

SANSA

Eddard Stark had left before dawn, Septa Mordane informed Sansa as they broke their fast. “The king sent for him. Another hunt, I do believe. There are still wild aurochs in these lands, I am told.”

“I’ve never seen an aurochs,” Sansa said, feeding a piece of bacon to Lady under the table. The direwolf took it from her hand, as delicate as a queen.

Septa Mordane sniffed in disapproval. “A noble lady does not feed dogs at her table,” she said, breaking off another piece of comb and letting the honey drip down onto her bread.

“She’s not a dog, she’s a direwolf,” Sansa pointed out as Lady licked her fingers with a rough tongue. “Anyway, Father said we could keep them with us if we want.”

The septa was not appeased. “You’re a good girl, Sansa, but I do vow, when it comes to that creature you’re as willful as your sister Arya.” She scowled. “And where is Arya this morning?”

“She wasn’t hungry,” Sansa said, knowing full well that her sister had probably stolen down to the kitchen hours ago and wheedled a breakfast out of some cook’s boy.

“Do remind her to dress nicely today. The grey velvet, perhaps. We are all invited to ride with the queen and Princess Myrcella in the royal wheelhouse, and we must look our best.”

Sansa already looked her best. She had brushed out her long auburn hair until it shone, and picked her nicest blue silks. She had been looking forward to today for more than a week. It was a great honor to ride with the queen, and besides, Prince Joffrey might be there. Her betrothed. Just thinking it made her feel a strange fluttering inside, even though they were not to marry for years and years. Sansa did not really *know* Joffrey yet, but she was already in love with him. He was all she ever dreamt her prince should be, tall and handsome and strong, with hair like gold. She treasured

every chance to spend time with him, few as they were. The only thing that scared her about today was Arya. Arya had a way of ruining everything. You never knew what she would do. "I'll tell her," Sansa said uncertainly, "but she'll dress the way she always does." She hoped it wouldn't be too embarrassing. "May I be excused?"

"You may." Septa Mordane helped herself to more bread and honey, and Sansa slid from the bench. Lady followed at her heels as she ran from the inn's common room.

Outside, she stood for a moment amidst the shouts and curses and the creak of wooden wheels as the men broke down the tents and pavilions and loaded the wagons for another day's march. The inn was a sprawling three-story structure of pale stone, the biggest that Sansa had ever seen, but even so, it had accommodations for less than a third of the king's party, which had swollen to more than four hundred with the addition of her father's household and the freeriders who had joined them on the road.

She found Arya on the banks of the Trident, trying to hold Nymeria still while she brushed dried mud from her fur. The direwolf was not enjoying the process. Arya was wearing the same riding leathers she had worn yesterday and the day before.

"You better put on something pretty," Sansa told her. "Septa Mordane said so. We're traveling in the queen's wheelhouse with Princess Myrcella today."

"I'm not," Arya said, trying to brush a tangle out of Nymeria's matted grey fur. "Mycah and I are going to ride upstream and look for rubies at the ford."

"Rubies," Sansa said, lost. "What rubies?"

Arya gave her a look like she was so stupid. "*Rhaegar's* rubies. This is where King Robert killed him and won the crown."

Sansa regarded her scrawny little sister in disbelief. "You can't look for rubies, the princess is expecting us. The queen invited us both."

"I don't care," Arya said. "The wheelhouse doesn't even have *windows*, you can't see a thing."

“What could you want to see?” Sansa said, annoyed. She had been thrilled by the invitation, and her stupid sister was going to ruin everything, just as she’d feared. “It’s all just fields and farms and holdfasts.”

“It is *not*,” Arya said stubbornly. “If you came with us sometimes, you’d see.”

“I *hate* riding,” Sansa said fervently. “All it does is get you soiled and dusty and sore.”

Arya shrugged. “Hold *still*,” she snapped at Nymeria, “I’m not hurting you.” Then to Sansa she said, “When we were crossing the Neck, I counted thirty-six flowers I never saw before, and Mycah showed me a lizard-lion.”

