must have been loose in the setting, that's all. It was loose and it fell out, and now it's lying somewhere in the throne room, or in the yard, unless . . .*

Ser Dontos had said the hair net was magic, that it would take her home. He told her she must wear it tonight at Joffrey's wedding feast. The silver wire stretched tight across her knuckles. Her thumb rubbed back and forth against the hole where the stone had been. She tried to stop, but her fingers were not her own. Her thumb was drawn to the hole as the tongue is drawn to a missing tooth. *What kind of magic?* The king was dead, the cruel king who had been her gallant prince a thousand years ago. If Dontos had lied about the hair net, had he lied about the rest as well? *What if he never*

comes? What if there is no ship, no boat on the river, no escape? What would happen to her then?

She heard a faint rustle of leaves, and stuffed the silver hair net down deep in the pocket of her cloak. “Who’s there?” she cried. “Who is it?” The godswood was dim and dark, and the bells were ringing Joff into his grave.

“Me.” He staggered out from under the trees, reeling drunk. He caught her arm to steady himself. “Sweet Jonquil, I’ve come. Your Florian has come, don’t be afraid.”

Sansa pulled away from his touch. “You said I must wear the hair net. The silver net with . . . what sort of stones are those?”

“Amethysts. Black amethysts from Asshai, my lady.”

“They’re no amethysts. Are they? *Are they?* You lied.”

“Black amethysts,” he swore. “There was magic in them.”

“There was *murder* in them!”

“Softly, my lady, softly. No murder. He choked on his pigeon pie.” Dontos chortled. “Oh, tasty tasty pie. Silver and stones, that’s all it was, silver and stone and magic.”

The bells were tolling, and the wind was making a noise like *he* had made as he tried to suck a breath of air. “You poisoned him. You did. You took a stone from my hair . . .”

“Hush, you’ll be the death of us. I did nothing. Come, we must away, they’ll search for you. Your husband’s been arrested.”

“Tyrion?” she said, shocked.

“Do you have another husband? The Imp, the dwarf uncle, she thinks he did it.” He grabbed her hand and pulled at her. “This way, we must away, quickly now, have no fear.”

Sansa followed unresisting. *I could never abide the weeping of women*, Joff once said, but his mother was the only woman weeping now. In Old Nan’s stories the grumkins crafted magic things that could make a wish come true. *Did I wish him dead?* she wondered, before she remembered that she was too old to believe in grumkins. “*Tyrion* poisoned him?” Her dwarf husband had hated his nephew, she knew. Could he truly have killed him?

Did he know about my hair net, about the black amethysts? He brought Joff wine. How could you make someone choke by putting an amethyst in their wine? *If Tyrion did it, they will think I was part of it as well,* she realized with a start of fear. How not? They were man and wife, and Joff had killed her father and mocked her with her brother's death. *One flesh, one heart, one soul.*

"Be quiet now, my sweetling," said Dontos. "Outside the godswood, we must make no sound. Pull up your hood and hide your face." Sansa nodded, and did as he said.

He was so drunk that sometimes Sansa had to lend him her arm to keep him from falling. The bells were ringing out across the city, more and more of them joining in. She kept her head down and stayed in the shadows, close behind Dontos. While descending the serpentine steps he stumbled to his knees and retched. *My poor Florian,* she thought, as he wiped his mouth with a floppy sleeve. *Dress dark,* he'd said, yet under his brown hooded cloak he was wearing his old surcoat; red and pink horizontal stripes beneath a black chief bearing three gold crowns, the arms of House Hollard. "Why are you wearing your surcoat? Joff decreed it was death if you were caught dressed as a knight again, he . . . oh . . ." Nothing Joff had decreed mattered any longer.

"I wanted to be a knight. For this, at least." Dontos lurched back to his feet and took her arm. "Come. Be quiet now, no questions."

