

SANSA

The walls of the throne room had been stripped bare, the hunting tapestries that King Robert loved taken down and stacked in the corner in an untidy heap.

Ser Mandon Moore went to take his place under the throne beside two of his fellows of the Kingsguard. Sansa hovered by the door, for once unguarded. The queen had given her freedom of the castle as a reward for being good, yet even so, she was escorted everywhere she went. “Honor guards for my daughter-to-be,” the queen called them, but they did not make Sansa feel honored.

“Freedom of the castle” meant that she could go wherever she chose within the Red Keep so long as she promised not to go beyond the walls, a promise Sansa had been more than willing to give. She couldn’t have gone beyond the walls anyway. The gates were watched day and night by Janos Slynt’s gold cloaks, and Lannister house guards were always about as well. Besides, even if she could leave the castle, where would she go? It was enough that she could walk in the yard, pick flowers in Myrcella’s garden, and visit the sept to pray for her father. Sometimes she prayed in the godswood as well, since the Starks kept the old gods.

This was the first court session of Joffrey’s reign, so Sansa looked about nervously. A line of Lannister house guards stood beneath the western windows, a line of gold-cloaked City Watchmen beneath the east. Of smallfolk and commoners, she saw no sign, but under the gallery a cluster of lords great and small milled restlessly. There were no more than twenty, where a hundred had been accustomed to wait upon King Robert.

Sansa slipped in among them, murmuring greetings as she worked her way toward the front. She recognized black-skinned Jalabhar Xho, gloomy Ser Aron Santagar, the Redwyne twins Horror and Slobber... only none of them seemed to recognize *her*. Or if they did, they shied away as if she had the grey plague. Sickly Lord Gyles covered his face at her approach and

feigned a fit of coughing, and when funny drunken Ser Dontos started to hail her, Ser Balon Swann whispered in his ear and he turned away.

And so many others were missing. Where had the rest of them gone? Sansa wondered. Vainly, she searched for friendly faces. Not one of them would meet her eyes. It was as if she had become a ghost, dead before her time.

Grand Maester Pycelle was seated alone at the council table, seemingly asleep, his hands clasped together atop his beard. She saw Lord Varys hurry into the hall, his feet making no sound. A moment later Lord Baelish entered through the tall doors in the rear, smiling. He chatted amiably with Ser Balon and Ser Dontos as he made his way to the front. Butterflies fluttered nervously in Sansa's stomach. *I shouldn't be afraid*, she told herself. *I have nothing to be afraid of, it will all come out well, Joff loves me and the queen does too, she said so.*

A herald's voice rang out. "All hail His Grace, Joffrey of the Houses Baratheon and Lannister, the First of his Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms. All hail his lady mother, Cersei of House Lannister, Queen Regent, Light of the West, and Protector of the Realm."

Ser Barristan Selmy, resplendent in white plate, led them in. Ser Arys Oakheart escorted the queen, while Ser Boros Blount walked beside Joffrey, so six of the Kingsguard were now in the hall, all the White Swords save Jaime Lannister alone. Her prince—no, her *king* now!—took the steps of the Iron Throne two at a time, while his mother was seated with the council. Joff wore plush black velvets slashed with crimson, a shimmering cloth-of-gold cape with a high collar, and on his head a golden crown crusted with rubies and black diamonds.

When Joffrey turned to look out over the hall, his eye caught Sansa's. He smiled, seated himself, and spoke. "It is a king's duty to punish the disloyal and reward those who are true. Grand Maester Pycelle, I command you to read my decrees."

Pycelle pushed himself to his feet. He was clad in a magnificent robe of thick red velvet, with an ermine collar and shiny gold fastenings. From a

drooping sleeve, heavy with gilded scrollwork, he drew a parchment, unrolled it, and began to read a long list of names, commanding each in the name of king and council to present themselves and swear their fealty to Joffrey. Failing that, they would be adjudged traitors, their lands and titles forfeit to the throne.

