

## SAMWELL

The sea made Samwell Tarly greensick.

It was not all his fear of drowning, though that was surely some of it. It was the motion of the ship as well, the way the decks rolled beneath his feet. “I have a queasy belly,” he confessed to Dareon the day they sailed from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. The singer slapped him on the back and said, “With a belly big as yours, Slayer, that is a lot of quease.”

Sam tried to keep a brave face on him, for Gilly’s sake if little else. She had never seen the sea before. When they were struggling through the snows after fleeing Craster’s Keep, they had come on several lakes, and even those had been a wonder to her. As *Blackbird* slipped away from shore the girl began to tremble, and big salt tears rolled down her cheeks. “Gods be good,” Sam heard her whisper. Eastwatch vanished first, and the Wall grew smaller and smaller in the distance, until it finally disappeared. The wind was coming up by then. The sails were the faded grey of a black cloak that had been washed too often, and Gilly’s face was white with fear. “This is a good ship,” Sam tried to tell her. “You don’t have to be afraid.” But she only looked at him, held her baby tighter, and fled below.

Sam soon found himself clutching tightly to the gunwale and watching the sweep of the oars. The way they all moved together was somehow beautiful to behold, and better than looking at the water. Looking at the water only made him think of drowning. When he was small his lord father had tried to teach him how to swim by throwing him into the pond beneath Horn Hill. The water had gotten in his nose and in his mouth and in his lungs, and he coughed and wheezed for hours after Ser Hyle pulled him out. After that he never dared go in any deeper than his waist.

The Bay of Seals was a *lot* deeper than his waist, and not so friendly as that little fishpond below his father’s castle. Its waters were grey and green and choppy, and the wooded shore they followed was a snarl of rocks and whirlpools. Even if he could kick and crawl that far somehow, the waves were like to smash him up against some stone and break his head to pieces.

“Looking for mermaids, Slayer?” asked Dareon when he saw Sam staring off across the bay. Fair-haired and hazel-eyed, the handsome young singer out of Eastwatch looked more like some dark prince than a black brother.

“No.” Sam did not know what he was looking for, or what he was doing on this boat. *Going to the Citadel to forge a chain and be a maester, to be of better service to the Watch*, he told himself, but the thought just made him weary. He did not want to be a maester, with a heavy chain wrapped around his neck, cold against his skin. He did not want to leave his brothers, the only friends he’d ever had. And he certainly did not want to face the father who had sent him to the Wall to die.

It was different for the others. For them, the voyage would have a happy ending. Gilly would be safe at Horn Hill, with all the width of Westeros between her and the horrors she had known in the haunted forest. As a serving maid in his father’s castle, she would be warm and well fed, a small part of a great world she could never have dreamed of as Craster’s wife. She would watch her son grow up big and strong, and become a huntsman or a stablehand or a smith. If the boy showed any aptitude for arms, some knight might even take him as a squire.

Maester Aemon was going to a better place as well. It was pleasant to think of him spending whatever time remained him bathed by the warm breezes of Oldtown, conversing with his fellow maesters and sharing his wisdom with acolytes and novices. He had earned his rest, a hundred times over.

Even Dareon would be happier. He had always claimed to be innocent of the rape that sent him to the Wall, insisting that he belonged at some lord’s court, singing for his supper. Now he would have that chance. Jon had named him a recruiter, to take the place of a man named Yoren, who had vanished and was presumed dead. His task would be to travel the Seven Kingdoms, singing of the valor of the Night’s Watch, and from time to time returning to the Wall with new recruits.

The voyage would be long and rough, no one could deny that, but for the others at least there would be a happy end. That was Sam’s solace. *I am*

going for them, he told himself, for the Night's Watch, and for the happy ending. The longer he looked at the sea, though, the colder and deeper it appeared.

