



SANSA

A new gown?" she said, as wary as she was astonished.

"More lovely than any you have worn, my lady," the old woman promised. She measured Sansa's hips with a length of knotted string. "All silk and Myrish lace, with satin linings. You will be very beautiful. The queen herself has commanded it."

"Which queen?" Margaery was not yet Joff's queen, but she had been Renly's. Or did she mean the Queen of Thorns? Or . . .

"The Queen Regent, to be sure."

"Queen *Cersei*?"

"None other. She has honored me with her custom for many a year." The old woman laid her string along the inside of Sansa's leg. "Her Grace said to me that you are a woman now, and should not dress like a little girl. Hold out your arm."

Sansa lifted her arm. She needed a new gown, that was true. She had grown three inches in the past year, and most of her old wardrobe had been ruined by the smoke when she'd tried to burn her mattress on the day of her first flowering

"Your bosom will be as lovely as the queen's," the old woman said as she looped her string around Sansa's chest. "You should not hide it so."

The comment made her blush. Yet the last time she'd gone riding, she could not lace her jerkin all the way to the top, and the stableboy gaped at her as he helped her mount. Sometimes she caught grown men looking at her chest as well, and some of her tunics were so tight she could scarce breathe in them.

"What color will it be?" she asked the seamstress.

"Leave the colors to me, my lady. You will be pleased, I know you will. You shall have smallclothes and hose as well, kirtles and mantles and cloaks, and all else befitting a . . . a lovely young lady of noble birth."

"Will they be ready in time for the king's wedding?"

"Oh, sooner, much sooner, Her Grace insists. I have six seamstresses and twelve apprentice girls, and we have set all our other work aside for this. Many ladies will be cross with us, but it was the queen's command."

"Thank Her Grace kindly for her thoughtfulness," Sansa said politely. "She is too good to me."

"Her Grace is most generous," the seamstress agreed, as she gathered up her things and took her leave.

But why? Sansa wondered when she was alone. It made her uneasy. *I'll wager this gown is Margaery's doing somehow, or her grandmother's.*

Margaery's kindness had been unfailing, and her presence changed everything. Her ladies welcomed Sansa as well. It had been so long since she had enjoyed the company of other women, she had almost forgotten how pleasant it could be. Lady Leonette gave her lessons on the high harp, and Lady Janna shared all the choice gossip. Merry Crane always had an amusing story, and little Lady Bulwer reminded her of Arya, though not so fierce.

Closest to Sansa's own age were the cousins Elinor, Alla, and Megga, Tyrells from junior branches of the House. "Roses from lower on the bush," quipped Elinor, who was witty and willowy. Megga was round and loud, Alla shy and pretty, but Elinor ruled the three by right of womanhood; she was a maiden flowered, whereas Megga and Alla were mere girls.

The cousins took Sansa into their company as if they had known her all their lives. They spent long afternoons doing needlework and talking over

lemon cakes and honeyed wine, played at tiles of an evening, sang together in the castle sept . . . and often one or two of them would be chosen to share Margaery's bed, where they would whisper half the night away. Alla had a lovely voice, and when coaxed would play the woodharp and sing songs of chivalry and lost loves. Megga couldn't sing, but she was mad to be kissed. She and Alla played a kissing game sometimes, she confessed, but it wasn't the same as kissing a man, much less a king. Sansa wondered what Megga would think about kissing the Hound, as she had. He'd come to her the night of the battle stinking of wine and blood. *He kissed me and threatened to kill me, and made me sing him a song.*

"King Joffrey has such beautiful lips," Megga gushed, oblivious, "oh, poor Sansa, how your heart must have broken when you lost him. Oh, how you must have wept!"

Joffrey made me weep more often than you know, she wanted to say, but Butterbumps was not on hand to drown out her voice, so she pressed her lips together and held her tongue.

