



## SAMWELL

**H**e sucks harder than mine.” Gilly stroked the babe’s head as she held him to her nipple.

“He’s hungry,” said the blonde woman Val, the one the black brothers called the wildling princess. “He’s lived on goats’ milk up to now, and potions from that blind maester.”

The boy did not have a name yet, no more than Gilly’s did. That was the wildling way. Not even Mance Rayder’s son would get a name till his third year, it would seem, though Sam had heard the brothers calling him “the little prince” and “born-in-battle.”

He watched the child nurse at Gilly’s breast, and then he watched Jon watch. *Jon is smiling.* A sad smile, still, but definitely a smile of sorts. Sam was glad to see it. *It is the first time I’ve seen him smile since I got back.*

They had walked from the Nightfort to Deep Lake, and from Deep Lake to Queensgate, following a narrow track from one castle to the next, never out of sight of the Wall. A day and a half from Castle Black, as they trudged along on callused feet, Gilly heard horses behind them, and turned to see a column of black riders coming from the west. “My brothers,” Sam assured her. “No one uses this road but the Night’s Watch.” It had turned out to be Ser Denys Mallister from the Shadow Tower, along with the wounded Bowen Marsh and the survivors from the fight at the Bridge of Skulls.

When Sam saw Dywen, Giant, and Dolorous Edd Tollett, he broke down and wept.

It was from them that he learned about the battle beneath the Wall. “Stannis landed his knights at Eastwatch, and Cotter Pyke led him along the ranger’s roads, to take the wildlings unawares,” Giant told him. “He smashed them. Mance Rayder was taken captive, a thousand of his best slain, including Harma Dogshead. The rest scattered like leaves before a storm, we heard.” *The gods are good*, Sam thought. If he had not gotten lost as he made his way south from Craster’s Keep, he and Gilly might have walked right into the battle . . . or into Mance Rayder’s camp, at the very least. That might have been well enough for Gilly and the boy, but not for him. Sam had heard all the stories about what wildlings did with captured crows. He shuddered.

Nothing that his brothers told him prepared him for what he found at Castle Black, however. The common hall had burned to the ground and the great wooden stair was a mound of broken ice and scorched timbers. Donal Noye was dead, along with Rast, Deaf Dick, Red Alyn, and so many more, yet the castle was more crowded than Sam had ever seen; not with black brothers, but with the king’s soldiers, more than a thousand of them. There was a king in the King’s Tower for the first time in living memory, and banners flew from the Lance, Hardin’s Tower, the Grey Keep, the Shieldhall, and other buildings that had stood empty and abandoned for long years. “The big one, the gold with the black stag, that’s the royal standard of House Baratheon,” he told Gilly, who had never seen banners before. “The fox-and-flowers is House Florent. The turtle is Estermont, the swordfish is Bar Emmon, and the crossed trumpets are for Wensington.”

“They’re all bright as flowers.” Gilly pointed. “I like those yellow ones, with the fire. Look, and some of the fighters have the same thing on their blouses.”

“A fiery heart. I don’t know whose sigil that is.”

He found out soon enough. “*Queen’s men*,” Pyp told him—after he let out a whoop, and shouted, “Run and bar the doors, lads, it’s Sam the Slayer come back from the grave,” while Grenn was hugging Sam so hard he thought his ribs might break—“but best you don’t go asking where the

queen is. Stannis left her at Eastwatch, with their daughter and his fleet. He brought no woman but the red one.”

“The red one?” said Sam uncertainly.

“Melisandre of Asshai,” said Grenn. “The king’s sorceress. They say she burned a man alive at Dragonstone so Stannis would have favorable winds for his voyage north. She rode beside him in the battle too, and gave him his magic sword. Lightbringer, they call it. Wait till you see it. It glows like it had a piece of sun inside it.” He looked at Sam again and grinned a big helpless stupid grin. “I still can’t believe you’re here.”

Jon Snow had smiled to see him too, but it was a tired smile, like the one he wore now. “You made it back after all,” he said. “And brought Gilly out as well. You’ve done well, Sam.”