The names he read made Sansa hold her breath. Lord Stannis Baratheon, his lady wife, his daughter. Lord Renly Baratheon. Both Lord Royces and their sons. Ser Loras Tyrell. Lord Mace Tyrell, his brothers, uncles, sons. The red priest, Thoros of Myr. Lord Beric Dondarrion. Lady Lysa Arryn and her son, the little Lord Robert. Lord Hoster Tully, his brother Ser Brynden, his son Ser Edmure. Lord Jason Mallister. Lord Bryce Caron of the Marches. Lord Tytos Blackwood. Lord Walder Frey and his heir Ser Stevron. Lord Karyl Vance. Lord Jonos Bracken. Lady Sheila Whent. Doran Martell, Prince of Dorne, and all his sons. *So many*, she thought as Pycelle read on and on, *it will take a whole flock of ravens to send out these commands*.

And at the end, near last, came the names Sansa had been dreading. Lady Catelyn Stark. Robb Stark. Brandon Stark, Rickon Stark, Arya Stark. Sansa stifled a gasp. *Arya*. They wanted Arya to present herself and swear an oath... it must mean her sister had fled on the galley, she must be safe at Winterfell by now...

Grand Maester Pycelle rolled up the list, tucked it up his left sleeve, and pulled another parchment from his right. He cleared his throat and resumed. "In the place of the traitor Eddard Stark, it is the wish of His Grace that Tywin Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West, take up the office of Hand of the King, to speak with his voice, lead his armies against his enemies, and carry out his royal will. So the king has decreed. The small council consents.

"In the place of the traitor Stannis Baratheon, it is the wish of His Grace that his lady mother, the Queen Regent Cersei Lannister, who has ever been his staunchest support, be seated upon his small council, that she may help him rule wisely and with justice. So the king has decreed. The small council consents."

Sansa heard a soft murmuring from the lords around her, but it was quickly stilled. Pycelle continued.

“It is also the wish of His Grace that his loyal servant, Janos Slynt, Commander of the City Watch of King’s Landing, be at once raised to the rank of lord and granted the ancient seat of Harrenhal with all its attendant lands and incomes, and that his sons and grandsons shall hold these honors after him until the end of time. It is moreover his command that *Lord* Slynt be seated immediately upon his small council, to assist in the governance of the realm. So the king has decreed. The small council consents.”

Sansa glimpsed motion from the corner of her eye as Janos Slynt made his entrance. This time the muttering was louder and angrier. Proud lords whose houses went back thousands of years made way reluctantly for the balding, frog-faced commoner as he marched past. Golden scales had been sewn onto the black velvet of his doublet and rang together softly with each step. His cloak was checked black-and-gold satin. Two ugly boys who must have been his sons went before him, struggling with the weight of a heavy metal shield as tall as they were. For his sigil he had taken a bloody spear, gold on a night-black field. The sight of it raised goose prickles up and down Sansa’s arms.

As Lord Slynt took his place, Grand Maester Pycelle resumed. “Lastly, in these times of treason and turmoil, with our beloved Robert so lately dead, it is the view of the council that the life and safety of King Joffrey is of paramount importance...” He looked to the queen.

Cersei stood. “Ser Barristan Selmy, stand forth.”

Ser Barristan had been standing at the foot of the Iron Throne, as still as any statue, but now he went to one knee and bowed his head. “Your Grace, I am yours to command.”

“Rise, Ser Barristan,” Cersei Lannister said. “You may remove your helm.”

“My lady?” Standing, the old knight took off his high white helm, though he did not seem to understand why.

“You have served the realm long and faithfully, good ser, and every man and woman in the Seven Kingdoms owes you thanks. Yet now I fear your service is at an end. It is the wish of king and council that you lay down your heavy burden.”

“My... burden? I fear I... I do not...”

The new-made lord, Janos Slynt, spoke up, his voice heavy and blunt. “Her Grace is trying to tell you that you are relieved as Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.”

The tall, white-haired knight seemed to shrink as he stood there, scarcely breathing. “Your Grace,” he said at last. “The Kingsguard is a Sworn Brotherhood. Our vows are taken for life. Only death may relieve the Lord Commander of his sacred trust.”

“Whose death, Ser Barristan?” The queen’s voice was soft as silk, but her words carried the whole length of the hall. “Yours, or your king’s?”

“You let my father die,” Joffrey said accusingly from atop the Iron Throne. “You’re too old to protect anybody.”