They continued down the serpentine and across a small sunken courtyard. Ser Dontos shoved open a heavy door and lit a taper. They were inside a long gallery. Along the walls stood empty suits of armor, dark and dusty, their helms crested with rows of scales that continued down their backs. As they hurried past, the taper's light made the shadows of each scale stretch and twist. *The hollow knights are turning into dragons,* she thought.

One more stair took them to an oaken door banded with iron. "Be strong now, my Jonquil, you are almost there." When Dontos lifted the bar and pulled open the door, Sansa felt a cold breeze on her face. She passed through twelve feet of wall, and then she was outside the castle, standing at the top of the cliff. Below was the river, above the sky, and one was as black as the other.

“We must climb down,” Ser Dontos said. “At the bottom, a man is waiting to row us out to the ship.”

“I’ll fall.” Bran had fallen, and he had loved to climb.

“No you won’t. There’s a sort of ladder, a secret ladder, carved into the stone. Here, you can feel it, my lady.” He got down on his knees with her and made her lean over the edge of the cliff, groping with her fingers until she found the handhold cut into the face of the bluff. “Almost as good as rungs.”

Even so, it was a long way down. “I *can’t*.”

“You must.”

“Isn’t there another way?”

“This is the way. It won’t be so hard for a strong young girl like you. Hold on tight and never look down and you’ll be at the bottom in no time at all.” His eyes were shiny. “Your poor Florian is fat and old and drunk, I’m the one should be afraid. I used to fall off my horse, don’t you remember? That was how we began. I was drunk and fell off my horse and Joffrey wanted my fool head, but you saved me. You *saved* me, sweetling.”

He’s weeping, she realized. “And now you have saved me.”

“Only if you go. If not, I have killed us both.”

It was him, she thought. *He killed Joffrey*. She had to go, for him as much as for herself. “You go first, ser.” If he *did* fall, she did not want him falling down on her head and knocking both of them off the cliff.

“As you wish, my lady.” He gave her a sloppy kiss and swung his legs clumsily over the precipice, kicking about until he found a foothold. “Let me get down a bit, and come after. You will come now? You must swear it.”

“I’ll come,” she promised.

Ser Dontos disappeared. She could hear him huffing and puffing as he began the descent. Sansa listened to the tolling of the bell, counting each ring. At ten, gingerly, she eased herself over the edge of the cliff, poking with her toes until they found a place to rest. The castle walls loomed large above her, and for a moment she wanted nothing so much as to pull herself up and run back to her warm rooms in the Kitchen Keep. *Be brave*, she told herself. *Be brave, like a lady in a song*.

Sansa dared not look down. She kept her eyes on the face of the cliff, making certain of each step before reaching for the next. The stone was rough and cold. Sometimes she could feel her fingers slipping, and the handholds were not as evenly spaced as she would have liked. The bells would not stop ringing. Before she was halfway down her arms were trembling and she knew that she was going to fall. *One more step*, she told herself, *one more step*. She had to keep moving. If she stopped, she would never start again, and dawn would find her still clinging to the cliff, frozen in fear. *One more step, and one more step*.

The ground took her by surprise. She stumbled and fell, her heart pounding. When she rolled onto her back and stared up at from where she had come, her head swam dizzily and her fingers clawed at the dirt. *I did it. I did it, I didn't fall, I made the climb and now I'm going home*.

Ser Dontos pulled her back onto her feet. "This way. Quiet now, quiet, quiet." He stayed close to the shadows that lay black and thick beneath the cliffs. Thankfully they did not have to go far. Fifty yards downriver, a man sat in a small skiff, half-hidden by the remains of a great galley that had gone aground there and burned. Dontos limped up to him, puffing. "Oswell?"

"No names," the man said. "In the boat." He sat hunched over his oars, an old man, tall and gangling, with long white hair and a great hooked nose, with eyes shaded by a cowl. "Get in, be quick about it," he muttered. "We need to be away."