Sansa shuddered. They had been twelve days crossing the Neck, rumbling down a crooked causeway through an endless black bog, and she had hated every moment of it. The air had been damp and clammy, the causeway so narrow they could not even make proper camp at night, they had to stop right on the kingsroad. Dense thickets of half-drowned trees pressed close around them, branches dripping with curtains of pale fungus. Huge flowers bloomed in the mud and floated on pools of stagnant water, but if you were stupid enough to leave the causeway to pluck them, there were quicksands waiting to suck you down, and snakes watching from the trees, and lizard-lions floating half-submerged in the water, like black logs with eyes and teeth.

None of which stopped Arya, of course. One day she came back grinning her horsey grin, her hair all tangled and her clothes covered in mud, clutching a raggedy bunch of purple and green flowers for Father. Sansa kept hoping he would tell Arya to behave herself and act like the highborn lady she was supposed to be, but he never did, he only hugged her and thanked her for the flowers. That just made her worse.

Then it turned out the purple flowers were called *poison kisses*, and Arya got a rash on her arms. Sansa would have thought that might have taught her a lesson, but Arya laughed about it, and the next day she rubbed mud all over her arms like some ignorant bog woman just because her friend Mycah told her it would stop the itching. She had bruises on her arms and shoulders too, dark purple welts and faded green-and-yellow splotches,

Sansa had seen them when her sister undressed for sleep. How she had gotten *those* only the seven gods knew.

Arya was still going on, brushing out Nymeria's tangles and chattering about things she'd seen on the trek south. "Last week we found this haunted watchtower, and the day before we chased a herd of wild horses. You should have seen them run when they caught a scent of Nymeria." The wolf wriggled in her grasp and Arya scolded her. "Stop that, I have to do the other side, you're all muddy."

"You're not supposed to leave the column," Sansa reminded her. "Father said so."

Arya shrugged. "I didn't go far. Anyway, Nymeria was with me the whole time. I don't always go off, either. Sometimes it's fun just to ride along with the wagons and talk to people."

Sansa knew all about the sorts of people Arya liked to talk to: squires and grooms and serving girls, old men and naked children, rough-spoken freeriders of uncertain birth. Arya would make friends with *anybody*. This Mycah was the worst; a butcher's boy, thirteen and wild, he slept in the meat wagon and smelled of the slaughtering block. Just the sight of him was enough to make Sansa feel sick, but Arya seemed to prefer his company to hers.

Sansa was running out of patience now. "You have to come with me," she told her sister firmly. "You can't refuse the queen. Septa Mordane will expect you."

Arya ignored her. She gave a hard yank with the brush. Nymeria growled and spun away, affronted. "Come *back* here!"

"There's going to be lemon cakes and tea," Sansa went on, all adult and reasonable. Lady brushed against her leg. Sansa scratched her ears the way she liked, and Lady sat beside her on her haunches, watching Arya chase Nymeria. "Why would you want to ride a smelly old horse and get all sore and sweaty when you could recline on feather pillows and eat cakes with the queen?"

“I don’t like the queen,” Arya said casually. Sansa sucked in her breath, shocked that even *Arya* would say such a thing, but her sister prattled on, heedless. “She won’t even let me bring Nymeria.” She thrust the brush under her belt and stalked her wolf. Nymeria watched her approach warily.

“A royal wheelhouse is no place for a *wolf*,” Sansa said. “And Princess Myrcella is afraid of them, you know that.”

“Myrcella is a little baby.” Arya grabbed Nymeria around her neck, but the moment she pulled out the brush again the direwolf wriggled free and bounded off. Frustrated, Arya threw down the brush. “*Bad* wolf!” she shouted.

Sansa couldn’t help but smile a little. The kennelmaster once told her that an animal takes after its master. She gave Lady a quick little hug. Lady licked her cheek. Sansa giggled. Arya heard and whirled around, glaring. “I don’t care what you say, I’m going out riding.” Her long horsey face got the stubborn look that meant she was going to do something willful.

“Gods be true, Arya, sometimes you act like such a *child*,” Sansa said. “I’ll go by myself then. It will be ever so much nicer that way. Lady and I will eat all the lemon cakes and just have the best time without you.”

She turned to walk off, but Arya shouted after her, “They won’t let you bring Lady either.” She was gone before Sansa could think of a reply, chasing Nymeria along the river.

Alone and humiliated, Sansa took the long way back to the inn, where she knew Septa Mordane would be waiting. Lady padded quietly by her side. She was almost in tears. All she wanted was for things to be nice and pretty, the way they were in the songs. Why couldn’t Arya be sweet and delicate and kind, like Princess Myrcella? She would have liked a sister like that.