Jon had done more than well himself, to hear Grenn tell it. Yet even capturing the Horn of Winter and a wildling prince had not been enough for Ser Alliser Thorne and his friends, who still named him turncloak. Though Maester Aemon said his wound was healing well, Jon bore other scars, deeper than the ones around his eye. *He grieves for his wildling girl, and for his brothers.*

“It’s strange,” he said to Sam. “Craster had no love for Mance, nor Mance for Craster, but now Craster’s daughter is feeding Mance’s son.”

“I have the milk,” Gilly said, her voice soft and shy. “Mine takes only a little. He’s not so greedy as this one.”

The wildling woman Val turned to face them. “I’ve heard the queen’s men saying that the red woman means to give Mance to the fire, as soon as he is strong enough.”

Jon gave her a weary look. “Mance is a deserter from the Night’s Watch. The penalty for that is death. If the Watch had taken him, he would have been hanged by now, but he’s the king’s captive, and no one knows the king’s mind but the red woman.”

“I want to see him,” Val said. “I want to show him his son. He deserves that much, before you kill him.”

Sam tried to explain. “No one is permitted to see him but Maester Aemon, my lady.”

“If it were in my power, Mance could hold his son.” Jon’s smile was gone. “I’m sorry, Val.” He turned away. “Sam and I have duties to return to. Well, Sam does, anyway. We’ll ask about your seeing Mance. That’s all I can promise.”

Sam lingered long enough to give Gilly’s hand a squeeze and promise to return again after supper. Then he hurried after. There were guards outside the door, queen’s men with spears. Jon was halfway down the steps, but he waited when he heard Sam puffing after him. “You’re more than fond of Gilly, aren’t you?”

Sam reddened. “Gilly’s good. She’s good and kind.” He was glad that his long nightmare was done, glad to be back with his brothers at Castle Black . . . but some nights, alone in his cell, he thought of how warm Gilly had been when they’d curled up beneath the furs with the babe between them. “She . . . she made me braver, Jon. Not *brave*, but . . . braver.”

“You know you cannot keep her,” Jon said gently, “no more than I could stay with Ygritte. You said the words, Sam, the same as I did. The same as all of us.”

“I know. Gilly said she’d be a wife to me, but . . . I told her about the words, and what they meant. I don’t know if that made her sad or glad, but I told her.” He swallowed nervously and said, “Jon, could there be honor in a lie, if it were told for a . . . a good purpose?”

“It would depend on the lie and the purpose, I suppose.” Jon looked at Sam. “I wouldn’t advise it. You’re not made to lie, Sam. You blush and squeak and stammer.”

“I do,” said Sam, “but I could lie in a letter. I’m better with a quill in hand. I had a . . . a thought. When things are more settled here, I thought maybe the best thing for Gilly . . . I thought I might send her to Horn Hill. To my mother and sisters and my . . . my f-f-father. If Gilly were to say the babe was m-mine . . .” He was blushing again. “My mother would want him, I know. She would find some place for Gilly, some kind of service, it wouldn’t be as hard as serving Craster. And Lord R-Randyll, he . . . he would never *say* so, but he might be pleased to believe I got a bastard on some wildling girl. At least it would prove I was man enough to lie with a woman and father a child. He told me once that I was sure to die a maiden,

that no woman would ever . . . you know . . . Jon, if I did this, wrote this lie . . . would that be a good thing? The life the boy would have . . .”

“Growing up a bastard in his grandfather’s castle?” Jon shrugged. “That depends in great part on your father, and what sort of boy this is. If he takes after you . . .”

“He won’t. Craster’s his real father. You saw him, he was hard as an old tree stump, and Gilly is stronger than she looks.”

“If the boy shows any skill with sword or lance, he should have a place with your father’s household guard at the least,” Jon said. “It’s not unknown for bastards to be trained as squires and raised to knighthood. But you’d best be sure Gilly can play this game convincingly. From what you’ve told me of Lord Randyll, I doubt he would take kindly to being deceived.”

