

sneaking away from Septa Mordane, defying her lord father. She had never done anything so willful before, and she would never have done it then if she hadn't loved Joffrey as much as she did. "He was going to take me back to Winterfell and marry me to some hedge knight, even though it was Joff I wanted. I told him, but he wouldn't listen." The king had been her last hope. The king could command Father to let her stay in King's Landing and marry Prince Joffrey, Sansa knew he could, but the king had always frightened her. He was loud and rough-voiced and drunk as often as not, and he would probably have just sent her back to Lord Eddard, if they even let her see him. So she went to the queen instead, and poured out her heart, and Cersei had listened and thanked her sweetly... only then Ser Arys had escorted her to the high room in Maegor's Holdfast and posted guards, and a few hours later, the fighting had begun outside. "Please," she finished, "you have to let me marry Joffrey, I'll be ever so good a wife to him, you'll see. I'll be a queen just like you, I promise."

Queen Cersei looked to the others. "My lords of the council, what do you say to her plea?"

"The poor child," murmured Varys. "A love so true and innocent, Your Grace, it would be cruel to deny it... and yet, what can we do?"

Her father stands condemned." His soft hands washed each other in a gesture of helpless distress.

"A child born of traitor's seed will find that betrayal comes naturally to her," said Grand Maester Pycelle. "She is a sweet thing now, but in ten years, who can say what treasons she may hatch?"

"No," Sansa said, horrified. "I'm not, I'd never... I wouldn't betray Joffrey, I love him, I swear it, I do."

"Oh, so poignant," said Varys. "And yet, it is truly said that blood runs truer than oaths."

"She reminds me of the mother, not the father," Lord Petyr Baelish said quietly. "Look at her. The hair, the eyes. She is the very image of Cat at the same age."

The queen looked at her, troubled, and yet Sansa could see kindness in her clear green eyes. "Child," she said, "if I could truly believe that you were not like your father, why nothing should please me more than to see you wed to my Joffrey. I know he loves you with all his heart." She sighed. "And yet, I fear that Lord Varys and the Grand Maester have the right of it. The blood will tell. I have only to remember how your sister set her wolf on my son."

"I'm not like Arya," Sansa blurted. "She has the traitor's blood, not me. I'm good, ask Septa Mordane, she'll tell you, I only want to be Joffrey's loyal and loving wife."

She felt the weight of Cersei's eyes as the queen studied her face. "I believe you mean it, child." She turned to face the others. "My lords, it seems to me that if the rest of her kin were to remain loyal in this terrible time, that would go a long way toward laying our fears to rest."

Grand Maester Pycelle stroked his huge soft beard, his wide brow furrowed in thought. "Lord Eddard has three sons."

"Mere boys," Lord Petyr said with a shrug. "I should be more concerned with Lady Catelyn and the Tullys."

The queen took Sansa's hand in both of hers. "Child, do you know your letters?"