Sansa could never understand how two sisters, born only two years apart, could be so different. It would have been easier if Arya had been a bastard, like their half brother Jon. She even *looked* like Jon, with the long face and brown hair of the Starks, and nothing of their lady mother in her face or her coloring. And Jon’s mother had been *common*, or so people whispered. Once, when she was littler, Sansa had even asked Mother if

perhaps there hadn't been some mistake. Perhaps the grumkins had stolen her *real* sister. But Mother had only laughed and said no, Arya was her daughter and Sansa's trueborn sister, blood of their blood. Sansa could not think why Mother would want to lie about it, so she supposed it had to be true.

As she neared the center of camp, her distress was quickly forgotten. A crowd had gathered around the queen's wheelhouse. Sansa heard excited voices buzzing like a hive of bees. The doors had been thrown open, she saw, and the queen stood at the top of the wooden steps, smiling down at someone. She heard her saying, "The council does us great honor, my good lords."

"What's happening?" she asked a squire she knew.

"The council sent riders from King's Landing to escort us the rest of the way," he told her. "An honor guard for the king."

Anxious to see, Sansa let Lady clear a path through the crowd. People moved aside hastily for the direwolf. When she got closer, she saw two knights kneeling before the queen, in armor so fine and gorgeous that it made her blink.

One knight wore an intricate suit of white enameled scales, brilliant as a field of new-fallen snow, with silver chasings and clasps that glittered in the sun. When he removed his helm, Sansa saw that he was an old man with hair as pale as his armor, yet he seemed strong and graceful for all that. From his shoulders hung the pure white cloak of the Kingsguard.

His companion was a man near twenty whose armor was steel plate of a deep forest-green. He was the handsomest man Sansa had ever set eyes upon; tall and powerfully made, with jet-black hair that fell to his shoulders and framed a clean-shaven face, and laughing green eyes to match his armor. Cradled under one arm was an antlered helm, its magnificent rack shimmering in gold.

At first Sansa did not notice the third stranger. He did not kneel with the others. He stood to one side, beside their horses, a gaunt grim man who watched the proceedings in silence. His face was pockmarked and beardless, with deepset eyes and hollow cheeks. Though he was not an old

man, only a few wisps of hair remained to him, sprouting above his ears, but those he had grown long as a woman's. His armor was iron-grey chainmail over layers of boiled leather, plain and unadorned, and it spoke of age and hard use. Above his right shoulder the stained leather hilt of the blade strapped to his back was visible; a two-handed greatsword, too long to be worn at his side.

"The king is gone hunting, but I know he will be pleased to see you when he returns," the queen was saying to the two knights who knelt before her, but Sansa could not take her eyes off the third man. He seemed to feel the weight of her gaze. Slowly he turned his head. Lady growled. A terror as overwhelming as anything Sansa Stark had ever felt filled her suddenly. She stepped backward and bumped into someone.

Strong hands grasped her by the shoulders, and for a moment Sansa thought it was her father, but when she turned, it was the burned face of Sandor Clegane looking down at her, his mouth twisted in a terrible mockery of a smile. "You are shaking, girl," he said, his voice rasping. "Do I frighten you so much?"

He did, and had since she had first laid eyes on the ruin that fire had made of his face, though it seemed to her now that he was not half so terrifying as the other. Still, Sansa wrenched away from him, and the Hound laughed, and Lady moved between them, rumbling a warning. Sansa dropped to her knees to wrap her arms around the wolf. They were all gathered around gaping, she could feel their eyes on her, and here and there she heard muttered comments and titters of laughter.

"A wolf," a man said, and someone else said, "Seven hells, that's a direwolf," and the first man said, "What's it doing in camp?" and the Hound's rasping voice replied, "The Starks use them for wet nurses," and Sansa realized that the two stranger knights were looking down on her and Lady, swords in their hands, and then she was frightened again, and ashamed. Tears filled her eyes.

She heard the queen say, "Joffrey, go to her."

And her prince was there.

“Leave her alone,” Joffrey said. He stood over her, beautiful in blue wool and black leather, his golden curls shining in the sun like a crown. He gave her his hand, drew her to her feet. “What is it, sweet lady? Why are you afraid? No one will hurt you. Put away your swords, all of you. The wolf is her little pet, that’s all.” He looked at Sandor Clegane. “And you, dog, away with you, you’re scaring my betrothed.”