But *not* looking at the water was even worse, Sam realized in the cramped cabin beneath the sterncastle that the passengers were sharing. He tried to take his mind off the roiling in his stomach by talking with Gilly as she nursed her son. "This ship will take us as far as Braavos," he said. "We'll find another ship to carry us to Oldtown. I read a book about Braavos when I was small. The whole city is built in a lagoon on a hundred little islands, and they have a titan there, a stone man hundreds of feet high. They have boats instead of horses, and their mummers play out written stories instead of just making up the usual stupid farces. The food is very good too, especially the fish. They have all kinds of clams and eels and oysters, fresh from their lagoon. We ought to have a few days between ships. If we do, we can go and see a mummer show, and have some oysters."

He thought that would excite her. He could not have been more wrong. Gilly peered at him with flat, dull eyes, looking through some strands of unwashed hair. "If you want, m'lord."

"What do *you* want?" Sam asked her.

"Nothing." She turned away from him and moved her son from one breast to the other.

The motion of the boat was stirring up the eggs and bacon and fried bread that Sam had eaten before the ship set out. All at once he could not stand the cabin one more instant. He pushed himself back to his feet and clambered up the ladder to give his breakfast to the sea. The sickness came on Sam so strongly that he did not stop to gauge which way the wind was blowing, so he retched from the wrong rail and ended up spattering himself. Even so, he felt much better afterward... though not for long.

The ship was *Blackbird*, the largest of the Watch's galleys. *Storm Crow* and *Talon* were faster, Cotter Pyke told Maester Aemon back at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, but they were fighting ships, lean, swift birds of prey where the rowers sat on open decks. *Blackbird* was a better choice for the rough

waters of the narrow sea beyond Skagos. “There have been storms,” Pyke warned them. “Winter storms are worse, but autumn’s are more frequent.”

The first ten days were calm enough, as *Blackbird* crept across the Bay of Seals, never out of sight of land. It was cold when the wind was blowing, but there was something bracing about the salt smell in the air. Sam could hardly eat, and when he did force something down it did not stay down for long, but aside from that he did not do too badly. He tried to bolster Gilly’s courage and give her what cheer he could, but that proved hard. She would not come up on deck, no matter what he said, and seemed to prefer to huddle in the dark with her son. The babe liked the ship no more than his mother did, it seemed. When he was not squalling, he was retching up his mother’s milk. His bowels were loose and always moving, staining the furs that Gilly wrapped him in to keep him warm and filling the air with a brown stench. No matter how many tallow candles Sam lit, the smell of shit persisted.

It was more pleasant out in the open air, especially when Dareon was singing. The singer was known to *Blackbird*’s oarsmen, and would play for them as they rowed. He knew all their favorite songs: sad ones like “The Day They Hanged Black Robin,” “The Mermaid’s Lament,” and “Autumn of My Day,” rousing ones like “Iron Lances” and “Seven Swords for Seven Sons,” bawdy ones like “Milady’s Supper,” “Her Little Flower,” and “Meggett Was a Merry Maid, a Merry Maid Was She.” When he sang “The Bear and the Maiden Fair,” all the oarsmen joined in, and *Blackbird* seemed to fly across the water. Dareon had not been much of a swordsman, Sam knew from their days training under Alliser Thorne, but he had a beautiful voice. “Honey poured over thunder,” Maester Aemon had once called it. He played woodharp and fiddle too, and even wrote his own songs... though Sam did not think them very good. Still, it was good to sit and listen, though the chest was so hard and splintery that Sam was almost grateful for his fleshy buttocks. *Fat men take a cushion with them wherever they go*, he thought.

Maester Aemon preferred to spend his days on deck as well, huddled beneath a pile of furs and gazing out across the water. “What is he looking

at?” Dareon wondered one day. “For him it’s as dark up here as it is down in the cabin.”

