



SANSA

The invitation seemed innocent enough, but every time Sansa read it her tummy tightened into a knot. *She's to be queen now, she's beautiful and rich and everyone loves her, why would she want to sup with a traitor's daughter?* It could be curiosity, she supposed; perhaps Margaery Tyrell wanted to get the measure of the rival she'd displaced. *Does she resent me, I wonder? Does she think I bear her ill will . . .*

Sansa had watched from the castle walls as Margaery Tyrell and her escort made their way up Aegon's High Hill. Joffrey had met his new bride-to-be at the King's Gate to welcome her to the city, and they rode side by side through cheering crowds, Joff glittering in gilded armor and the Tyrell girl splendid in green with a cloak of autumn flowers blowing from her shoulders. She was sixteen, brown-haired and brown-eyed, slender and beautiful. The people called out her name as she passed, held up their children for her blessing, and scattered flowers under the hooves of her horse. Her mother and grandmother followed close behind, riding in a tall wheelhouse whose sides were carved into the shape of a hundred twining roses, every one gilded and shining. The smallfolk cheered them as well.

The same smallfolk who pulled me from my horse and would have killed me, if not for the Hound. Sansa had done nothing to make the commons hate her, no more than Margaery Tyrell had done to win their love. *Does she want me to love her too?* She studied the invitation, which looked to be

written in Margaery's own hand. *Does she want my blessing?* Sansa wondered if Joffrey knew of this supper. For all she knew, it might be his doing. That thought made her fearful. If Joff was behind the invitation, he would have some cruel jape planned to shame her in the older girl's eyes. Would he command his Kingsguard to strip her naked once again? The last time he had done that his uncle Tyrion had stopped him, but the Imp could not save her now.

No one can save me but my Florian. Ser Dontos had promised he would help her escape, but not until the night of Joffrey's wedding. The plans had been well laid, her dear devoted knight-turned-fool assured her; there was nothing to do until then but endure, and count the days.

And sup with my replacement . . .

Perhaps she was doing Margaery Tyrell an injustice. Perhaps the invitation was no more than a simple kindness, an act of courtesy. *It might be just a supper.* But this was the Red Keep, this was King's Landing, this was the court of King Joffrey Baratheon, the First of His Name, and if there was one thing that Sansa Stark had learned here, it was mistrust.

Even so, she must accept. She was nothing now, the discarded daughter of a traitor and disgraced sister of a rebel lord. She could scarcely refuse Joffrey's queen-to-be.

I wish the Hound were here. The night of the battle, Sandor Clegane had come to her chambers to take her from the city, but Sansa had refused. Sometimes she lay awake at night, wondering if she'd been wise. She had his stained white cloak hidden in a cedar chest beneath her summer silks. She could not say why she'd kept it. The Hound had turned craven, she heard it said; at the height of the battle, he got so drunk the Imp had to take his men. But Sansa understood. She knew the secret of his burned face. *It was only the fire he feared.* That night, the wildfire had set the river itself ablaze, and filled the very air with green flame. Even in the castle, Sansa had been afraid. Outside . . . she could scarcely imagine it.

Sighing, she got out quill and ink, and wrote Margaery Tyrell a gracious note of acceptance.

When the appointed night arrived, another of the Kingsguard came for her, a man as different from Sandor Clegane as . . . *well, as a flower from a*

dog. The sight of Ser Loras Tyrell standing on her threshold made Sansa's heart beat a little faster. This was the first time she had been so close to him since he had returned to King's Landing, leading the vanguard of his father's host. For a moment she did not know what to say. "Ser Loras," she finally managed, "you . . . you look so lovely."

He gave her a puzzled smile. "My lady is too kind. And beautiful besides. My sister awaits you eagerly."

"I have so looked forward to our supper."

"As has Margaery, and my lady grandmother as well." He took her arm and led her toward the steps.

"Your grandmother?" Sansa was finding it hard to walk and talk and think all at the same time, with Ser Loras touching her arm. She could feel the warmth of his hand through the silk.

"Lady Olenna. She is to sup with you as well."

"Oh," said Sansa. *I am talking to him, and he's touching me, he's holding my arm and touching me.* "The Queen of Thorns, she's called. Isn't that right?"

