

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 councilors 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.”