The old man heard him. Though Aemon’s eyes had dimmed and gone dark, there was nothing wrong with his ears. “I was not born blind,” he reminded them. “When last I passed this way, I saw every rock and tree and whitecap, and watched the grey gulls flying in our wake. I was five-and-thirty and had been a maester of the chain for sixteen years. Egg wanted me to help him rule, but I knew my place was here. He sent me north aboard the *Golden Dragon*, and insisted that his friend Ser Duncan see me safe to Eastwatch. No recruit had arrived at the Wall with so much pomp since Nymeria sent the Watch six kings in golden fetters. Egg emptied out the dungeons too, so I would not need to say my vows alone. My honor guard, he called them. One was no less a man than Brynden Rivers. Later he was chosen lord commander.”

“Bloodraven?” said Dareon. “I know a song about him. ‘A Thousand Eyes, and One,’ it’s called. But I thought he lived a hundred years ago.”

“We all did. Once I was as young as you.” That seemed to make him sad. He coughed, and closed his eyes, and went to sleep, swaying in his furs whenever some wave rocked the ship.

Beneath grey skies they sailed, east and south and east again, as the Bay of Seals widened about them. The captain, a grizzled brother with a belly like a keg of ale, wore blacks so stained and faded that the crew called him Old Tattersalt. He seldom said a word. His mate made up for him, blistering the salt air with curses whenever the wind died or the oarsmen seemed to flag. They ate oaten porridge in the mornings, pease porridge in the afternoons, and salt beef, salt cod, and salt mutton at night, and washed it down with ale. Dareon sang, Sam retched, Gilly cried and nursed her babe, Maester Aemon slept and shivered, and the winds grew colder and more blustery with every passing day.

Even so, it was a better voyage than the last one Sam had taken. He had been no more than ten when he set sail on Lord Redwyne’s galleas, the *Arbor Queen*. Five times as large as *Blackbird* and magnificent to behold, she had three great burgundy sails and banks of oars that flashed gold and

white in the sunlight. The way they rose and fell as the ship departed Oldtown had made Sam hold his breath... but that was the last good memory he had of the Redwyne Straits. Then as now the sea had made him sick, to his lord father's disgust.

And when they reached the Arbor, things had gone from bad to worse. Lord Redwyne's twin sons had despised Sam on first sight. Every morn they found some fresh way to shame him in the practice yard. On the third day Horas Redwyne made him squeal like a pig when he begged for quarter. On the fifth his brother Hobber clad a kitchen girl in his own armor and let her beat Sam with a wooden sword until he began to cry. When she revealed herself, all the squires and pages and stableboys howled with laughter.

"The boy needs a bit of seasoning, that's all," his father had told Lord Redwyne that night, but Redwyne's fool rattled his rattle and replied, "Aye, a pinch of pepper, a few nice cloves, and an apple in his mouth." Thereafter, Lord Randyll forbade Sam to eat apples so long as they remained beneath Paxter Redwyne's roof. He had been seasick on their voyage home as well, but so relieved to be going that he almost welcomed the taste of vomit at the back of his throat. It was not until they were back at Horn Hill that his mother told Sam that his father had never meant for him to return. "Horas was to come with us in your place, whilst you remained on the Arbor as Lord Paxter's page and cupbearer. If you had pleased him, you would have been betrothed to his daughter." Sam could still recall the soft touch of his mother's hand as she washed the tears off his face with a bit of lace, dampened with her spit. "My poor Sam," she murmured. "My poor poor Sam."

It will be good to see her again, he thought, as he clung to Blackbird's rail and watched waves breaking on the stony shore. If she saw me in my blacks, it might even make her proud. "I am a man now, Mother," I could tell her, "a steward, and a man of the Night's Watch. My brothers call me Sam the Slayer sometimes." He would see his brother Dickon too, and his sisters. "See," I could tell them, "see, I was good for something after all."

If he went to Horn Hill, though, his father might be there.

The thought made his belly heave again. Sam bent over the gunwale and retched, but not into the wind. He had gone to the right rail this time. He was getting good at retching.

Or so he thought, until *Blackbird* left the land behind and struck east across the bay for the shores of Skagos.