"It is." Ser Loras laughed. *He has the warmest laugh,* she thought as he went on, "You'd best not use that name in her presence, though, or you're like to get pricked."

Sansa reddened. Any fool would have realized that no woman would be happy about being called "the Queen of Thorns." *Maybe I truly am as stupid as Cersei Lannister says.* Desperately she tried to think of something clever and charming to say to him, but her wits had deserted her. She almost told him how beautiful he was, until she remembered that she'd already done that.

He *was* beautiful, though. He seemed taller than he'd been when she'd first met him, but still so lithe and graceful, and Sansa had never seen another boy with such wonderful eyes. *He's no boy, though, he's a man grown, a knight of the Kingsguard.* She thought he looked even finer in white than in the greens and golds of House Tyrell. The only spot of color on him now was the brooch that clasped his cloak; the rose of Highgarden wrought in soft yellow gold, nestled in a bed of delicate green jade leaves.

Ser Balon Swann held the door of Maegor's for them to pass. He was all in white as well, though he did not wear it half so well as Ser Loras. Beyond the spiked moat, two dozen men were taking their practice with sword and shield. With the castle so crowded, the outer ward had been given over to guests to raise their tents and pavilions, leaving only the smaller inner yards for training. One of the Redwyne twins was being driven backward by Ser Tallad, with the eyes on his shield. Chunky Ser Kennos of Kayce, who chuffed and puffed every time he raised his longsword, seemed to be holding his own against Osney Kettleblack, but Osney's brother Ser Osfryd was savagely punishing the frog-faced squire Morros Slynt. Blunted swords or no, Slynt would have a rich crop of bruises by the morrow. It made Sansa wince just to watch. *They have scarcely finished burying the dead from the last battle, and already they are practicing for the next one.*

On the edge of the yard, a lone knight with a pair of golden roses on his shield was holding off three foes. Even as they watched, he caught one of them alongside the head, knocking him senseless. "Is that your brother?" Sansa asked.

"It is, my lady," said Ser Loras. "Garlan often trains against three men, or even four. In battle it is seldom one against one, he says, so he likes to be prepared."

"He must be very brave."

"He is a great knight," Ser Loras replied. "A better sword than me, in truth, though I'm the better lance."

"I remember," said Sansa. "You ride wonderfully, ser."

"My lady is gracious to say so. When has she seen me ride?"

"At the Hand's tourney, don't you remember? You rode a white courser, and your armor was a hundred different kinds of flowers. You gave me a rose. A *red* rose. You threw white roses to the other girls that day." It made her flush to speak of it. "You said no victory was half as beautiful as me."

Ser Loras gave her a modest smile. "I spoke only a simple truth, that any man with eyes could see."

He doesn't remember, Sansa realized, startled. *He is only being kind to me, he doesn't remember me or the rose or any of it.* She had been so certain that it meant something, that it meant *everything*. A *red* rose, not a white. "It was after you unhorsed Ser Robar Royce," she said, desperately.

He took his hand from her arm. "I slew Robar at Storm's End, my lady." It was not a boast; he sounded sad.

Him, and another of King Renly's Rainbow Guard as well, yes. Sansa had heard the women talking of it round the well, but for a moment she'd forgotten. "That was when Lord Renly was killed, wasn't it? How terrible for your poor sister."

"For Margaery?" His voice was tight. "To be sure. She was at Bitterbridge, though. She did not see."

"Even so, when she heard . . ."

Ser Loras brushed the hilt of his sword lightly with his hand. Its grip was white leather, its pommel a rose in alabaster. "Renly is dead. Robar as well. What use to speak of them?"

The sharpness in his tone took her aback. "I . . . my lord, I . . . I did not mean to give offense, ser."

"Nor could you, Lady Sansa," Ser Loras replied, but all the warmth had gone from his voice. Nor did he take her arm again.

They ascended the serpentine steps in a deepening silence.

Oh, why did I have to mention Ser Robar? Sansa thought. *I've ruined everything. He is angry with me now.* She tried to think of something she might say to make amends, but all the words that came to her were lame and weak. *Be quiet, or you will only make it worse,* she told herself.

