



SAMWELL

The king was angry. Sam saw that at once.

As the black brothers entered one by one and knelt before him, Stannis shoved away his breakfast of hardbread, salt beef, and boiled eggs, and eyed them coldly. Beside him, the red woman Melisandre looked as if she found the scene amusing.

I have no place here, Sam thought anxiously, when her red eyes fell upon him. *Someone had to help Maester Aemon up the steps. Don't look at me, I'm just the maester's steward.* The others were contenders for the Old Bear's command, all but Bowen Marsh, who had withdrawn from the contest but remained castellan and Lord Steward. Sam did not understand why Melisandre should seem so interested in *him*.

King Stannis kept the black brothers on their knees for an extraordinarily long time. "Rise," he said at last. Sam gave Maester Aemon his shoulder to help him back up.

The sound of Lord Janos Slynt clearing his throat broke the strained silence. "Your Grace, let me say how pleased we are to be summoned here. When I saw your banners from the Wall, I knew the realm was saved. 'There comes a man who ne'er forgets his duty,' I said to good Ser Alliser. 'A *strong* man, and a true king.' May I congratulate you on your victory over the savages? The singers will make much of it, I know—"

“The singers may do as they like,” Stannis snapped. “Spare me your fawning, Janos, it will not serve you.” He rose to his feet and frowned at them all. “Lady Melisandre tells me that you have not yet chosen a Lord Commander. I am displeased. How much longer must this folly last?”

“Sire,” said Bowen Marsh in a defensive tone, “no one has achieved two-thirds of the vote yet. It has only been ten days.”

“Nine days too long. I have captives to dispose of, a realm to order, a war to fight. Choices must be made, decisions that involve the Wall and the Night’s Watch. By rights your Lord Commander should have a voice in those decisions.”

“He should, yes,” said Janos Slynt. “But it must be said. We brothers are only simple soldiers. Soldiers, yes! And Your Grace will know that soldiers are most comfortable taking orders. They would benefit from your royal guidance, it seems to me. For the good of the realm. To help them choose wisely.”

The suggestion outraged some of the others. “Do you want the king to wipe our arses for us too?” said Cotter Pyke angrily. “The choice of a Lord Commander belongs to the Sworn Brothers, and to them alone,” insisted Ser Denys Mallister. “If they choose wisely they won’t be choosing me,” moaned Dolorous Edd. Maester Aemon, calm as always, said, “Your Grace, the Night’s Watch has been choosing its own leader since Brandon the Builder raised the Wall. Through Jeor Mormont we have had nine hundred and ninety-seven Lords Commander in unbroken succession, each chosen by the men he would lead, a tradition many thousands of years old.”

Stannis ground his teeth. “It is not my wish to tamper with your rights and traditions. As to *royal guidance*, Janos, if you mean that I ought to tell your brothers to choose you, have the courage to say so.”

That took Lord Janos aback. He smiled uncertainly and began to sweat, but Bowen Marsh beside him said, “Who better to command the black cloaks than a man who once commanded the gold, sire?”

“Any of you, I would think. Even the cook.” The look the king gave Slynt was cold. “Janos was hardly the first gold cloak ever to take a bribe, I grant you, but he may have been the first commander to fatten his purse by

selling places and promotions. By the end he must have had half the officers in the City Watch paying him part of their wages. Isn't that so, Janos?"

Slynt's neck was purpling. "Lies, all lies! A strong man makes enemies, Your Grace knows that, they whisper lies behind your back. Naught was ever proven, not a man came forward . . ."

"Two men who were prepared to come forward died suddenly on their rounds." Stannis narrowed his eyes. "Do not trifle with me, my lord. I saw the proof Jon Arryn laid before the small council. If I had been king you would have lost more than your office, I promise you, but Robert shrugged away your little lapses. 'They all steal,' I recall him saying. 'Better a thief we know than one we don't, the next man might be worse.' Lord Petyr's words in my brother's mouth, I'll warrant. Littlefinger had a nose for gold, and I'm certain he arranged matters so the crown profited as much from your corruption as you did yourself."

Lord Slynt's jowls were quivering, but before he could frame a further protest Maester Aemon said, "Your Grace, by law a man's past crimes and transgressions are wiped clean when he says his words and becomes a Sworn Brother of the Night's Watch."

"I am aware of that. If it happens that Lord Janos here is the best the Night's Watch can offer, I shall grit my teeth and choke him down. It is naught to me which man of you is chosen, so long as you *make a choice*. We have a war to fight."

"Your Grace," said Ser Denys Mallister, in tones of wary courtesy. "If you are speaking of the wildlings . . ."