As for Elinor, she was promised to a young squire, a son of Lord Ambrose; they would be wed as soon as he won his spurs. He had won her favor in the Battle of the Blackwater, where he'd slain a Myrish crossbowman and a Mullendore man-at-arms. "Alyn said her favor made him fearless," said Megga. "He says he shouted her name for his battle cry, isn't that ever so gallant? Someday I want some champion to wear my favor, and kill a hundred men." Elinor told her to hush, but looked pleased all the same.

They are children, Sansa thought. *They are silly little girls, even Elinor. They've never seen a battle, they've never seen a man die, they know nothing.* Their dreams were full of songs and stories, the way hers had been before Joffrey cut her father's head off. Sansa pitied them. Sansa envied them.

Margaery was different, though. Sweet and gentle, yet there was a little of her grandmother in her, too. The day before last she'd taken Sansa hawking. It was the first time she had been outside the city since the battle. The dead had been burned or buried, but the Mud Gate was scarred and splintered where Lord Stannis's rams had battered it, and the hulls of

smashed ships could be seen along both sides of the Blackwater, charred masts poking from the shallows like gaunt black fingers. The only traffic was the flat-bottomed ferry that took them across the river, and when they reached the kingswood they found a wilderness of ash and charcoal and dead trees. But the waterfowl teemed in the marshes along the bay, and Sansa's merlin brought down three ducks while Margaery's peregrine took a heron in full flight.

"Willas has the best birds in the Seven Kingdoms," Margaery said when the two of them were briefly alone. "He flies an eagle sometimes. You will see, Sansa." She took her by the hand and gave it a squeeze. "Sister."

Sister. Sansa had once dreamt of having a sister like Margaery; beautiful and gentle, with all the world's graces at her command. Arya had been entirely unsatisfactory as sisters went. *How can I let my sister marry Joffrey?* she thought, and suddenly her eyes were full of tears. "Margaery, please," she said, "you mustn't." It was hard to get the words out. "You *mustn't* marry him. He's not like he seems, he's not. He'll hurt you."

"I shouldn't think so." Margaery smiled confidently. "It's brave of you to warn me, but you need not fear. Joff's spoiled and vain and I don't doubt that he's as cruel as you say, but Father forced him to name Loras to his Kingsguard before he would agree to the match. I shall have the finest knight in the Seven Kingdoms protecting me night and day, as Prince Aemon protected Naerys. So our little lion had best behave, hadn't he?" She laughed, and said, "Come, sweet sister, let's race back to the river. It will drive our guards quite mad." And without waiting for an answer, she put her heels into her horse and flew.

She is so brave, Sansa thought, galloping after her . . . and yet, her doubts still gnawed at her. Ser Loras was a great knight, all agreed. But Joffrey had other Kingsguard, and gold cloaks and red cloaks besides, and when he was older he would command armies of his own. Aegon the Unworthy had never harmed Queen Naerys, perhaps for fear of their brother the Dragonknight . . . but when another of his Kingsguard fell in love with one of his mistresses, the king had taken both their heads.

Ser Loras is a Tyrell, Sansa reminded herself. *That other knight was only a Toyne. His brothers had no armies, no way to avenge him but with*

swords. Yet the more she thought about it all, the more she wondered. *Joff might restrain himself for a few turns, perhaps as long as a year, but soon or late he will show his claws, and when he does . . .* The realm might have a second Kingslayer, and there would be war *inside* the city, as the men of the lion and the men of the rose made the gutters run red.

Sansa was surprised that Margaery did not see it too. *She is older than me, she must be wiser. And her father, Lord Tyrell, he knows what he is doing, surely. I am just being silly.*

When she told Ser Dontos that she was going to Highgarden to marry Willas Tyrell, she thought he would be relieved and pleased for her. Instead he had grabbed her arm and said, “You *cannot!*” in a voice as thick with horror as with wine. “I tell you, these Tyrells are only Lannisters with flowers. I beg of you, forget this folly, give your Florian a kiss, and promise you’ll go ahead as we have planned. The night of Joffrey’s wedding, that’s not so long, wear the silver hair net and do as I told you, and afterward we make our escape.” He tried to plant a kiss on her cheek.