Lord Mace Tyrell and his entourage had been housed behind the royal sept, in the long slate-roofed keep that had been called the Maidenvault since King Baelor the Blessed had confined his sisters therein, so the sight of them might not tempt him into carnal thoughts. Outside its tall carved doors stood two guards in gilded halfhelms and green cloaks edged in gold satin, the golden rose of Highgarden sewn on their breasts. Both were seven-footers, wide of shoulder and narrow of waist, magnificently muscled. When Sansa got close enough to see their faces, she could not tell

one from the other. They had the same strong jaws, the same deep blue eyes, the same thick red mustaches. “Who are they?” she asked Ser Loras, her discomfit forgotten for a moment.

“My grandmother’s personal guard,” he told her. “Their mother named them Erryk and Arryk, but Grandmother can’t tell them apart, so she calls them Left and Right.”

Left and Right opened the doors, and Margaery Tyrell herself emerged and swept down the short flight of steps to greet them. “Lady Sansa,” she called, “I’m so pleased you came. Be welcome.”

Sansa knelt at the feet of her future queen. “You do me great honor, Your Grace.”

“Won’t you call me Margaery? Please, rise. Loras, help the Lady Sansa to her feet. Might I call you Sansa?”

“If it please you.” Ser Loras helped her up.

Margaery dismissed him with a sisterly kiss, and took Sansa by the hand. “Come, my grandmother awaits, and she is not the most patient of ladies.”

A fire was crackling in the hearth, and sweet-swelling rushes had been scattered on the floor. Around the long trestle table a dozen women were seated.

Sansa recognized only Lord Tyrell’s tall, dignified wife, Lady Alerie, whose long silvery braid was bound with jeweled rings. Margaery performed the other introductions. There were three Tyrell cousins, Megga and Alla and Elinor, all close to Sansa’s age. Buxom Lady Janna was Lord Tyrell’s sister, and wed to one of the green-apple Fossoways; dainty, bright-eyed Lady Leonette was a Fossoway as well, and wed to Ser Garlan. Septa Nysterica had a homely pox-scarred face but seemed jolly. Pale, elegant Lady Graceford was with child, and Lady Bulwer *was* a child, no more than eight. And “Merry” was what she was to call boisterous plump Meredyth Crane, but most definitely *not* Lady Merryweather, a sultry black-eyed Myrish beauty.

Last of all, Margaery brought her before the wizened white-haired doll of a woman at the head of the table. “I am honored to present my grandmother

the Lady Olenna, widow to the late Luthor Tyrell, Lord of Highgarden, whose memory is a comfort to us all.”

The old woman smelled of rosewater. *Why, she's just the littlest bit of a thing.* There was nothing the least bit thorny about her. “Kiss me, child,” Lady Olenna said, tugging at Sansa’s wrist with a soft spotted hand. “It is so kind of you to sup with me and my foolish flock of hens.”

Dutifully, Sansa kissed the old woman on the cheek. “It is kind of you to have me, my lady.”

“I knew your grandfather, Lord Rickard, though not well.”

“He died before I was born.”

“I am aware of that, child. It’s said that your Tully grandfather is dying too. Lord Hoster, surely they told you? An old man, though not so old as me. Still, night falls for all of us in the end, and too soon for some. You would know that more than most, poor child. You’ve had your share of grief, I know. We are sorry for your losses.”

Sansa glanced at Margaery. “I was saddened when I heard of Lord Renly’s death, Your Grace. He was very gallant.”

“You are kind to say so,” answered Margaery.

Her grandmother snorted. “Gallant, yes, and charming, and very clean. He knew how to dress and he knew how to smile and he knew how to bathe, and somehow he got the notion that this made him fit to be king. The Baratheons have always had some queer notions, to be sure. It comes from their Targaryen blood, I should think.” She sniffed. “They tried to marry me to a Targaryen once, but I soon put an end to that.”

“Renly was brave and gentle, Grandmother,” said Margaery. “Father liked him as well, and so did Loras.”

“Loras is young,” Lady Olenna said crisply, “and very good at knocking men off horses with a stick. That does not make him wise. As to your father, would that I’d been born a peasant woman with a big wooden spoon, I might have been able to beat some sense into his fat head.”

“*Mother,*” Lady Alerie scolded.

“Hush, Alerie, don’t take that tone with me. And don’t call me Mother. If I’d given birth to you, I’m sure I’d remember. I’m only to blame for your

husband, the lord oaf of Highgarden.”

