

## SANSA

*Come to the godswood tonight, if you want to go home.*

The words were the same on the hundredth reading as they'd been on the first, when Sansa had discovered the folded sheet of parchment beneath her pillow. She did not know how it had gotten there or who had sent it. The note was unsigned, unsealed, and the hand unfamiliar. She crushed the parchment to her chest and whispered the words to herself. "Come to the godswood tonight, if you want to go home," she breathed, ever so faintly.

What could it mean? Should she take it to the queen to prove that she was being good? Nervously, she rubbed her stomach. The angry purple bruise Ser Meryn had given her had faded to an ugly yellow, but still hurt. His fist had been mailed when he hit her. It was her own fault. She must learn to hide her feelings better, so as not to anger Joffrey. When she heard that the Imp had sent Lord Slynt to the Wall, she had forgotten herself and said, "I hope the Others get him." The king had not been pleased.

*Come to the godswood tonight, if you want to go home.*

Sansa had prayed so hard. Could this be her answer at last, a true knight sent to save her? Perhaps it was one of the Redwyne twins, or bold Ser Balon Swann... or even Beric Dondarrion, the young lord her friend Jeyne Poole had loved, with his red-gold hair and the spray of stars on his black cloak.

*Come to the godswood tonight, if you want to go home.*

What if it was some cruel jape of Joffrey's, like the day he had taken her up to the battlements to show her Father's head? Or perhaps it was some subtle snare to prove she was not loyal. If she went to the godswood, would she find Ser Ilyn Payne waiting for her, sitting silent under the heart tree with Ice in his hand, his pale eyes watching to see if she'd come?

*Come to the godswood tonight, if you want to go home.*

When the door opened, she hurriedly stuffed the note under her sheet and sat on it. It was her bedmaid, the mousy one with the limp brown hair.

“What do you want?” Sansa demanded.

“Will milady be wanting a bath tonight?”

“A fire, I think... I feel a chill.” She was shivering, though the day had been hot.

“As you wish.”

Sansa watched the girl suspiciously. Had she seen the note? Had she put it under the pillow? It did not seem likely; she seemed a stupid girl, not one you’d want delivering secret notes, but Sansa did not know her. The queen had her servants changed every fortnight, to make certain none of them befriended her.

When a fire was blazing in the hearth, Sansa thanked the maid curtly and ordered her out. The girl was quick to obey, as ever, but Sansa decided there was something sly about her eyes. Doubtless, she was scurrying off to report to the queen, or maybe Varys. All her maids spied on her, she was certain.

Once alone, she thrust the note in the flames, watching the parchment curl and blacken. *Come to the godswood tonight, if you want to go home.* She drifted to her window. Below, she could see a short knight in moon-pale armor and a heavy white cloak pacing the drawbridge. From his height, it could only be Ser Preston Greenfield. The queen had given her freedom of the castle, but even so, he would want to know where she was going if she tried to leave Maegor’s Holdfast at this time of night. What was she to tell him? Suddenly she was glad she had burned the note.

She unlaced her gown and crawled into her bed, but she did not sleep. *Was he still there?* she wondered. *How long will he wait?* It was so cruel, to send her a note and tell her nothing. The thoughts went round and round in her head.

If only she had someone to tell her what to do. She missed Septa Mordane, and even more Jeyne Poole, her truest friend. The septa had lost her head with the rest, for the crime of serving House Stark. Sansa did not know what had happened to Jeyne, who had disappeared from her rooms afterward, never to be mentioned again. She tried not to think of them too

often, yet sometimes the memories came unbidden, and then it was hard to hold back the tears. Once in a while, Sansa even missed her sister. By now Arya was safe back in Winterfell, dancing and sewing, playing with Bran and baby Rickon, even riding through the winter town if she liked. Sansa was allowed to go riding too, but only in the bailey, and it got boring going round in a circle all day.