"I am not. And you know that, ser."

"And you must know that whilst we are thankful for the aid you rendered us against Mance Rayder, we can offer you no help in your contest for the throne. The Night's Watch takes no part in the wars of the Seven Kingdoms. For eight thousand years—"

"I know your history, Ser Denys," the king said brusquely. "I give you my word, I shall not ask you to lift your swords against any of the rebels and usurpers who plague me. I do expect that you will continue to defend the Wall as you always have."

“We’ll defend the Wall to the last man,” said Cotter Pyke.

“Probably me,” said Dolorous Edd, in a resigned tone.

Stannis crossed his arms. “I shall require a few other things from you as well. Things that you may not be so quick to give. I want your castles. And I want the Gift.”

Those blunt words burst among the black brothers like a pot of wildfire tossed onto a brazier. Marsh, Mallister, and Pyke all tried to speak at once. King Stannis let them talk. When they were done, he said, “I have three times the men you do. I can take the lands if I wish, but I would prefer to do this legally, with your consent.”

“The Gift was given to the Night’s Watch in perpetuity, Your Grace,” Bowen Marsh insisted.

“Which means it cannot be lawfully seized, attained, or taken from you. But what was given once can be given again.”

“What will you do with the Gift?” demanded Cotter Pyke.

“Make better use of it than you have. As to the castles, Eastwatch, Castle Black, and the Shadow Tower shall remain yours. Garrison them as you always have, but I must take the others for *my* garrisons if we are to hold the Wall.”

“You do not have the men,” objected Bowen Marsh.

“Some of the abandoned castles are scarce more than ruins,” said Othell Yarwyck, the First Builder.

“Ruins can be rebuilt.”

“Rebuilt?” Yarwyck said. “But who will do the work?”

“That is my concern. I shall require a list from you, detailing the present state of every castle and what might be required to restore it. I mean to have them all garrisoned again within the year, and nightfires burning before their gates.”

“Nightfires?” Bowen Marsh gave Melisandre an uncertain look. “We’re to light nightfires now?”

“You are.” The woman rose in a swirl of scarlet silk, her long copper-bright hair tumbling about her shoulders. “Swords alone cannot hold this

darkness back. Only the light of the Lord can do that. Make no mistake, good sers and valiant brothers, the war we've come to fight is no petty squabble over lands and honors. Ours is a war for life itself, and should we fail the world dies with us."

The officers did not know how to take that, Sam could see. Bowen Marsh and Othell Yarwyck exchanged a doubtful look, Janos Slynt was fuming, and Three-Finger Hobb looked as though he would sooner be back chopping carrots. But all of them seemed surprised to hear Maester Aemon murmur, "It is the war for the dawn you speak of, my lady. But where is the prince that was promised?"

"He stands before you," Melisandre declared, "though you do not have the eyes to see. Stannis Baratheon is Azor Ahai come again, the warrior of fire. In him the prophecies are fulfilled. The red comet blazed across the sky to herald his coming, and he bears Lightbringer, the red sword of heroes."

Her words seemed to make the king desperately uncomfortable, Sam saw. Stannis ground his teeth, and said, "You called and I came, my lords. Now you must live with me, or die with me. Best get used to that." He made a brusque gesture. "That's all. Maester, stay a moment. And you, Tarly. The rest of you may go."

Me? Sam thought, stricken, as his brothers were bowing and making their way out. *What does he want with me?*

"You are the one that killed the creature in the snow," King Stannis said, when only the four of them remained.

"Sam the Slayer." Melisandre smiled.

Sam felt his face turning red. "No, my lady. Your Grace. I mean, I am, yes. I'm Samwell Tarly, yes."

"Your father is an able soldier," King Stannis said. "He defeated my brother once, at Ashford. Mace Tyrell has been pleased to claim the honors for that victory, but Lord Randyll had decided matters before Tyrell ever found the battlefield. He slew Lord Cafferren with that great Valyrian sword of his and sent his head to Aerys." The king rubbed his jaw with a finger. "You are not the sort of son I would expect such a man to have."

"I . . . I am not the sort of son he wanted, sire."

“If you had not taken the black, you would make a useful hostage,” Stannis mused.

“He has taken the black, sire,” Maester Aemon pointed out.

“I am well aware of that,” the king said. “I am aware of more than you know, Aemon Targaryen.”

The old man inclined his head. “I am only Aemon, sire. We give up our House names when we forge our maester’s chains.”

The king gave that a curt nod, as if to say he knew and did not care. “You slew this creature with an obsidian dagger, I am told,” he said to Sam.

“Y-yes, Your Grace. Jon Snow gave it to me.”