When both of them were safe aboard, the cowed man slid the blades into the water and put his back into the oars, rowing them out toward the channel. Behind them the bells were still tolling the boy king's death. They had the dark river all to themselves.

With slow, steady, rhythmic strokes, they threaded their way downstream, sliding above the sunken galleys, past broken masts, burned hulls, and torn sails. The oarlocks had been muffled, so they moved almost soundlessly. A mist was rising over the water. Sansa saw the embattled ramparts of one of the Imp's winch towers looming above, but the great chain had been lowered, and they rowed unimpeded past the spot where a thousand men had burned. The shore fell away, the fog grew thicker, the sound of the bells

began to fade. Finally even the lights were gone, lost somewhere behind them. They were out in Blackwater Bay, and the world shrank to dark water, blowing mist, and their silent companion stooped over the oars. “How far must we go?” she asked.

“No talk.” The oarsman was old, but stronger than he looked, and his voice was fierce. There was something oddly familiar about his face, though Sansa could not say what it was.

“Not far.” Ser Dontos took her hand in his own and rubbed it gently. “Your friend is near, waiting for you.”

“*No talk!*” the oarsman growled again. “Sound carries over water, Ser Fool.”

Abashed, Sansa bit her lip and huddled down in silence. The rest was rowing, rowing, rowing.

The eastern sky was vague with the first hint of dawn when Sansa finally saw a ghostly shape in the darkness ahead; a trading galley, her sails furled, moving slowly on a single bank of oars. As they drew closer, she saw the ship’s figurehead, a merman with a golden crown blowing on a great seashell horn. She heard a voice cry out, and the galley swung slowly about.

As they came alongside, the galley dropped a rope ladder over the rail. The rower shipped the oars and helped Sansa to her feet. “Up now. Go on, girl, I got you.” Sansa thanked him for his kindness, but received no answer but a grunt. It was much easier going up the rope ladder than it had been coming down the cliff. The oarsman Oswald followed close behind her, while Ser Dontos remained in the boat.

Two sailors were waiting by the rail to help her onto the deck. Sansa was trembling. “She’s cold,” she heard someone say. He took off his cloak and put it around her shoulders. “There, is that better, my lady? Rest easy, the worst is past and done.”

She knew the voice. *But he’s in the Vale*, she thought. Ser Lothor Brune stood beside him with a torch.

“Lord Petyr,” Dontos called from the boat. “I must needs row back, before they think to look for me.”

Petyr Baelish put a hand on the rail. “But first you’ll want your payment. Ten thousand dragons, was it?”

“Ten thousand.” Dontos rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. “As you promised, my lord.”

“Ser Lothor, the reward.”

Lothor Brune dipped his torch. Three men stepped to the gunwale, raised crossbows, fired. One bolt took Dontos in the chest as he looked up, punching through the left crown on his surcoat. The others ripped into throat and belly. It happened so quickly neither Dontos nor Sansa had time to cry out. When it was done, Lothor Brune tossed the torch down on top of the corpse. The little boat was blazing fiercely as the galley moved away.

“You *killed* him.” Clutching the rail, Sansa turned away and retched. Had she escaped the Lannisters to tumble into worse?

“My lady,” Littlefinger murmured, “your grief is wasted on such a man as that. He was a sot, and no man’s friend.”

“But he *saved* me.”

“He sold you for a promise of ten thousand dragons. Your disappearance will make them suspect you in Joffrey’s death. The gold cloaks will hunt, and the eunuch will jingle his purse. Dontos . . . well, you heard him. He sold you for gold, and when he’d drunk it up he would have sold you again. A bag of dragons buys a man’s silence for a while, but a well-placed quarrel buys it forever.” He smiled sadly. “All he did he did at my behest. I dared not befriend you openly. When I heard how you saved his life at Joff’s tourney, I knew he would be the perfect catspaw.”

Sansa felt sick. “He said he was my Florian.”