More guards were posted on the steps outside the tower. These were king’s men, though; Sam had quickly learned the difference. The king’s men were as earthy and impious as any other soldiers, but the queen’s men were fervid in their devotion to Melisandre of Asshai and her Lord of Light. “Are you going to the practice yard again?” Sam asked as they crossed the yard. “Is it wise to train so hard before your leg’s done healing?”

Jon shrugged. “What else is there for me to do? Marsh has removed me from duty, for fear that I’m still a turncloak.”

“It’s only a few who believe that,” Sam assured him. “Ser Alliser and his friends. Most of the brothers know better. King Stannis knows as well, I’ll wager. You brought him the Horn of Winter and captured Mance Rayder’s son.”

“All I did was protect Val and the babe against looters when the wildlings fled, and keep them there until the rangers found us. I never *captured* anyone. King Stannis keeps his men well in hand, that’s plain. He lets them plunder some, but I’ve only heard of three wildling women being raped, and the men who did it have all been gelded. I suppose I should have been killing the free folk as they ran. Ser Alliser has been putting it about that the only time I bared my sword was to defend our foes. I failed to kill Mance Rayder because I was in league with him, he says.”

“That’s only Ser Alliser,” said Sam. “Everyone knows the sort of man he is.” With his noble birth, his knighthood, and his long years in the Watch,

Ser Alliser Thorne might have been a strong challenger for the Lord Commander's title, but almost all the men he'd trained during his years as master-at-arms despised him. His name had been offered, of course, but after running a weak sixth on the first day and actually *losing* votes on the second, Thorne had withdrawn to support Lord Janos Slynt.

"What everyone knows is that Ser Alliser is a knight from a noble line, and trueborn, while I'm the bastard who killed Qhorin Halfhand and bedded with a spearwife. The *warg*, I've heard them call me. How can I be a warg without a wolf, I ask you?" His mouth twisted. "I don't even dream of Ghost anymore. All my dreams are of the crypts, of the stone kings on their thrones. Sometimes I hear Robb's voice, and my father's, as if they were at a feast. But there's a wall between us, and I know that no place has been set for me."

*The living have no place at the feasts of the dead.* It tore the heart from Sam to hold his silence then. *Bran's not dead, Jon*, he wanted to stay. *He's with friends, and they're going north on a giant elk to find a three-eyed crow in the depths of the haunted forest.* It sounded so mad that there were times Sam Tarly thought he must have dreamt it all, conjured it whole from fever and fear and hunger . . . but he would have blurted it out anyway, if he had not given his word.

Three times he had sworn to keep the secret; once to Bran himself, once to that strange boy Jojen Reed, and last of all to Coldhands. "The world believes the boy is dead," his rescuer had said as they parted. "Let his bones lie undisturbed. We want no seekers coming after us. Swear it, Samwell of the Night's Watch. Swear it for the life you owe me."

Miserable, Sam shifted his weight and said, "Lord Janos will never be chosen Lord Commander." It was the best comfort he had to offer Jon, the only comfort. "That won't happen."

"Sam, you're a sweet fool. Open your eyes. It's been happening for days." Jon pushed his hair back out of his eyes and said, "I may know nothing, but I know that. Now pray excuse me, I need to hit someone very hard with a sword."

There was naught that Sam could do but watch him stride off toward the armory and the practice yard. That was where Jon Snow spent most of his

waking hours. With Ser Endrew dead and Ser Alliser disinterested, Castle Black had no master-at-arms, so Jon had taken it on himself to work with some of the rawer recruits; Satin, Horse, Hop-Robin with his clubfoot, Arron and Emrick. And when they had duties, he would train alone for hours with sword and shield and spear, or match himself against anyone who cared to take him on.

*Sam, you're a sweet fool*, he could hear Jon saying, all the way back to the maester's keep. *Open your eyes. It's been happening for days*. Could he be right? A man needed the votes of two-thirds of the Sworn Brothers to become the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, and after nine days and nine votes no one was even close to that. Lord Janos *had* been gaining, true, creeping up past first Bowen Marsh and then Othell Yarwyck, but he was still well behind Ser Denys Mallister of the Shadow Tower and Cotter Pyke of Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. *One of them will be the new Lord Commander, surely*, Sam told himself.