Sansa slipped from his grasp and stepped away from him. “I won’t. I can’t. Something would go wrong. When I *wanted* to escape you wouldn’t take me, and now I don’t need to.”

Dontos stared at her stupidly. “But the arrangements are made, sweetling. The ship to take you home, the boat to take you to the ship, your Florian did it all for his sweet Jonquil.”

“I am sorry for all the trouble I put you to,” she said, “but I have no need of boats and ships now.”

“But it’s all to see you *safe*.”

“I will be safe in Highgarden. Willas will keep me safe.”

“But he does not know you,” Dontos insisted, “and he will not love you. Jonquil, Jonquil, open your sweet eyes, these Tyrells care nothing for you. It’s your *claim* they mean to wed.”

“My claim?” She was lost for a moment.

“Sweetling,” he told her, “you are heir to Winterfell.” He grabbed her again, pleading that she must not do this thing, and Sansa wrenched free

and left him swaying beneath the heart tree. She had not visited the godswood since.

But she had not forgotten his words, either. *The heir to Winterfell*, she would think as she lay abed at night. *It's your claim they mean to wed*. Sansa had grown up with three brothers. She never thought to have a claim, but with Bran and Rickon dead . . . *It doesn't matter, there's still Robb, he's a man grown now, and soon he'll wed and have a son. Anyway, Willas Tyrell will have Highgarden, what would he want with Winterfell?*

Sometimes she would whisper his name into her pillow just to hear the sound of it. "Willas, Willas, Willas." Willas was as good a name as Loras, she supposed. They even sounded the same, a little. What did it matter about his leg? Willas would be Lord of Highgarden and she would be his lady.

She pictured the two of them sitting together in a garden with puppies in their laps, or listening to a singer strum upon a lute while they floated down the Mander on a pleasure barge. *If I give him sons, he may come to love me*. She would name them Eddard and Brandon and Rickon, and raise them all to be as valiant as Ser Loras. *And to hate Lannisters, too*. In Sansa's dreams, her children looked just like the brothers she had lost. Sometimes there was even a girl who looked like Arya.

She could never hold a picture of Willas long in her head, though; her imaginings kept turning him back into Ser Loras, young and graceful and beautiful. *You must not think of him like that*, she told herself. *Or else he may see the disappointment in your eyes when you meet, and how could he marry you then, knowing it was his brother you loved?* Willas Tyrell was twice her age, she reminded herself constantly, and lame as well, and perhaps even plump and red-faced like his father. But comely or no, he might be the only champion she would ever have.

Once she dreamed it was still her marrying Joff, not Margaery, and on their wedding night he turned into the headsman Ilyn Payne. She woke trembling. She did not want Margaery to suffer as she had, but she dreaded the thought that the Tyrells might refuse to go ahead with the wedding. *I warned her, I did, I told her the truth of him*. Perhaps Margaery did not believe her. Joff always played the perfect knight with her, as once he had

with Sansa. *She will see his true nature soon enough. After the wedding if not before.* Sansa decided that she would light a candle to the Mother Above the next time she visited the sept, and ask her to protect Margaery from Joffrey's cruelty. And perhaps a candle to the Warrior as well, for Loras.

She would wear her new gown for the ceremony at the Great Sept of Baelor, she decided as the seamstress took her last measurement. *That must be why Cersei is having it made for me, so I will not look shabby at the wedding.* She really ought to have a different gown for the feast afterward but she supposed one of her old ones would do. She did not want to risk getting food or wine on the new one. *I must take it with me to Highgarden.* She wanted to look beautiful for Willas Tyrell. *Even if Dontos was right, and it is Winterfell he wants and not me, he still may come to love me for myself.* Sansa hugged herself tightly, wondering how long it would be before the gown was ready. She could scarcely wait to wear it.