“Do you perchance recall what I said to you that day your father sat the Iron Throne?”

The moment came back to her vividly. “You told me that life was not a song. That I would learn that one day, to my sorrow.” She felt tears in her eyes, but whether she wept for Ser Dontos Hollard, for Joff, for Tyrion, or for herself, Sansa could not say. “Is it *all* lies, forever and ever, everyone and everything?”

“Almost everyone. Save you and I, of course.” He smiled. “*Come to the godswood tonight if you want to go home.*”

“The note . . . it was you?”

“It had to be the godswood. No other place in the Red Keep is safe from the eunuch’s little birds . . . or little rats, as I call them. There are trees in the godswood instead of walls. Sky above instead of ceiling. Roots and dirt and rock in place of floor. The rats have no place to scurry. Rats need to hide, lest men skewer them with swords.” Lord Petyr took her arm. “Let me show you to your cabin. You have had a long and trying day, I know. You must be weary.”

Already the little boat was no more than a swirl of smoke and fire behind them, almost lost in the immensity of the dawn sea. There was no going back; her only road was forward. “Very weary,” she admitted.

As he led her below, he said, “Tell me of the feast. The queen took such pains. The singers, the jugglers, the dancing bear . . . did your little lord husband enjoy my jousting dwarfs?”

“Yours?”

“I had to send to Braavos for them and hide them away in a brothel until the wedding. The expense was exceeded only by the bother. It is surprisingly difficult to hide a dwarf, and Joffrey . . . you can lead a king to water, but with Joff one had to splash it about before he realized he could drink it. When I told him about my little surprise, His Grace said, ‘Why would I want some ugly dwarfs at my feast? I hate dwarfs.’ I had to take him by the shoulder and whisper, ‘Not as much as your uncle will.’”

The deck rocked beneath her feet, and Sansa felt as if the world itself had grown unsteady. “They think Tyrion poisoned Joffrey. Ser Dontos said they seized him.”

Littlefinger smiled. “Widowhood will become you, Sansa.”

The thought made her tummy flutter. She might never need to share a bed with Tyrion again. That *was* what she’d wanted . . . wasn’t it?

The cabin was low and cramped, but a featherbed had been laid upon the narrow sleeping shelf to make it more comfortable, and thick furs piled atop it. “It will be snug, I know, but you shouldn’t be too uncomfortable.”

Littlefinger pointed out a cedar chest under the porthole. “You’ll find fresh garb within. Dresses, smallclothes, warm stockings, a cloak. Wool and linen only, I fear. Unworthy of a maid so beautiful, but they’ll serve to keep you dry and clean until we can find you something finer.”

He had this all prepared for me. “My lord, I . . . I do not understand . . . Joffrey gave you Harrenhal, made you Lord Paramount of the Trident . . . why . . .”

“Why should I wish him dead?” Littlefinger shrugged. “I had no motive. Besides, I am a thousand leagues away in the Vale. Always keep your foes confused. If they are never certain who you are or what you want, they cannot know what you are like to do next. Sometimes the best way to baffle them is to make moves that have no purpose, or even seem to work against you. Remember that, Sansa, when you come to play the game.”

“What . . . what game?”

“The only game. The game of thrones.” He brushed back a strand of her hair. “You are old enough to know that your mother and I were more than friends. There was a time when Cat was all I wanted in this world. I dared to dream of the life we might make and the children she would give me . . . but she was a daughter of Riverrun, and Hoster Tully. *Family, Duty, Honor*, Sansa. *Family, Duty, Honor* meant I could never have her hand. But she gave me something finer, a gift a woman can give but once. How could I turn my back upon her daughter? In a better world, you might have been mine, not Eddard Stark’s. My loyal loving daughter . . . Put Joffrey from your mind, sweetling. Dontos, Tyrion, all of them. They will never trouble you again. You are safe now, that’s all that matters. You are safe with me, and sailing home.”