Sansa watched as the knight peered up at his new king. She had never seen him look his years before, yet now he did. “Your Grace,” he said. “I was chosen for the White Swords in my twenty-third year. It was all I had ever dreamed, from the moment I first took sword in hand. I gave up all claim to my ancestral keep. The girl I was to wed married my cousin in my place, I had no need of land or sons, my life would be lived for the realm. Ser Gerold Hightower himself heard my vows... to ward the king with all my strength... to give my blood for his... I fought beside the White Bull and Prince Lewyn of Dorne... beside Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning. Before I served your father, I helped shield King Aerys, and his father Jaehaerys before him... three kings...”

“And all of them dead,” Littlefinger pointed out.

“Your time is done,” Cersei Lannister announced. “Joffrey requires men around him who are young and strong. The council has determined that Ser Jaime Lannister will take your place as the Lord Commander of Sworn Brothers of the White Swords.”

“The Kingslayer,” Ser Barristan said, his voice hard with contempt. “The false knight who profaned his blade with the blood of the king he had sworn to defend.”

“Have a care for your words, ser,” the queen warned. “You are speaking of our beloved brother, your king’s own blood.”

Lord Varys spoke, gentler than the others. “We are not unmindful of your service, good ser. Lord Tywin Lannister has generously agreed to grant you a handsome tract of land north of Lannisport, beside the sea, with gold and men sufficient to build you a stout keep, and servants to see to your every need.”

Ser Barristan looked up sharply. “A hall to die in, and men to bury me. I thank you, my lords... but I spit upon your pity.” He reached up and undid the clasps that held his cloak in place, and the heavy white garment slithered from his shoulders to fall in a heap on the floor. His helmet dropped with a *clang*. “I am a knight,” he told them. He opened the silver fastenings of his breastplate and let that fall as well. “I shall die a knight.”

“A naked knight, it would seem,” quipped Littlefinger.

They all laughed then, Joffrey on his throne, and the lords standing attendance, Janos Slynt and Queen Cersei and Sandor Clegane and even the other men of the Kingsguard, the five who had been his brothers until a moment ago. *Surely that must have hurt the most*, Sansa thought. Her heart went out to the gallant old man as he stood shamed and red-faced, too angry to speak. Finally he drew his sword.

Sansa heard someone gasp. Ser Boros and Ser Meryn moved forward to confront him, but Ser Barristan froze them in place with a look that dripped contempt. “Have no fear, sers, your king is safe... no thanks to you. Even now, I could cut through the five of you as easy as a dagger cuts cheese. If you would serve under the Kingslayer, not a one of you is fit to wear the white.” He flung his sword at the foot of the Iron Throne. “Here, boy. Melt it down and add it to the others, if you like. It will do you more good than the swords in the hands of these five. Perhaps Lord Stannis will chance to sit on it when he takes your throne.”

He took the long way out, his steps ringing loud against the floor and echoing off the bare stone walls. Lords and ladies parted to let him pass. Not until the pages had closed the great oak-and-bronze doors behind him did Sansa hear sounds again: soft voices, uneasy stirrings, the shuffle of papers from the council table. “He called me *boy*,” Joffrey said peevishly, sounding younger than his years. “He talked about my uncle Stannis too.”

“Idle talk,” said Varys the eunuch. “Without meaning...”

“He could be making plots with my uncles. I want him seized and questioned.” No one moved. Joffrey raised his voice. “I said, *I want him seized!*”

Janos Slynt rose from the council table. “My gold cloaks will see to it, Your Grace.”

“Good,” said King Joffrey. Lord Janos strode from the hall, his ugly sons double-stepping to keep up as they lugged the great metal shield with the arms of House Slynt.

“Your Grace,” Littlefinger reminded the king. “If we might resume, the seven are now six. We find ourselves in need of a new sword for your Kingsguard.”

Joffrey smiled. “Tell them, Mother.”

“The king and council have determined that no man in the Seven Kingdoms is more fit to guard and protect His Grace than his sworn shield, Sandor Clegane.”

“How do you like that, dog?” King Joffrey asked.

The Hound’s scarred face was hard to read. He took a long moment to consider. “Why not? I have no lands nor wife to forsake, and who’d care if I did?” The burned side of his mouth twisted. “But I warn you, I’ll say no knight’s vows.”