The Hound, ever faithful, bowed and slid away quietly through the press. Sansa struggled to steady herself. She felt like such a fool. She was a Stark of Winterfell, a noble lady, and someday she would be a queen. “It was not him, my sweet prince,” she tried to explain. “It was the other one.”

The two stranger knights exchanged a look. “Payne?” chuckled the young man in the green armor.

The older man in white spoke to Sansa gently. “Ofttimes Ser Ilyn frightens me as well, sweet lady. He has a fearsome aspect.”

“As well he should.” The queen had descended from the wheelhouse. The spectators parted to make way for her. “If the wicked do not fear the Mng’s Justice, you have put the wrong man in the office.”

Sansa finally found her words. “Then surely you have chosen the right one, Your Grace,” she said, and a gale of laughter erupted all around her.

“Well spoken, child,” said the old man in white. “As befits the daughter of Eddard Stark. I am honored to know you, however irregular the manner of our meeting. I am Ser Barristan Selmy, of the Kingsguard.” He bowed.

Sansa knew the name, and now the courtesies that Septa Mordane had taught her over the years came back to her. “The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard,” she said, “and councillor to Robert our king and to Aerys Targaryen before him. The honor is mine, good knight. Even in the far north, the singers praise the deeds of Barristan the Bold.”

The green knight laughed again. “Barristan the Old, you mean. Don’t flatter him too sweetly, child, he thinks overmuch of himself already.” He smiled at her. “Now, wolf girl, if you can put a name to me as well, then I must concede that you are truly our Hand’s daughter.”

Joffrey stiffened beside her. “Have a care how you address my betrothed.”

“I can answer,” Sansa said quickly, to quell her prince’s anger. She smiled at the green knight. “Your helmet bears golden antlers, my lord. The stag is the sigil of the royal House. King Robert has two brothers. By your extreme youth, you can only be Renly Baratheon, Lord of Storm’s End and councillor to the king, and so I name you.”

Ser Barristan chuckled. “By his extreme youth, he can only be a prancing jackanapes, and so *I* name him.”

There was general laughter, led by Lord Renly himself. The tension of a few moments ago was gone, and Sansa was beginning to feel comfortable... until Ser Ilyn Payne shouldered two men aside, and stood before her, unsmiling. He did not say a word. Lady bared her teeth and began to growl, a low rumble full of menace, but this time Sansa silenced the wolf with a gentle hand to the head. “I am sorry if I offended you, Ser Ilyn,” she said.

She waited for an answer, but none came. As the headsman looked at her, his pale colorless eyes seemed to strip the clothes away from her, and then the skin, leaving her soul naked before him. Still silent, he turned and walked away.

Sansa did not understand. She looked at her prince. “Did I say something wrong, Your Grace? Why will he not speak to me?”

“Ser Ilyn has not been feeling talkative these past fourteen years,” Lord Renly commented with a sly smile.

Joffrey gave his uncle a look of pure loathing, then took Sansa’s hands in his own. “Aerys Targaryen had his tongue ripped out with hot pincers.”

“He speaks most eloquently with his sword, however,” the queen said, “and his devotion to our realm is unquestioned.” Then she smiled graciously and said, “Sansa, the good councillors and I must speak together until the king returns with your father. I fear we shall have to postpone your day with Myrcella. Please give your sweet sister my apologies. Joffrey, perhaps you would be so kind as to entertain our guest today.”

“It would be my pleasure, Mother,” Joffrey said very formally. He took her by the arm and led her away from the wheelhouse, and Sansa’s spirits took flight. A whole day with her prince! She gazed at Joffrey worshipfully. He was so gallant, she thought. The way he had rescued her from Ser Ilyn and the Hound, why, it was almost like the songs, like the time Serwyn of the Mirror Shield saved the Princess Daeryssa from the giants, or Prince Aemon the Dragonknight championing Queen Naerys’s honor against evil Ser Morgil’s slanders.

The touch of Joffrey’s hand on her sleeve made her heart beat faster. “What would you like to do?”

Be with you, Sansa thought, but she said, “Whatever you’d like to do, my prince.”