The island sat at the mouth of the Bay of Seals, massive and mountainous, a stark and forbidding land peopled by savages. They lived in caves and grim mountain fastnesses, Sam had read, and rode great shaggy unicorns to war. *Skagos* meant “stone” in the Old Tongue. The Skagosi named themselves the stoneborn, but their fellow northmen called them Skaggs and liked them little. Only a hundred years ago Skagos had risen in rebellion. Their revolt had taken years to quell and claimed the life of the Lord of Winterfell and hundreds of his sworn swords. Some songs said the Skaggs were cannibals; supposedly their warriors ate the hearts and livers of the men they slew. In ancient days, the Skagosi had sailed to the nearby isle of Skane, seized its women, slaughtered its men, and ate them on a pebbled beach in a feast that lasted for a fortnight. Skane remained unpeopled to this day.

Dareon knew the songs as well. When the bleak grey peaks of Skagos rose up from the sea, he joined Sam at *Blackbird*’s prow, and said, “If the gods are good, we may catch a glimpse of a unicorn.”

“If the captain is good, we won’t come that close. The currents are treacherous around Skagos, and there are rocks that can crack a ship’s hull like an egg. But don’t you mention that to Gilly. She’s scared enough.”

“Her and that squalling whelp of hers. I don’t know which of them is noisier. The only time he ever stops crying is when she shoves a nipple in his mouth, and then *she* starts to sob.”

Sam had noticed that as well. “Maybe the babe is hurting her,” he said, feebly. “If his teeth are coming in...”

Dareon plucked at his lute with one finger, sending up a derisive note. “I’d heard that wildlings were braver than that.”

“She *is* brave,” Sam insisted, though even he had to admit that he had never seen Gilly in such a wretched state. Though she hid her face more oft than not and kept the cabin dark, he could see that her eyes were always red, her cheeks wet with tears. When he asked her what was wrong, though, she only shook her head, leaving him to find answers of his own. “The sea scares her, that’s all,” he told Dareon. “Before she came to the Wall, all she knew was Craster’s Keep and the woods around it. I don’t know that she went more than half a league from the place that she was born. She knows streams and rivers, but she had never seen a lake until we came on one, and the sea... the sea is a scary thing.”

“We’ve never been out of sight of land.”

“We will be.” Sam did not relish that part himself.

“Surely a little water does not frighten the Slayer.”

“No,” Sam lied, “not me. But Gilly... maybe if you played some lullabies for them, it would help the babe to sleep.”

Dareon’s mouth twisted in disgust. “Only if she shoves a plug up his arse. I cannot abide the smell.”

The next day the rains began, and the seas grew rougher. “We had best go below, where it’s dry,” Sam said to Aemon, but the old maester only smiled, and said, “The rain feels good against my face, Sam. It feels like tears. Let me stay a while longer, I pray you. It has been a long time since last I wept.”

If Maester Aemon meant to stay on deck, old and frail as he was, Sam had no choice but to do the same. He stayed beside the old man for nigh unto an hour, huddled in his cloak as a soft, steady rain soaked him to his skin. Aemon hardly seemed to feel it. He sighed and closed his eyes, and Sam moved closer to him, to shield him from the worst of the wind. *He will ask me to help him to the cabin soon, he told himself. He must.* But he never did, and finally thunder began to rumble in the distance, off to the east. “We *have* to get below,” Sam said, shivering. Maester Aemon did not reply. It was only then that Sam realized the old man had gone to sleep. “Maester,” he said, shaking him gently by one shoulder. “Maester Aemon, wake up.”



Aemon's blind white eyes came open. "Egg?" he said, as the rain streamed down his cheeks. "Egg, I dreamed that I was old."

Sam did not know what to do. He knelt and scooped the old man up and carried him below. No one had ever called him strong, and the rain had soaked through Maester Aemon's blacks and made him twice as heavy, but even so, he weighed no more than a child.