She was wide awake when she heard the shouting. Distant at first, then growing louder. Many voices yelling together. She could not make out the words. And there were horses as well, and pounding feet, shouts of command. She crept to her window and saw men running on the walls, carrying spears and torches. *Go back to your bed*, Sansa told herself, *this is nothing that concerns you, just some new trouble out in the city*. The talk at the wells had all been of troubles in the city of late. People were crowding in, running from the war, and many had no way to live save by robbing and killing each other. *Go to bed*.

But when she looked, the white knight was gone, the bridge across the dry moat down but undefended.

Sansa turned away without thinking and ran to her wardrobe. *Oh, what am I doing?* she asked herself as she dressed. *This is madness*. She could see the lights of many torches on the curtain walls. Had Stannis and Renly come at last to kill Joffrey and claim their brother's throne? If so, the guards would raise the drawbridge, cutting off Maegor's Holdfast from the outer castle. Sansa threw a plain grey cloak over her shoulders and picked up the knife she used to cut her meat. *If it is some trap, better that I die than let them hurt me more*, she told herself. She hid the blade under her cloak.

A column of red-cloaked swordsmen ran past as she slipped out into the night. She waited until they were well past before she darted across the undefended drawbridge. In the yard, men were buckling on swordbelts and cinching the saddles of their horses. She glimpsed Ser Preston near the stables with three others of the Kingsguard, white cloaks bright as the moon as they helped Joffrey into his armor. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw the king. Thankfully, he did not see her. He was shouting for his sword and crossbow.

The noise receded as she moved deeper into the castle, never daring to look back for fear that Joffrey might be watching... or worse, following. The serpentine steps twisted ahead, striped by bars of flickering light from the narrow windows above. Sansa was panting by the time she reached the top. She ran down a shadowy colonnade and pressed herself against a wall to catch her breath. When something brushed against her leg, she almost jumped out of her skin, but it was only a cat, a ragged black tom with a chewed-off ear. The creature spit at her and leapt away.

By the time she reached the godswood, the noises had faded to a faint rattle of steel and a distant shouting. Sansa pulled her cloak tighter. The air was rich with the smells of earth and leaf. *Lady would have liked this place*, she thought. There was something wild about a godswood; even here, in the heart of the castle at the heart of the city, you could feel the old gods watching with a thousand unseen eyes.

Sansa had favored her mother's gods over her father's. She loved the statues, the pictures in leaded glass, the fragrance of burning incense, the septons with their robes and crystals, the magical play of the rainbows over altars inlaid with mother-of-pearl and onyx and lapis lazuli. Yet she could not deny that the godswood had a certain power too. Especially by night. *Help me*, she prayed, *send me a friend, a true knight to champion me...*

She moved from tree to tree, feeling the roughness of the bark beneath her fingers. Leaves brushed at her cheeks. Had she come too late? He would not have left so soon, would he? Or had he even been here? Dare she risk calling out? It seemed so hushed and still here...

"I feared you would not come, child."

Sansa whirled. A man stepped out of the shadows, heavysset, thick of neck, shambling. He wore a dark grey robe with the cowl pulled forward, but when a thin sliver of moonlight touched his cheek, she knew him at once by the blotchy skin and web of broken veins beneath. "Ser Dontos," she breathed, heartbroken. "Was it you?"

"Yes, my lady." When he moved closer, she could smell the sour stench of wine on his breath. "Me." He reached out a hand.

Sansa shrank back. “*Don’t!*” She slid her hand under her cloak, to her hidden knife. “What... what do you want with me?”

“Only to help you,” Dontos said, “as you helped me.”

“You’re drunk, aren’t you?”

“Only one cup of wine, to help my courage. If they catch me now, they’ll strip the skin off my back.”

*And what will they do to me?* Sansa found herself thinking of Lady again. She could smell out falsehood, she *could*, but she was dead, Father had killed her, on account of Arya. She drew the knife and held it before her with both hands.

“Are you going to stab me?” Dontos asked.

“I will,” she said. “Tell me who sent you.”

“No one, sweet lady. I swear it on my honor as a knight.”