Stannis had posted guards outside the maester's door too. Within, the rooms were hot and crowded with the wounded from the battle; black brothers, king's men, and queen's men, all three. Clydas was shuffling amongst them with flagons of goats' milk and dreamwine, but Maester Aemon had not yet returned from his morning call on Mance Rayder. Sam hung his cloak upon a peg and went to lend a hand. But even as he fetched and poured and changed dressings, Jon's words nagged at him. *Sam, you're a sweet fool. Open your eyes. It's been happening for days*.

It was a good hour before he could excuse himself to feed the ravens. On the way up to the rookery, he stopped to check the tally he had made of last night's count. At the start of the choosing, more than thirty names had been offered, but most had withdrawn once it became clear they could not win. Seven remained as of last night. Ser Denys Mallister had collected two hundred and thirteen tokens, Cotter Pyke one hundred and eighty-seven, Lord Slynt seventy-four, Othell Yarwyck sixty, Bowen Marsh forty-nine, Three-Finger Hobb five, and Dolorous Edd Tollett one. *Pyp and his stupid japes*. Sam shuffled through the earlier counts. Ser Denys, Cotter Pyke, and Bowen Marsh had all been falling since the third day, Othell Yarwyck since the sixth. Only Lord Janos Slynt was climbing, day after day after day.

He could hear the birds *quorking* in the rookery, so he put the papers away and climbed the steps to feed them. Three more ravens had come in, he saw with pleasure. “*Snow,*” they cried at him. “*Snow, snow, snow.*” He had taught them that. Even with the newcomers, the ravenry seemed dismally empty. Few of the birds that Aemon had sent off had returned as yet. *One reached Stannis, though. One found Dragonstone, and a king who still cared.* A thousand leagues south, Sam knew, his father had joined House Tully to the cause of the boy on the Iron Throne, but neither King Joffrey nor little King Tommen had bestirred himself when the Watch cried out for help. *What good is a king who will not defend his realm?* he thought angrily, remembering the night on the Fist of the First Men and the terrible trek to Craster’s Keep through darkness, fear, and falling snow. The queen’s men made him uneasy, it was true, but at least they had *come*.

That night at supper Sam looked for Jon Snow, but did not see him anywhere in the cavernous stone vault where the brothers now took their meals. He finally took a place on the bench near his other friends. Pyp was telling Dolorous Edd about the contest they’d had to see which of the straw soldiers could collect the most wildling arrows. “You were leading most of the way, but Watt of Long Lake got three in the last day and passed you.”

“I never win anything,” Dolorous Edd complained. “The gods always smiled on Watt, though. When the wildlings knocked him off the Bridge of Skulls, somehow he landed in a nice deep pool of water. How lucky was that, missing all those rocks?”

“Was it a long fall?” Grenn wanted to know. “Did landing in the pool of water save his life?”

“No,” said Dolorous Edd. “He was dead already, from that axe in his head. Still, it was pretty lucky, missing the rocks.”

Three-Finger Hobb had promised the brothers roast haunch of mammoth that night, maybe in hopes of cadging a few more votes. *If that was his notion, he should have found a younger mammoth,* Sam thought, as he pulled a string of gristle out from between his teeth. Sighing, he pushed the food away.

There would be another vote shortly, and the tensions in the air were thicker than the smoke. Cotter Pyke sat by the fire, surrounded by rangers



from Eastwatch. Ser Denys Mallister was near the door with a smaller group of Shadow Tower men. *Janos Slynt has the best place*, Sam realized, *halfway between the flames and the drafts*. He was alarmed to see Bowen Marsh beside him, wan-faced and haggard, his head still wrapped in linen, but listening to all that Lord Janos had to say. When he pointed that out to his friends, Pyp said, “And look down there, that’s Ser Alliser whispering with Othell Yarwyck.”

After the meal Maester Aemon rose to ask if any of the brothers wished to speak before they cast their tokens. Dolorous Edd got up, stone-faced and glum as ever. “I just want to say to whoever is voting for me that I would certainly make an awful Lord Commander. But so would all these others.” He was followed by Bowen Marsh, who stood with one hand on Lord Slynt’s shoulder. “Brothers and friends, I am asking that my name be withdrawn from this choosing. My wound still troubles me, and the task is too large for me, I fear . . . but not for Lord Janos here, who commanded the gold cloaks of King’s Landing for many years. Let us all give him our support.”