When he shoved into the cabin with Aemon in his arms, he found that Gilly had let all the candles gutter out. The babe was asleep and she was curled up in a corner, sobbing softly in the folds of the big black cloak that Sam had given her. "Help me," he said urgently. "Help me dry him off and get him warm."

She rose at once, and together they got the old maester out of his wet clothes and buried him beneath a pile of furs. His skin was damp and cold, though, clammy to the touch. "You get in with him," Sam told Gilly. "Hold him. Warm him with your body. We have to warm him up." She did that too, never saying a word, all the while still sniffing. "Where's Dareon?" asked Sam. "We'd all be warmer if we were together. He needs to be here too." He was headed back up top to find the singer when the deck rose up beneath him, then fell away beneath his feet. Gilly wailed, Sam slammed down hard and lost his legs, and the babe woke screaming.

The next roll of the ship came as he was struggling back to his feet. It threw Gilly into his arms, and the wildling girl clung to him so fiercely that Sam could hardly breathe. "Don't you be frightened," he told her. "This is just an adventure. One day you'll tell your son this tale." That only made her dig her nails into his arm. She shuddered, her whole body shaking with the violence of her sobs. *Whatever I say just makes her worse.* He held her tightly, uncomfortably aware of her breasts pressing up against him. As frightened as he was, somehow that was enough to make him stiff. *She'll feel it,* he thought, ashamed, but if she did, she gave no sign, only clung to him the harder.

The days ran together after that. They never saw the sun. The days were grey and the nights black, except when lightning lit the sky above the peaks of Skagos. All of them were starved yet none could eat. The captain

broached a cask of firewine to fortify the oarsmen. Sam tried a cup and sighed as hot snakes wriggled down his throat and through his chest. Dareon took a liking to the drink as well, and was seldom sober thereafter.

The sails went up, the sails came down, and one ripped free of the mast and flew away like a great grey bird. As *Blackbird* rounded the south coast of Skagos, they spotted the wreckage of a galley on the rocks. Some of her crew had washed up on the shore, and the rooks and crabs had gathered to pay them homage. “Too bloody close,” grumbled Old Tattersalt when he saw. “One good blow, and we’ll be breaking up aside them.” Exhausted as they were, his rowers bent to their oars again, and the ship clawed south toward the narrow sea, till Skagos dwindled to no more than a few dark shapes in the sky that might have been thunderheads, or the tops of tall black mountains, or both. After that, they had eight days and seven nights of clear, smooth sailing.

Then came more storms, worse than before.

Was it three storms, or only one, broken up by lulls? Sam never knew, though he tried desperately to care. “*What does it matter?*” Dareon screamed at him once, when all of them were huddled in the cabin. *It doesn’t*, Sam wanted to tell him, *but so long as I’m thinking about that I’m not thinking about drowning or being sick or Maester Aemon’s shivering.* “It doesn’t,” he managed to squeak, but the thunder drowned out all the rest of it, and the deck lurched and knocked him sideways. Gilly was sobbing. The babe was shrieking. And up top he could hear Old Tattersalt bellowing at his crew, the ragged captain who never spoke at all.

*I hate the sea*, Sam thought, *I hate the sea, I hate the sea, I hate the sea.* The next lightning flash was so bright it lit the cabin through the seams in the planking overhead. *This is a good sound ship, a good sound ship, a good ship*, he told himself. *It will not sink. I am not afraid.*

During one of the lulls between the gales, as Sam clung white-knuckled to the rail wanting desperately to retch, he heard some of the crew muttering that this was what came of bringing a woman aboard ship, and a wildling woman at that. “Fucked her own father,” Sam heard one man say, as the wind was rising once again. “Worse than whoring, that. Worse than

*anything*. We'll all drown unless we get rid of her, and that abomination that she whelped."

Sam dared not confront them. They were older men, hard and sinewy, their arms and shoulders thickened by years at the oars. But he made certain that his knife was sharp, and whenever Gilly left the cabin to make water, he went with her.