“Grandmother,” Margaery said, “mind your words, or what will Sansa think of us?”

“She might think we have some wits about us. One of us, at any rate.” The old woman turned back to Sansa. “It’s treason, I warned them, Robert has two sons, and Renly has an older brother, how can he *possibly* have any claim to that ugly iron chair? Tut-tut, says my son, don’t you want your sweetling to be queen? You Starks were kings once, the Arryns and the Lannisters as well, and even the Baratheons through the female line, but the Tyrells were no more than stewards until Aegon the Dragon came along and cooked the rightful King of the Reach on the Field of Fire. If truth be told, even our claim to Highgarden is a bit dodgy, just as those dreadful Florents are always whining. ‘What does it matter?’ you ask, and of course it doesn’t, except to oafs like my son. The thought that one day he may see his grandson with his arse on the Iron Throne makes Mace puff up like . . . now, what do you call it? Margaery, you’re clever, be a dear and tell your poor old half-daft grandmother the name of that queer fish from the Summer Isles that puffs up to ten times its own size when you poke it.”

“They call them puff fish, Grandmother.”

“Of course they do. Summer Islanders have no imagination. My son ought to take the puff fish for his sigil, if truth be told. He could put a crown on it, the way the Baratheons do their stag, mayhap that would make him happy. We should have stayed well out of all this bloody foolishness if you ask me, but once the cow’s been milked there’s no squirting the cream back up her udder. After Lord Puff Fish put that crown on Renly’s head, we were into the pudding up to our knees, so here we are to see things through. And what do you say to that, Sansa?”

Sansa’s mouth opened and closed. She felt very like a puff fish herself. “The Tyrells can trace their descent back to Garth Greenhand,” was the best she could manage at short notice.

The Queen of Thorns snorted. “So can the Florents, the Rowans, the Oakhearts, and half the other noble houses of the south. Garth liked to plant his seed in fertile ground, they say. I shouldn’t wonder that more than his hands were green.”

“*Sansa*,” Lady Alerie broke in, “you must be very hungry. Shall we have a bite of boar together, and some lemon cakes?”

“Lemon cakes are my favorite,” Sansa admitted.

“So we have been told,” declared Lady Olenna, who obviously had no intention of being hushed. “That Varys creature seemed to think we should be grateful for the information. I’ve never been quite sure what the *point* of a eunuch is, if truth be told. It seems to me they’re only men with the useful bits cut off. Alerie, will you have them bring the food, or do you mean to starve me to death? Here, Sansa, sit here next to me, I’m much less boring than these others. I hope that you’re fond of fools.”

Sansa smoothed down her skirts and sat. “I think . . . fools, my lady? You mean . . . the sort in motley?”

“Feathers, in this case. What did you imagine I was speaking of? My son? Or these lovely ladies? No, don’t blush, with your hair it makes you look like a pomegranate. All men are fools, if truth be told, but the ones in motley are more amusing than ones with crowns. Margaery, child, summon Butterbumps, let us see if we can’t make Lady Sansa smile. The rest of you be seated, do I have to tell you everything? Sansa must think that my granddaughter is attended by a flock of sheep.”

Butterbumps arrived before the food, dressed in a jester’s suit of green and yellow feathers with a floppy coxcomb. An immense round fat man, as big as three Moon Boys, he came cartwheeling into the hall, vaulted onto the table, and laid a gigantic egg right in front of Sansa. “Break it, my lady,” he commanded. When she did, a dozen yellow chicks escaped and began running in all directions. “*Catch them!*” Butterbumps exclaimed. Little Lady Bulwer snagged one and handed it to him, whereby he tilted back his head, popped it into his huge rubbery mouth, and seemed to swallow it whole. When he belched, tiny yellow feathers flew out his nose. Lady Bulwer began to wail in distress, but her tears turned into a sudden squeal of delight when the chick came squirming out of the sleeve of her gown and ran down her arm.

As the servants brought out a broth of leeks and mushrooms, Butterbumps began to juggle and Lady Olenna pushed herself forward to

rest her elbows on the table. “Do you know my son, Sansa? Lord Puff Fish of Highgarden?”

“A great lord,” Sansa answered politely.