“A knight?” Joffrey had decreed that he was to be a knight no longer, only a fool, lower even than Moon Boy. “I prayed to the gods for a knight to come save me,” she said. “I prayed and prayed. Why would they send me a drunken old fool?”

“I deserve that, though... I know it’s queer, but... all those years I was a knight, I was truly a fool, and now that I am a fool I think... I think I may find it in me to be a knight again, sweet lady. And all because of you... your grace, your courage. You saved me, not only from Joffrey, but from myself.” His voice dropped. “The singers say there was another fool once who was the greatest knight of all...”

“*Florian*,” Sansa whispered. A shiver went through her.

“Sweet lady, I would be your Florian,” Dontos said humbly, falling to his knees before her.

Slowly, Sansa lowered the knife. Her head seemed terribly light, as if she were floating. *This is madness, to trust myself to this drunkard, but if I turn away will the chance ever come again?* “How... how would you do it? Get me away?”

Ser Dontos raised his face to her. "Taking you from the castle, that will be the hardest. Once you're out, there are ships that would take you home. I'd need to find the coin and make the arrangements, that's all."

"Could we go now?" she asked, hardly daring to hope.

"This very night? No, my lady, I fear not. First I must find a sure way to get you from the castle when the hour is ripe. It will not be easy, nor quick. They watch me as well." He licked his lips nervously. "Will you put away your blade?"

Sansa slipped the knife beneath her cloak. "Rise, ser."

"Thank you, sweet lady." Ser Dontos lurched clumsily to his feet, and brushed earth and leaves from his knees. "Your lord father was as true a man as the realm has ever known, but I stood by and let them slay him. I said nothing, did nothing... and yet, when Joffrey would have slain me, you spoke up. Lady, I have never been a hero, no Ryam Redwyne or Barristan the Bold. I've won no tourneys, no renown in war... but I was a knight once, and you have helped me remember what that meant. My life is a poor thing, but it is yours." Ser Dontos placed a hand on the gnarled bole of the heart tree. He was shaking, she saw. "I vow, with your father's gods as witness, that I shall send you home."

*He swore.* A solemn oath, before the gods. "Then... I will put myself in your hands, ser. But how will I know, when it is time to go? Will you send me another note?"

Ser Dontos glanced about anxiously. "The risk is too great. You must come here, to the godswood. As often as you can. This is the safest place. The *only* safe place. Nowhere else. Not in your chambers nor mine nor on the steps nor in the yard, even if it seems we are alone. The stones have ears in the Red Keep, and only here may we talk freely."

"Only here," Sansa said. "I'll remember."

"And if I should seem cruel or mocking or indifferent when men are watching, forgive me, child. I have a role to play, and you must do the same. One misstep and our heads will adorn the walls as did your father's."

She nodded. "I understand."

“You will need to be brave and strong... and patient, patient above all.”

“I will be,” she promised, “but... please... make it as soon as you can. I’m afraid...”

“So am I,” Ser Dontos said, smiling wanly. “And now you must go, before you are missed.”

“You will not come with me?”

“Better if we are never seen together.”

Nodding, Sansa took a step... then spun back, nervous, and softly laid a kiss on his cheek, her eyes closed. “My Florian,” she whispered. “The gods heard my prayer.”

She flew along the river walk, past the small kitchen, and through the pig yard, her hurried footsteps lost beneath the squealing of the hogs in their pens. *Home*, she thought, *home, he is going to take me home, he’ll keep me safe, my Florian*. The songs about Florian and Jonquil were her very favorites. *Florian was homely too, though not so old*.

She was racing headlong down the serpentine steps when a man lurched out of a hidden doorway. Sansa caromed into him and lost her balance. Iron fingers caught her by the wrist before she could fall, and a deep voice rasped at her. “It’s a long roll down the serpentine, little bird. Want to kill us both?” His laughter was rough as a saw on stone. “Maybe you do.”

*The Hound*. “No, my lord, pardons, I’d never.” Sansa averted her eyes but it was too late, he’d seen her face. “Please, you’re hurting me.” She tried to wriggle free.