“The Sworn Brothers of the Kingsguard have always been knights,” Ser Boros said firmly.

“Until now,” the Hound said in his deep rasp, and Ser Boros fell silent.

When the king’s herald moved forward, Sansa realized the moment was almost at hand. She smoothed down the cloth of her skirt nervously. She

was dressed in mourning, as a sign of respect for the dead king, but she had taken special care to make herself beautiful. Her gown was the ivory silk that the queen had given her, the one Arya had ruined, but she'd had them dye it black and you couldn't see the stain at all. She had fretted over her jewelry for hours and finally decided upon the elegant simplicity of a plain silver chain.

The herald's voice boomed out. "If any man in this hall has other matters to set before His Grace, let him speak now or go forth and hold his silence."

Sansa quailed. *Now, she told herself, I must do it now. Gods give me courage.* She took one step, then another. Lords and knights stepped aside silently to let her pass, and she felt the weight of their eyes on her. *I must be as strong as my lady mother.* "Your Grace," she called out in a soft, tremulous voice.

The height of the Iron Throne gave Joffrey a better vantage point than anyone else in the hall. He was the first to see her. "Come forward, my lady," he called out, smiling.

His smile emboldened her, made her feel beautiful and strong. *He does love me, he does.* Sansa lifted her head and walked toward him, not too slow and not too fast. She must not let them see how nervous she was.

"The Lady Sansa, of House Stark," the herald cried.

She stopped under the throne, at the spot where Ser Barristan's white cloak lay puddled on the floor beside his helm and breastplate. "Do you have some business for king and council, Sansa?" the queen asked from the council table.

"I do." She knelt on the cloak, so as not to spoil her gown, and looked up at her prince on his fearsome black throne. "As it please Your Grace, I ask mercy for my father, Lord Eddard Stark, who was the Hand of the King." She had practiced the words a hundred times.

The queen sighed. "Sansa, you disappoint me. What did I tell you about traitor's blood?"

“Your father has committed grave and terrible crimes, my lady,” Grand Maester Pycelle intoned.

“Ah, poor sad thing,” sighed Varys. “She is only a babe, my lords, she does not know what she asks.”

Sansa had eyes only for Joffrey. *He must listen to me, he must*, she thought. The king shifted on his seat, “Let her speak,” he commanded. “I want to hear what she says.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Sansa smiled, a shy secret smile, just for him. He was listening. She knew he would.

“Treason is a noxious weed,” Pycelle declared solemnly. “It must be torn up, root and stem and seed, lest new traitors sprout from every roadside.”

“Do you deny your father’s crime?” Lord Baelish asked.

“No, my lords.” Sansa knew better than that. “I know he must be punished. All I ask is mercy. I know my lord father must regret what he did. He was King Robert’s friend and he loved him, you all know he loved him. He never wanted to be Hand until the king asked him. They must have lied to him. Lord Renly or Lord Stannis or... or *somebody*, they must have lied, otherwise...”

King Joffrey leaned forward, hands grasping the arms of the throne. Broken sword points fanned out between his fingers. “He said I wasn’t the king. Why did he say that?”

“His leg was broken,” Sansa replied eagerly. “It hurt ever so much, Maester Pycelle was giving him milk of the poppy, and they say that milk of the poppy fills your head with clouds. Otherwise he would never have said it.”

Varys said, “A child’s faith... such sweet innocence... and yet, they say wisdom oft comes from the mouths of babes.”

“Treason is treason,” Pycelle replied at once.

Joffrey rocked restlessly on the throne. “Mother?”

Cersei Lannister considered Sansa thoughtfully. “If Lord Eddard were to confess his crime,” she said at last, “we would know he had repented his

folly.”

Joffrey pushed himself to his feet. *Please*, Sansa thought, *please, please, be the king I know you are, good and kind and noble, please*. “Do you have any more to say?” he asked her.

“Only... that as you love me, you do me this kindness, my prince,” Sansa said.

King Joffrey looked her up and down. “Your sweet words have moved me,” he said gallantly, nodding, as if to say all would be well. “I shall do as you ask... but first your father has to confess. He has to confess and say that I’m the king, or there will be no mercy for him.”

“He will,” Sansa said, heart soaring. “Oh, I know he will.”