“A great oaf,” said the Queen of Thorns. “His father was an oaf as well. My husband, the late Lord Luthor. Oh, I loved him well enough, don’t mistake me. A kind man, and not unskilled in the bedchamber, but an appalling oaf all the same. He managed to ride off a cliff whilst hawking. They say he was looking up at the sky and paying no mind to where his horse was taking him.

“And now my oaf son is doing the same, only he’s riding a lion instead of a palfrey. It is easy to mount a lion and not so easy to get off, I warned him, but he only chuckles. Should you ever have a son, Sansa, beat him frequently so he learns to mind you. I only had the one boy and I hardly beat him at all, so now he pays more heed to Butterbumps than he does to me. A lion is not a lap cat, I told him, and he gives me a ‘tut-tut-Mother.’ There is entirely too much tut-tutting in this realm, if you ask me. All these kings would do a deal better if they would put down their swords and listen to their mothers.”

Sansa realized that her mouth was open again. She filled it with a spoon of broth while Lady Alerie and the other women were giggling at the spectacle of Butterbumps bouncing oranges off his head, his elbows, and his ample rump.

“I want you to tell me the truth about this royal boy,” said Lady Olenna abruptly. “This Joffrey.”

Sansa’s fingers tightened round her spoon. *The truth? I can’t. Don’t ask it, please, I can’t.* “I . . . I . . . I . . .”

“You, yes. Who would know better? The lad seems kingly enough, I’ll grant you. A bit full of himself, but that would be his Lannister blood. We have heard some troubling tales, however. Is there any truth to them? Has this boy mistreated you?”

Sansa glanced about nervously. Butterbumps popped a whole orange into his mouth, chewed and swallowed, slapped his cheek, and blew seeds out of his nose. The women giggled and laughed. Servants were coming and going, and the Maidenvault echoed to the clatter of spoons and plates. One

of the chicks hopped back onto the table and ran through Lady Graceford's broth. No one seemed to be paying them any mind, but even so, she was frightened.

Lady Olenna was growing impatient. "Why are you gaping at Butterbumps? I asked a question, I expect an answer. Have the Lannisters stolen your tongue, child?"

Ser Dontos had warned her to speak freely only in the godswood. "Joff . . . King Joffrey, he's . . . His Grace is very fair and handsome, and . . . and as brave as a lion."

"Yes, all the Lannisters are lions, and when a Tyrell breaks wind it smells just like a rose," the old woman snapped. "But how *kind* is he? How clever? Has he a good heart, a gentle hand? Is he chivalrous as befits a king? Will he cherish Margaery and treat her tenderly, protect her honor as he would his own?"

"He will," Sansa lied. "He is very . . . very comely."

"You said that. You know, child, some say that you are as big a fool as Butterbumps here, and I am starting to believe them. *Comely*? I have taught my Margaery what comely is worth, I hope. Somewhat less than a mummer's fart. Aerion Brightfire was comely enough, but a monster all the same. The question is, what is Joffrey?" She reached to snag a passing servant. "I am not fond of leeks. Take this broth away, and bring me some cheese."

"The cheese will be served after the cakes, my lady."

"The cheese will be served when I want it served, and I want it served now." The old woman turned back to Sansa. "Are you frightened, child? No need for that, we're only women here. Tell me the truth, no harm will come to you."

"My father always told the truth." Sansa spoke quietly, but even so, it was hard to get the words out.

"Lord Eddard, yes, he had that reputation, but they named him traitor and took his head off even so." The old woman's eyes bore into her, sharp and bright as the points of swords.

“Joffrey,” Sansa said. “Joffrey did that. He promised me he would be merciful, and cut my father’s head off. He said *that* was mercy, and he took me up on the walls and made me look at it. The head. He wanted me to weep, but . . .” She stopped abruptly, and covered her mouth. *I’ve said too much, oh gods be good, they’ll know, they’ll hear, someone will tell on me.*

“Go on.” It was Margaery who urged. Joffrey’s own queen-to-be. Sansa did not know how much she had heard.

“I can’t.” *What if she tells him, what if she tells? He’ll kill me for certain then, or give me to Ser Ilyn.* “I never meant . . . my father was a traitor, my brother as well, I have the traitor’s blood, please, don’t make me say more.”

“Calm yourself, child,” the Queen of Thorns commanded.

“She’s terrified, Grandmother, just look at her.”