“Dragonglass.” The red woman’s laugh was music. “*Frozen fire*, in the tongue of old Valyria. Small wonder it is anathema to these cold children of the Other.”

“On Dragonstone, where I had my seat, there is much of this obsidian to be seen in the old tunnels beneath the mountain,” the king told Sam. “Chunks of it, boulders, ledges. The great part of it was black, as I recall, but there was some green as well, some red, even purple. I have sent word to Ser Rolland my castellan to begin mining it. I will not hold Dragonstone for very much longer, I fear, but perhaps the Lord of Light shall grant us enough *frozen fire* to arm ourselves against these creatures, before the castle falls.”

Sam cleared his throat. “S-sire. The dagger . . . the dragonglass only shattered when I tried to stab a wight.”

Melisandre smiled. “Necromancy animates these wights, yet they are still only dead flesh. Steel and fire will serve for them. The ones you call the Others are something more.”

“Demons made of snow and ice and cold,” said Stannis Baratheon. “The ancient enemy. The only enemy that matters.” He considered Sam again. “I am told that you and this wildling girl passed beneath the Wall, through some magic gate.”

“The B-black Gate,” Sam stammered. “Below the Nightfort.”

“The Nightfort is the largest and oldest of the castles on the Wall,” the king said. “That is where I intend to make my seat, whilst I fight this war.

You will show me this gate.”

“I,” said Sam, “I w-will, if . . .” *If it is still there. If it will open for a man not of the black. If . . .*

“You will,” snapped Stannis. “I shall tell you when.”

Maester Aemon smiled. “Your Grace,” he said, “before we go, I wonder if you would do us the great honor of showing us this wondrous blade we have all heard so very much of.”

“You want to see Lightbringer? A *blind* man?”

“Sam shall be my eyes.”

The king frowned. “Everyone else has seen the thing, why not a blind man?” His swordbelt and scabbard hung from a peg near the hearth. He took the belt down and drew the longsword out. Steel scraped against wood and leather, and radiance filled the solar; shimmering, shifting, a dance of gold and orange and red light, all the bright colors of fire.

“Tell me, Samwell.” Maester Aemon touched his arm.

“It *glows*,” said Sam, in a hushed voice. “As if it were on fire. There are no flames, but the steel is yellow and red and orange, all flashing and glimmering, like sunshine on water, but prettier. I wish you could see it, Maester.”

“I see it now, Sam. A sword full of sunlight. So lovely to behold.” The old man bowed stiffly. “Your Grace. My lady. This was most kind of you.”

When King Stannis sheathed the shining sword, the room seemed to grow very dark, despite the sunlight streaming through the window. “Very well, you’ve seen it. You may return to your duties now. And remember what I said. Your brothers will chose a Lord Commander tonight, or I shall make them wish they had.”

Maester Aemon was lost in thought as Sam helped him down the narrow turnpike stair. But as they were crossing the yard, he said, “I felt no heat. Did you, Sam?”

“Heat? From the sword?” He thought back. “The air around it was shimmering, the way it does above a hot brazier.”

“Yet you *felt* no heat, did you? And the scabbard that held this sword, it is wood and leather, yes? I heard the sound when His Grace drew out the blade. Was the leather scorched, Sam? Did the wood seem burnt or blackened?”

“No,” Sam admitted. “Not that I could see.”

Maester Aemon nodded. Back in his own chambers, he asked Sam to set a fire and help him to his chair beside the hearth. “It is hard to be so old,” he sighed as he settled onto the cushion. “And harder still to be so blind. I miss the sun. And books. I miss books most of all.” Aemon waved a hand. “I shall have no more need of you till the choosing.”

“The choosing . . . Maester, isn’t there something you could do? What the king said of Lord Janos . . .”

“I recall,” Maester Aemon said, “but Sam, I am a maester, chained and sworn. My duty is to counsel the Lord Commander, whoever he might be. It would not be proper for me to be seen to favor one contender over another.”

“I’m not a maester,” said Sam. “Could *I* do something?”

Aemon turned his blind white eyes toward Sam’s face, and smiled softly. “Why, I don’t know, Samwell. Could you?”

I could, Sam thought. *I have to*. He had to do it right away, too. If he hesitated he was certain to lose his courage. *I am a man of the Night’s Watch*, he reminded himself as he hurried across the yard. *I am. I can do this*. There had been a time when he had quaked and squeaked if Lord Mormont so much as looked at him, but that was the old Sam, before the Fist of the First Men and Craster’s Keep, before the wights and Coldhands and the Other on his dead horse. He was braver now. *Gilly made me braver*, he’d told Jon. It was true. It had to be true.