Even Dareon had no good to say about the wildling girl. Once, at Sam's urging, the singer played a lullaby to soothe the babe, but partway through the first verse Gilly began to sob inconsolably. "Seven bloody hells," Dareon snapped, "can't you even stop weeping long enough to hear a *song*?"

"Just play," Sam pleaded, "just sing the song for her."

"She doesn't need a song," said Dareon. "She needs a good spanking, or maybe a hard fuck. Get out of my way, Slayer." He shoved Sam aside and went from the cabin to find some solace in a cup of firewine and the rough brotherhood of the oars.

Sam was at his wit's end by then. He had almost gotten used to the smells, but between the storms and Gilly's sobbing he had not slept for days. "Isn't there something you can give her?" he asked Maester Aemon very softly, when he saw that the old man was awake. "Some herb or potion, so she won't be so afraid?"

"It is not fear you hear," the old man told him. "That is the sound of grief, and there is no potion for that. Let her tears run their course, Sam. You cannot stem the flow."

Sam had not understood. "She's going to a safe place. A *warm* place. Why should she be grieving?"

"Sam," the old man whispered, "you have two good eyes, and yet you do not see. She is a mother grieving for her child."

"He's greensick, that's all. We're all greensick. Once we make port in Braavos..."

"...the babe will still be Dalla's son, and not the child of her body."

It took Sam a moment to grasp what Aemon was suggesting. “That couldn’t... she wouldn’t... of course he’s hers. Gilly would never have left the Wall without her *son*. She loves him.”

“She nursed them both and loved them both,” said Aemon, “but not alike. No mother loves all her children the same, not even the Mother Above. Gilly did not leave the child willingly, I am certain. What threats the Lord Commander made, what promises, I can only guess... but threats and promises there surely were.”

“No. No, that’s wrong. Jon would never...”

“Jon would never. Lord Snow did. Sometimes there is no happy choice, Sam, only one less grievous than the others.”

*No happy choice.* Sam thought of all the trials that he and Gilly suffered, Craster’s Keep and the death of the Old Bear, snow and ice and freezing winds, days and days and days of walking, the wights at Whitetree, Coldhands and the tree of ravens, the Wall, the Wall, the Wall, the Black Gate beneath the earth. What had it all been for? *No happy choices and no happy endings.*

He wanted to scream. He wanted to howl and sob and shake and curl up in a little ball and whimper. He switched the babes, he told himself. He switched the babes to protect the little prince, to keep him away from Lady Melisandre’s fires, away from her red god. If she burns Gilly’s boy, who will care? No one but Gilly. He was only Craster’s whelp, an abomination born of incest, not the son of the King-beyond-the-Wall. He’s no good for a hostage, no good for a sacrifice, no good for anything, he doesn’t even have a name.

Wordless, Sam staggered up onto the deck to retch, but there was nothing in his belly to bring up. Night had come upon them, a strange still night such as they had not seen for many days. The sea was black as glass. At the oars, the rowers rested. One or two were sleeping where they sat. The wind was in the sails, and to the north Sam could even see a scattering of stars, and the red wanderer the free folk called the Thief. *That ought to be my star*, Sam thought miserably. *I helped to make Jon Lord Commander, and I brought him Gilly and the babe. There are no happy endings.*

“Slayer.” Dareon appeared beside him, oblivious to Sam’s pain. “A sweet night, for once. Look, the stars are coming out. We might even get a bit of moon. Might be the worst is done.”

“No.” Sam wiped his nose, and pointed south with a fat finger, toward the gathering darkness. “There,” he said. No sooner had he spoken than lightning flashed, sudden and silent and blinding bright. The distant clouds glowed for half a heartbeat, mountains heaped on mountains, purple and red and yellow, taller than the world. “The worst isn’t done. The worst is just beginning, and there are no happy endings.”

“Gods be good,” said Dareon, laughing. “Slayer, you are *such* a craven.”