The old woman called to Butterbumps. “*Fool!* Give us a song. A long one, I should think. ‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair’ will do nicely.”

“It will!” the huge jester replied. “It will do nicely indeed! Shall I sing it standing on my head, my lady?”

“Will that make it sound better?”

“No.”

“Stand on your feet, then. We wouldn’t want your hat to fall off. As I recall, you never wash your hair.”

“As my lady commands.” Butterbumps bowed low, let loose of an enormous belch, then straightened, threw out his belly, and bellowed. “*A bear there was, a bear, a BEAR! All black and brown, and covered with hair . . .*”

Lady Olenna squirmed forward. “Even when I was a girl younger than you, it was well known that in the Red Keep the very walls have ears. Well, they will be the better for a song, and meanwhile we girls shall speak freely.”

“But,” Sansa said, “Varys . . . he *knows*, he always . . .”

“*Sing louder!*” the Queen of Thorns shouted at Butterbumps. “These old ears are almost deaf, you know. Are you whispering at me, you fat fool? I don’t pay you for whispers. *Sing!*”

“ . . . *THE BEAR!*” thundered Butterbumps, his great deep voice echoing off the rafters. “*OH, COME, THEY SAID, OH COME TO THE FAIR! THE FAIR? SAID HE, BUT I’M A BEAR! ALL BLACK AND BROWN, AND COVERED WITH HAIR!*”

The wrinkled old lady smiled. “At Highgarden we have many spiders amongst the flowers. So long as they keep to themselves we let them spin their little webs, but if they get underfoot we step on them.” She patted Sansa on the back of the hand. “Now, child, the truth. What sort of man is this Joffrey, who calls himself Baratheon but looks so very Lannister?”

“*AND DOWN THE ROAD FROM HERE TO THERE. FROM HERE! TO THERE! THREE BOYS, A GOAT, AND A DANCING BEAR!*”

Sansa felt as though her heart had lodged in her throat. The Queen of Thorns was so close she could smell the old woman’s sour breath. Her gaunt thin fingers were pinching her wrist. To her other side, Margaery was listening as well. A shiver went through her. “A monster,” she whispered, so tremulously she could scarcely hear her own voice. “Joffrey is a monster. He lied about the butcher’s boy and made Father kill my wolf. When I displease him, he has the Kingsguard beat me. He’s evil and cruel, my lady, it’s so. And the queen as well.”

Lady Olenna Tyrell and her granddaughter exchanged a look. “Ah,” said the old woman, “that’s a pity.”

Oh, gods, thought Sansa, horrified. *If Margaery won’t marry him, Joff will know that I’m to blame.* “Please,” she blurted, “don’t stop the wedding . . .”

“Have no fear, Lord Puff Fish is determined that Margaery shall be queen. And the word of a Tyrell is worth more than all the gold in Casterly Rock. At least it was in my day. Even so, we thank you for the truth, child.”

“ . . . *DANCED AND SPUN, ALL THE WAY TO THE FAIR! THE FAIR! THE FAIR!*” Butterbumps hopped and roared and stomped his feet.

“Sansa, would you like to visit Highgarden?” When Margaery Tyrell smiled, she looked very like her brother Loras. “All the autumn flowers are in bloom just now, and there are groves and fountains, shady courtyards, marble colonnades. My lord father always keeps singers at court, sweeter ones than Butters here, and pipers and fiddlers and harpers as well. We have

the best horses, and pleasure boats to sail along the Mander. Do you hawk, Sansa?"

"A little," she admitted.

"OH, SWEET SHE WAS, AND PURE, AND FAIR! THE MAID WITH HONEY IN HER HAIR!"

"You will love Highgarden as I do, I know it." Margaery brushed back a loose strand of Sansa's hair. "Once you see it, you'll never want to leave. And perhaps you won't have to."

"HER HAIR! HER HAIR! THE MAID WITH HONEY IN HER HAIR!"

"Shush, child," the Queen of Thorns said sharply. "Sansa hasn't even told us that she would like to come for a visit."

"Oh, but I would," Sansa said. Highgarden sounded like the place she had always dreamed of, like the beautiful magical court she had once hoped to find at King's Landing.

". . . SMELLED THE SCENT ON THE SUMMER AIR. THE BEAR! THE BEAR! ALL BLACK AND BROWN AND COVERED WITH HAIR."