Cotter Pyke was the scarier of the two commanders, so Sam went to him first, while his courage was still hot. He found him in the old Shieldhall, dicing with three of his Eastwatch men and a red-headed sergeant who had come from Dragonstone with Stannis.

When Sam begged leave to speak with him, though, Pyke barked an order, and the others took the dice and coins and left them.

No man would ever call Cotter Pyke handsome, though the body under his studded brigantine and roughspun breeches was lean and hard and wiry strong. His eyes were small and close-set, his nose broken, his widow's peak as sharply pointed as the head of a spear. The pox had ravaged his face badly, and the beard he'd grown to hide the scars was thin and scraggly.

"Sam the Slayer!" he said, by way of greeting. "Are you sure you stabbed an Other, and not some child's snow knight?"

This isn't starting well. "It was the dragonglass that killed it, my lord," Sam explained feebly.

"Aye, no doubt. Well, out with it, Slayer. Did the maester send you to me?"

"The maester?" Sam swallowed. "I . . . I just left him, my lord." That wasn't truly a lie, but if Pyke chose to read it wrong, it might make him more inclined to listen. Sam took a deep breath and launched into his plea.

Pyke cut him off before he'd said twenty words. "You want me to kneel down and kiss the hem of Mallister's pretty cloak, is that it? I might have known. You lordlings all flock like sheep. Well, tell Aemon that he's wasted your breath and my time. If anyone withdraws it should be Mallister. The man's too bloody *old* for the job, maybe you ought to go tell him that. We choose him, and we're like to be back here in a year, choosing someone else."

"He's old," Sam agreed, "but he's well ex-experienced."

"At sitting in his tower and fussing over maps, maybe. What does he plan to do, write letters to the wights? He's a knight, well and good, but he's not a *fighter*, and I don't give a kettle of piss who he unhorsed in some fool tourney fifty years ago. The Halfhand fought all his battles, even an old blind man should see that. And we need a fighter more than ever with this bloody king on top of us. Today it's ruins and empty fields, well and good, but what will *His Grace* want come the morrow? You think *Mallister* has the belly to stand up to Stannis Baratheon and that red bitch?" He laughed. "I don't."

"You won't support him, then?" said Sam, dismayed.

“Are you Sam the Slayer or Deaf Dick? No, I won’t support him.” Pyke jabbed a finger at his face. “Understand this, boy. I don’t *want* the bloody job, and never did. I fight best with a deck beneath me, not a horse, and Castle Black is too far from the sea. But I’ll be buggered with a red-hot sword before I turn the Night’s Watch over to that preening eagle from the Shadow Tower. And you can run back to the old man and tell him I said so, if he asks.” He stood. “Get out of my sight.”

It took all the courage Sam had left in him to say, “W-what if there was someone else? Could you s-support someone else?”

“Who? Bowen Marsh? The man counts spoons. Othell’s a follower, does what he’s told and does it well, but no more’n that. Slynt . . . well, his men like him, I’ll grant you, and it would almost be worth it to stick him down the royal craw and see if Stannis gagged, but no. There’s too much of King’s Landing in that one. A toad grows wings and thinks he’s a bloody dragon.” Pyke laughed. “Who does that leave, Hobb? We could pick him, I suppose, only then who’s going to boil your mutton, Slayer? You look like a man who likes his bloody mutton.”

There was nothing more to say. Defeated, Sam could only stammer out his thanks and take his leave. *I will do better with Ser Denys*, he tried to tell himself as he walked through the castle. Ser Denys was a knight, highborn and well-spoken, and he had treated Sam most courteously when he’d found him and Gilly on the road. *Ser Denys will listen to me, he has to.*

The commander of the Shadow Tower had been born beneath the Booming Tower of Seagard, and looked every inch a Mallister. Sable trimmed his collar and accented the sleeves of his black velvet doublet. A silver eagle fastened its claws in the gathered folds of his cloak. His beard was white as snow, his hair was largely gone, and his face was deeply lined, it was true. Yet he still had grace in his movements and teeth in his mouth, and the years had dimmed neither his blue-grey eyes nor his courtesy.

“My lord of Tarly,” he said, when his steward brought Sam to him in the Lance, where the Shadow Tower men were staying. “I am pleased to see that you’ve recovered from your ordeal. Might I offer you a cup of wine? Your lady mother is a Florent, I recall. One day I must tell you about the time I unhorsed both of your grandfathers in the same tourney. Not today,

though, I know we have more pressing concerns. You come from Maester Aemon, to be sure. Does he have counsel to offer me?"