Joffrey reflected a moment. “We could go riding.”

“Oh, I *love* riding,” Sansa said.

Joffrey glanced back at Lady, who was following at their heels. “Your wolf is liable to frighten the horses, and my dog seems to frighten you. Let us leave them both behind and set off on our own, what do you say?”

Sansa hesitated. “If you like,” she said uncertainly. “I suppose I could tie Lady up.” She did not quite understand, though. “I didn’t know you had a dog...”

Joffrey laughed. “He’s my mother’s dog, in truth. She has set him to guard me, and so he does.”

“You mean the Hound,” she said. She wanted to hit herself for being so slow. Her prince would never love her if she seemed stupid. “Is it safe to leave him behind?”

Prince Joffrey looked annoyed that she would even ask. “Have no fear, lady. I am almost a man grown, and I don’t fight with wood like your brothers. All I need is this.” He drew his sword and showed it to her; a longsword adroitly shrunk to suit a boy of twelve, gleaming blue steel, castle-forged and double-edged, with a leather grip and a lion’s-head pommel in gold. Sansa exclaimed over it admiringly, and Joffrey looked pleased. “I call it Lion’s Tooth,” he said.

And so they left her direwolf and his bodyguard behind them, while they ranged east along the north bank of the Trident with no company save Lion's Tooth.

It was a glorious day, a magical day. The air was warm and heavy with the scent of flowers, and the woods here had a gentle beauty that Sansa had never seen in the north. Prince Joffrey's mount was a blood bay courser, swift as the wind, and he rode it with reckless abandon, so fast that Sansa was hard-pressed to keep up on her mare. It was a day for adventures. They explored the caves by the riverbank, and tracked a shadowcat to its lair, and when they grew hungry, Joffrey found a holdfast by its smoke and told them to fetch food and wine for their prince and his lady. They dined on trout fresh from the river, and Sansa drank more wine than she had ever drunk before. "My father only lets us have one cup, and only at feasts," she confessed to her prince.

"My betrothed can drink as much as she wants," Joffrey said, refilling her cup.

They went more slowly after they had eaten. Joffrey sang for her as they rode, his voice high and sweet and pure. Sansa was a little dizzy from the wine. "Shouldn't we be starting back?" she asked.

"Soon," Joffrey said. "The battleground is right up ahead, where the river bends. That was where my father killed Rhaegar Targaryen, you know. He smashed in his chest, *crunch*, right through the armor." Joffrey swung an imaginary warhammer to show her how it was done. "Then my uncle Jaime killed old Aerys, and my father was king. What's that sound?"

Sansa heard it too, floating through the woods, a kind of wooden clattering, *snack snack snack*. "I don't know," she said. It made her nervous, though. "Joffrey, let's go back."

"I want to see what it is." Joffrey turned his horse in the direction of the sounds, and Sansa had no choice but to follow. The noises grew louder and more distinct, the clack of wood on wood, and as they grew closer they heard heavy breathing as well, and now and then a grunt.

"Someone's there," Sansa said anxiously. She found herself thinking of Lady, wishing the direwolf was with her.

“You’re safe with me.” Joffrey drew his Lion’s Tooth from its sheath. The sound of steel on leather made her tremble. “This way,” he said, riding through a stand of trees.

Beyond, in a clearing overlooking the river, they came upon a boy and a girl playing at knights. Their swords were wooden sticks, broom handles from the look of them, and they were rushing across the grass, swinging at each other lustily. The boy was years older, a head taller, and much stronger, and he was pressing the attack. The girl, a scrawny thing in soiled leathers, was dodging and managing to get her stick in the way of most of the boy’s blows, but not all. When she tried to lunge at him, he caught her stick with his own, swept it aside, and slid his wood down hard on her fingers. She cried out and lost her weapon.

Prince Joffrey laughed. The boy looked around, wide-eyed and startled, and dropped his stick in the grass. The girl glared at them, sucking on her knuckles to take the sting out, and Sansa was horrified. “*Arya?*” she called out incredulously.

“Go away,” Arya shouted back at them, angry tears in her eyes. “What are you doing here? Leave us alone.”

Joffrey glanced from Arya to Sansa and back again. “Your sister?” She nodded, blushing. Joffrey examined the boy, an ungainly lad with a coarse, freckled face and thick red hair. “And who are you, boy?” he asked in a commanding tone that took no notice of the fact that the other was a year his senior.