“And what’s Joff’s little bird doing flying down the serpentine in the black of night?” When she did not answer, he shook her. “*Where were you?*”

“The g-g-godswood, my lord,” she said, not daring to lie. “Praying... praying for my father, and... for the king, praying that he’d not be hurt.”

“Think I’m so drunk that I’d believe *that*?” He let go his grip on her arm, swaying slightly as he stood, stripes of light and darkness falling across his terrible burnt face. “You look almost a woman... face, teats, and

you're taller too, almost... ah, you're still a stupid little bird, aren't you? Singing all the songs they taught you... sing me a song, why don't you? Go on. Sing to me. Some song about knights and fair maids. You like knights, don't you?"

He was scaring her. "T-true knights, my lord."

"*True* knights," he mocked. "And I'm no lord, no more than I'm a knight. Do I need to beat that into you?" Clegane reeled and almost fell. "*Gods*," he swore, "too much wine. Do you like wine, little bird? *True* wine? A flagon of sour red, dark as blood, all a man needs. Or a woman." He laughed, shook his head. "Drunk as a dog, damn me. You come now. Back to your cage, little bird. I'll take you there. Keep you safe for the king." The Hound gave her a push, oddly gentle, and followed her down the steps. By the time they reached the bottom, he had lapsed back into a brooding silence, as if he had forgotten she was there.

When they reached Maegor's Holdfast, she was alarmed to see that it was Ser Boros Blount who now held the bridge. His high white helm turned stiffly at the sound of their footsteps. Sansa flinched away from his gaze. Ser Boros was the worst of the Kingsguard, an ugly man with a foul temper, all scowls and jowls.

"That one is nothing to fear, girl." The Hound laid a heavy hand on her shoulder. "Paint stripes on a toad, he does not become a tiger."

Ser Boros lifted his visor. "Ser, where—"

"Fuck your *ser*, Boros. You're the knight, not me. I'm the king's dog, remember? "

"The king was looking for his dog earlier."

"The dog was drinking. It was your night to shield him, ser. You and my other *brothers*."

Ser Boros turned to Sansa. "How is it you are not in your chambers at this hour, lady?"

"I went to the godswood to pray for the safety of the king." The lie sounded better this time, almost true.



“You expect her to sleep with all the noise?” Clegane said. “What was the trouble?”

“Fools at the gate,” Ser Boros admitted. “Some loose tongues spread tales of the preparations for Tyrek’s wedding feast, and these wretches got it in their heads they should be feasted too. His Grace led a sortie and sent them scurrying.”

“A brave boy,” Clegane said, mouth twitching.

*Let us see how brave he is when he faces my brother,* Sansa thought. The Hound escorted her across the drawbridge. As they were winding their way up the steps, she said, “Why do you let people call you a dog? You won’t let *anyone* call you a knight.”

“I like dogs better than knights. My father’s father was kennelmaster at the Rock. One autumn year, Lord Tytos came between a lioness and her prey. The lioness didn’t give a shit that she was Lannister’s own sigil. Bitch tore into my lord’s horse and would have done for my lord too, but my grandfather came up with the hounds. Three of his dogs died running her off. My grandfather lost a leg, so Lannister paid him for it with lands and a towerhouse, and took his son to squire. The three dogs on our banner are the three that died, in the yellow of autumn grass. A hound will die for you, but never lie to you. And he’ll look you straight in the face.” He cupped her under the jaw, raising her chin, his fingers pinching her painfully. “And that’s more than little birds can do, isn’t it? I never got my song.”

“I... I know a song about Florian and Jonquil.”

“Florian and Jonquil? A fool and his cunt. Spare me. But one day I’ll have a song from you, whether you will it or no.”

“I will sing it for you gladly.”

Sandor Clegane snorted. “Pretty thing, and such a bad liar. A dog can smell a lie, you know. Look around you, and take a good whiff. They’re all liars here... and every one better than you.”