Sam took a sip of wine, and chose his words with care. "A maester chained and sworn . . . it would not be proper for him to be seen as having influenced the choice of Lord Commander . . ."

The old knight smiled. "Which is why he has not come to me himself. Yes, I quite understand, Samwell. Aemon and I are both old men, and wise in such matters. Say what you came to say."

The wine was sweet, and Ser Denys listened to Sam's plea with grave courtesy, unlike Cotter Pyke. But when he was done, the old knight shook his head. "I agree that it would be a dark day in our history if a king were to name our Lord Commander. This king especially. He is not like to keep his crown for long. But truly, Samwell, it ought to be Pyke who withdraws. I have more support than he does, and I am better suited to the office."

"You are," Sam agreed, "but Cotter Pyke might serve. It's said he has oft proved himself in battle." He did not mean to offend Ser Denys by praising his rival, but how else could he convince him to withdraw?

"Many of my brothers have proved themselves in battle. It is not enough. Some matters cannot be settled with a battleaxe. Maester Aemon will understand that, though Cotter Pyke does not. The Lord Commander of the Night's Watch is a *lord*, first and foremost. He must be able to treat with other lords . . . and with kings as well. He must be a man worthy of respect." Ser Denys leaned forward. "We are the sons of great lords, you and I. We know the importance of birth, blood, and that early training that can ne'er be replaced. I was a squire at twelve, a knight at eighteen, a champion at two-and-twenty. I have been the commander at the Shadow Tower for thirty-three years. Blood, birth, and training have fitted me to deal with kings. Pyke . . . well, did you hear him this morning, asking if His Grace would wipe his bottom? Samwell, it is not my habit to speak unkindly of my brothers, but let us be frank . . . the ironborn are a race of pirates and thieves, and Cotter Pyke was raping and murdering when he was still half a boy. Maester Harmune reads and writes his letters, and has for years. No, loath as I am to disappoint Maester Aemon, I could not in honor stand aside for Pyke of Eastwatch."

This time Sam was ready. “Might you for someone else? If it was someone more suitable?”

Ser Denys considered a moment. “I have never desired the honor for its own sake. At the last choosing, I stepped aside gratefully when Lord Mormont’s name was offered, just as I had for Lord Qorgyle at the choosing before that. So long as the Night’s Watch remains in good hands, I am content. But Bowen Marsh is not equal to the task, no more than Othell Yarwyck. And this so-called Lord of Harrenhal is a butcher’s whelp unjumped by the Lannisters. Small wonder he is venal and corrupt.”

“There’s another man,” Sam blurted out. “Lord Commander Mormont trusted him. So did Donal Noye and Qhorin Halfhand. Though he’s not as highly born as you, he comes from old blood. He was castle-born and castle-raised, and he learned sword and lance from a knight and letters from a maester of the Citadel. His father was a lord, and his brother a king.”

Ser Denys stroked his long white beard. “Mayhaps,” he said, after a long moment. “He is very young, but . . . mayhaps. He might serve, I grant you, though I would be more suitable. I have no doubt of that. I would be the wiser choice.”

Jon said there could be honor in a lie, if it were told for the right reason. Sam said, “If we do not choose a Lord Commander tonight, King Stannis means to name Cotter Pyke. He said as much to Maester Aemon this morning, after all of you had left.”

“I see.” Ser Denys rose. “I must think on this. Thank you, Samwell. And give my thanks to Maester Aemon as well.”

Sam was trembling by the time he left the Lance. *What have I done?* he thought. *What have I said?* If they caught him in his lie, they would . . . *what? Send me to the Wall? Rip my entrails out? Turn me into a wight?* Suddenly it all seemed absurd. How could he be so frightened of Cotter Pyke and Ser Denys Mallister, when he had seen a raven eating Small Paul’s face?

Pyke was not pleased by his return. “You again? Make it quick, you are starting to annoy me.”

“I only need a moment more,” Sam promised. “You won’t withdraw for Ser Denys, you said, but you might for someone else.”

“Who is it this time, Slayer? You?”

“No. A fighter. Donal Noye gave him the Wall when the wildlings came, and he was the Old Bear’s squire. The only thing is, he’s bastard-born.”

Cotter Pyke laughed. “Bloody hell. That would shove a spear up Mallister’s arse, wouldn’t it? Might be worth it just for that. How bad could the boy be?” He snorted. “I’d be better, though. I’m what’s needed, any fool can see that.”

“Any fool,” Sam agreed, “even me. But . . . well, I shouldn’t be telling you, but . . . King Stannis means to force Ser Denys on us, if we do not choose a man tonight. I heard him tell Maester Aemon that, after the rest of you were sent away.”