"But the queen," Sansa went on, "she won't let me go . . ."

"She will. Without Highgarden, the Lannisters have no hope of keeping Joffrey on his throne. If my son the lord oaf asks, she will have no choice but to grant his request."

"Will he?" asked Sansa. "Will he ask?"

Lady Olenna frowned. "I see no need to give him a choice. Of course, he has no hint of our true purpose."

"HE SMELLED THE SCENT ON THE SUMMER AIR!"

Sansa wrinkled her brow. "Our true purpose, my lady?"

"HE SNIFFED AND ROARED AND SMELLED IT THERE! HONEY ON THE SUMMER AIR!"

"To see you safely wed, child," the old woman said, as Butterbumps bellowed out the old, old song, "to my grandson."

Wed to Ser Loras, oh . . . Sansa's breath caught in her throat. She remembered Ser Loras in his sparkling sapphire armor, tossing her a rose. Ser Loras in white silk, so pure, innocent, beautiful. The dimples at the

corner of his mouth when he smiled. The sweetness of his laugh, the warmth of his hand. She could only imagine what it would be like to pull up his tunic and caress the smooth skin underneath, to stand on her toes and kiss him, to run her fingers through those thick brown curls and drown in his deep brown eyes. A flush crept up her neck.

“OH, I’M A MAID, AND I’M PURE AND FAIR! I’LL NEVER DANCE WITH A HAIRY BEAR! A BEAR! A BEAR! I’LL NEVER DANCE WITH A HAIRY BEAR!”

“Would you like that, Sansa?” asked Margaery. “I’ve never had a sister, only brothers. Oh, please say yes, please say that you will consent to marry my brother.”

The words came tumbling out of her. “Yes. I will. I would like that more than anything. To wed Ser Loras, to love him . . .”

“*Loras?*” Lady Olenna sounded annoyed. “Don’t be foolish, child. Kingsguard never wed. Didn’t they teach you anything in Winterfell? We were speaking of my grandson Willas. He is a bit old for you, to be sure, but a dear boy for all that. Not the least bit oafish, and heir to Highgarden besides.”

Sansa felt dizzy; one instant her head was full of dreams of Loras, and the next they had all been snatched away. *Willas? Willas?* “I,” she said stupidly. *Courtesy is a lady’s armor. You must not offend them, be careful what you say.* “I do not know Ser Willas. I have never had the pleasure, my lady. Is he . . . is he as great a knight as his brothers?”

“. . . LIFTED HER HIGH INTO THE AIR! THE BEAR! THE BEAR!”

“No,” Margaery said. “He has never taken vows.”

Her grandmother frowned. “Tell the girl the truth. The poor lad is crippled, and that’s the way of it.”

“He was hurt as a squire, riding in his first tourney,” Margaery confided. “His horse fell and crushed his leg.”

“That snake of a Dornishman was to blame, that Oberyne Martell. And his maester as well.”

“I CALLED FOR A KNIGHT, BUT YOU’RE A BEAR! A BEAR! A BEAR! ALL BLACK AND BROWN AND COVERED WITH HAIR!”

“Willas has a bad leg but a good heart,” said Margaery. “He used to read to me when I was a little girl, and draw me pictures of the stars. You will love him as much as we do, Sansa.”

“SHE KICKED AND WAILED, THE MAID SO FAIR, BUT HE LICKED THE HONEY FROM HER HAIR. HER HAIR! HER HAIR! HE LICKED THE HONEY FROM HER HAIR!”

“When might I meet him?” asked Sansa, hesitantly.

“Soon,” promised Margaery. “When you come to Highgarden, after Joffrey and I are wed. My grandmother will take you.”

“I will,” said the old woman, patting Sansa’s hand and smiling a soft wrinkly smile. “I will indeed.”

“THEN SHE SIGHED AND SQUEALED AND KICKED THE AIR! MY BEAR! SHE SANG. MY BEAR SO FAIR! AND OFF THEY WENT, FROM HERE TO THERE, THE BEAR, THE BEAR, AND THE MAIDEN FAIR.” Butterbumps roared the last line, leapt into the air, and came down on both feet with a crash that shook the wine cups on the table. The women laughed and clapped.

“I thought that dreadful song would never end,” said the Queen of Thorns. “But look, here comes my cheese.”