Sam heard angry mutters from Cotter Pyke’s end of the room, and Ser Denys looked at one of his companions and shook his head. *It is too late, the damage is done*. He wondered where Jon was, and why he had stayed away.

Most of the brothers were unlettered, so by tradition the choosing was done by dropping tokens into a big potbellied iron kettle that Three-Finger Hobb and Owen the Oaf had dragged over from the kitchens. The barrels of tokens were off in a corner behind a heavy drape, so the voters could make their choice unseen. You were allowed to have a friend cast your token if you had duty, so some men took two tokens, three, or four, and Ser Denys and Cotter Pyke voted for the garrisons they had left behind.

When the hall was finally empty, save for them, Sam and Clydas upended the kettle in front of Maester Aemon. A cascade of seashells, stones, and copper pennies covered the table. Aemon’s wrinkled hands sorted with surprising speed, moving the shells here, the stones there, the pennies to one side, the occasional arrowhead, nail, and acorn off to themselves. Sam and Clydas counted the piles, each of them keeping his own tally.

Tonight it was Sam's turn to give his results first. "Two hundred and three for Ser Denys Mallister," he said. "One hundred and sixty-nine for Cotter Pyke. One hundred and thirty-seven for Lord Janos Slynt, seventy-two for Othell Yarwyck, five for Three-Finger Hobb, and two for Dolorous Edd."

"I had one hundred and sixty-eight for Pyke," Clydas said. "We are two votes short by my count, and one by Sam's."

"Sam's count is correct," said Maester Aemon. "Jon Snow did not cast a token. It makes no matter. No one is close."

Sam was more relieved than disappointed. Even with Bowen Marsh's support, Lord Janos was still only third. "Who are these five who keep voting for Three-Finger Hobb?" he wondered.

"Brothers who want him out of the kitchens?" said Clydas.

"Ser Denys is down ten votes since yesterday," Sam pointed out. "And Cotter Pyke is down almost twenty. That's not good."

"Not good for their hopes of becoming Lord Commander, certainly," said Maester Aemon. "Yet it may be good for the Night's Watch, in the end. That is not for us to say. Ten days is not unduly long. There was once a choosing that lasted near two years, some seven hundred votes. The brothers will come to a decision in their own time."

*Yes, Sam thought, but what decision?*

Later, over cups of watered wine in the privacy of Pyp's cell, Sam's tongue loosened and he found himself thinking aloud. "Cotter Pyke and Ser Denys Mallister have been losing ground, but between them they still have almost two-thirds," he told Pyp and Grenn. "Either one would be fine as Lord Commander. Someone needs to convince one of them to withdraw and support the other."

"Someone?" said Grenn, doubtfully. "What someone?"

"Grenn is so dumb he thinks *someone* might be him," said Pyp. "Maybe when someone is done with Pyke and Mallister, he should convince King Stannis to marry Queen Cersei too."

"King Stannis is married," Grenn objected.

"What am I going to do with him, Sam?" sighed Pyp.

“Cotter Pyke and Ser Denys don’t like each other much,” Grenn argued stubbornly. “They fight about *everything*.”

“Yes, but only because they have different ideas about what’s best for the Watch,” said Sam. “If we explained—”

“*We?*” said Pyp. “How did *someone* change to *we*? I’m the mummer’s monkey, remember? And Grenn is, well, *Grenn*.” He smiled at Sam, and wiggled his ears. “You, now . . . you’re a lord’s son, and the maester’s steward . . .”

“And Sam the Slayer,” said Grenn. “You slew an Other.”

“It was the *dragonglass* that killed it,” Sam told him for the hundredth time.

“A lord’s son, the maester’s steward, and Sam the Slayer,” Pyp mused. “*You* could talk to them, might be . . .”

“I could,” said Sam, sounding as gloomy as Dolorous Edd, “if I wasn’t too craven to face them.”