

The balcony was deserted save for Sansa. She stood with her head bowed, fighting to hold back her tears, while below Joffrey sat on his Iron Throne and dispensed what it pleased him to call justice. Nine cases out of ten seemed to bore him; those he allowed his council to handle, squirming restlessly while Lord Baelish, Grand Maester Pycelle, or Queen Cersei resolved the matter. When he did choose to make a ruling, though, not even his queen mother could sway him.

A thief was brought before him and he had Ser Ilyn chop his hand off, right there in court. Two knights came to him with a dispute about some land, and he decreed that they should duel for it on the morrow. "To the death," he added. A woman fell to her knees to plead for the head of a man executed as a traitor. She had loved him, she said, and she wanted to see him decently buried. "If you loved a traitor, you must be a traitor too," Joffrey said. Two gold cloaks dragged her off to the dungeons.

Frog-faced Lord Slynt sat at the end of the council table wearing a black velvet doublet and a shiny cloth-of-gold cape, nodding with approval every time the king pronounced a sentence. Sansa stared hard at his ugly face, remembering how he had thrown down her father for Ser Ilyn to behead, wishing she could hurt him, wishing that some hero would throw him down and cut off his head. But a voice inside her whispered, There are no heroes, and she remembered what Lord Petyr had said to her, here in this very hall. "Life is not a song, sweetling," he'd told her. "You may learn that one day to your sorrow." In life, the monsters win, she told herself, and now it was the Hound's voice she heard, a cold rasp, metal on stone. "Save yourself some pain, girl, and give him what he wants."

The last case was a plump tavern singer, accused of making a song that ridiculed the late King Robert. Joffrey commanded them to fetch his woodharp and ordered him to perform the song for the court. The singer wept and swore he would never sing that song again, but the king insisted. It was sort of a funny song, all about Robert fighting with a pig. The pig was the boar who'd killed him, Sansa knew, but in some verses it almost sounded as if he were singing about the queen. When the song was done, Joffrey announced that he'd decided to be merciful. The singer could keep either his fingers or his tongue. He would have a day to make his choice. Janos Slynt nodded.

That was the final business of the afternoon, Sansa saw with relief, but her ordeal was not yet done. When the herald's voice dismissed the court, she fled the balcony, only to find Joffrey waiting for her at the base of the curving stairs. The Hound was with him, and Ser Meryn as well. The young king examined her critically, top to bottom. "You look much better than you did."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Sansa said. Hollow words, but they made him nod and smile.

"Walk with me," Joffrey commanded, offering her his arm. She had no choice but to take it. The touch of his hand would have thrilled her once; now it made her flesh crawl. "My name day will be here soon," Joffrey said as they slipped out the rear of the throne room. "There will be a great feast, and gifts. What are you going to give me?"