“Mycah,” the boy muttered. He recognized the prince and averted his eyes. “M’lord.”

“He’s the butcher’s boy,” Sansa said.

“He’s my friend,” Arya said sharply. “You leave him alone.”

“A butcher’s boy who wants to be a knight, is it?” Joffrey swung down from his mount, sword in hand. “Pick up your sword, butcher’s boy,” he said, his eyes bright with amusement. “Let us see how good you are.”

Mycah stood there, frozen with fear.

Joffrey walked toward him. “Go on, pick it up. Or do you only fight little girls?”

“She ast me to, m’lord,” Mycah said. “She *ast* me to.”

Sansa had only to glance at Arya and see the flush on her sister’s face to know the boy was telling the truth, but Joffrey was in no mood to listen. The wine had made him wild. “Are you going to pick up your sword?”

Mycah shook his head. “It’s only a stick, m’lord. It’s not no sword, it’s only a stick.”

“And you’re only a butcher’s boy, and no knight.” Joffrey lifted Lion’s Tooth and laid its point on Mycah’s cheek below the eye, as the butcher’s boy stood trembling. “That was my lady’s sister you were hitting, do you know that?” A bright bud of blood blossomed where his sword pressed into Mycah’s flesh, and a slow red line trickled down the boy’s cheek.

“*Stop it!*” Arya screamed. She grabbed up her fallen stick.

Sansa was afraid. “Arya, you stay out of this.”

“I won’t hurt him... much,” Prince Joffrey told Arya, never taking his eyes off the butcher’s boy.

Arya went for him.

Sansa slid off her mare, but she was too slow. Arya swung with both hands. There was a loud *crack* as the wood split against the back of the prince’s head, and then everything happened at once before Sansa’s horrified eyes. Joffrey staggered and whirled around, roaring curses. Mycah ran for the trees as fast as his legs would take him. Arya swung at the prince again, but this time Joffrey caught the blow on Lion’s Tooth and sent her broken stick flying from her hands. The back of his head was all bloody and his eyes were on fire. Sansa was shrieking, “No, no, stop it, stop it, both of you, you’re spoiling it,” but no one was listening. Arya scooped up a rock and hurled it at Joffrey’s head. She hit his horse instead, and the blood bay reared and went galloping off after Mycah. “*Stop it, don’t, stop it!*” Sansa screamed. Joffrey slashed at Arya with his sword, screaming obscenities, terrible words, filthy words. Arya darted back, frightened now, but Joffrey followed, hounding her toward the woods, backing her up against a tree.

Sansa didn't know what to do. She watched helplessly, almost blind from her tears.

Then a grey blur flashed past her, and suddenly Nymeria was there, leaping, jaws closing around Joffrey's sword arm. The steel fell from his fingers as the wolf knocked him off his feet, and they rolled in the grass, the wolf snarling and ripping at him, the prince shrieking in pain. "Get it *off*," he screamed. "Get it *off*!"

Arya's voice cracked like a whip. "*Nymeria!*"

The direwolf let go of Joffrey and moved to Arya's side. The prince lay in the grass, whimpering, cradling his mangled arm. His shirt was soaked in blood. Arya said, "She didn't hurt you... much." She picked up Lion's Tooth where it had fallen, and stood over him, holding the sword with both hands.

Joffrey made a scared whimpery sound as he looked up at her. "No," he said, "don't hurt me. I'll tell my mother."

"*You leave him alone!*" Sansa screamed at her sister.

Arya whirled and heaved the sword into the air, putting her whole body into the throw. The blue steel flashed in the sun as the sword spun out over the river. It hit the water and vanished with a splash. Joffrey moaned. Arya ran off to her horse, Nymeria loping at her heels.

After they had gone, Sansa went to Prince Joffrey. His eyes were closed in pain, his breath ragged. Sansa knelt beside him. "Joffrey," she sobbed. "Oh, look what they did, look what they did. My poor prince. Don't be afraid. I'll ride to the holdfast and bring help for you." Tenderly she reached out and brushed back his soft blond hair.

His eyes snapped open and looked at her, and there was nothing but loathing there, nothing but the vilest contempt. "Then *go*," he spit at her. "*And don't touch me.*"