

## SAMWELL

The *Cinnamon Wind* was a swan ship out of Tall Trees Town on the Summer Isles, where men were black, women were wanton, and even the gods were strange. She had no septon aboard her to lead them in the prayers of passing, so the task fell to Samwell Tarly, somewhere off the sun-scorched southern coast of Dorne.

Sam donned his blacks to say the words, though the afternoon was warm and muggy, with nary a breath of wind. “He was a good man,” he began... but as soon as he had said the words he knew that they were wrong. “No. He was a *great* man. A maester of the Citadel, chained and sworn, and Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch, ever faithful. When he was born they named him for a hero who had died too young, but though he lived a long long time, his own life was no less heroic. No man was wiser, or gentler, or kinder. At the Wall, a dozen lords commander came and went during his years of service, but he was always there to counsel them. He counseled kings as well. He could have been a king himself, but when they offered him the crown he told them they should give it to his younger brother. How many men would do that?” Sam felt the tears welling in his eyes, and knew he could not go on much longer. “He was the blood of the dragon, but now his fire has gone out. He was Aemon Targaryen. And now his watch is ended.”

“And now his watch is ended,” Gilly murmured after him, rocking the babe in her arms. Kojja Mo echoed her in the Common Tongue of Westeros, then repeated the words in the Summer Tongue for Xhondo and her father and the rest of the assembled crew. Sam hung his head and began to weep, his sobs so loud and wrenching that they made his whole body shake. Gilly came and stood beside him and let him cry upon her shoulder. There were tears in her eyes as well.

The air was moist and warm and dead calm, and the *Cinnamon Wind* was adrift upon a deep blue sea far beyond the sight of land. “Black Sam said good words,” Xhondo said. “Now we drink his life.” He shouted

something in the Summer Tongue, and a cask of spiced rum was rolled up onto the afterdeck and breached, so those on watch might down a cup in the memory of the old blind dragon. The crew had known him only a short while, but Summer Islanders revered the elderly and celebrated their dead.

Sam had never drunk rum before. The liquor was strange and heady; sweet at first, but with a fiery aftertaste that burned his tongue. He was tired, so tired. Every muscle he had was aching, and there were other aches in places where Sam hadn't known he had muscles. His knees were stiff, his hands covered with fresh new blisters and raw, sticky patches of skin where the old blisters had burst. Yet between them, rum and sadness seemed to wash his hurts away. "If only we could have gotten him to Oldtown, the archmaesters might have saved him," he told Gilly, as they sipped their rum on the *Cinnamon Wind*'s high forecastle. "The healers of the Citadel are the best in the Seven Kingdoms. For a while I thought... I hoped..."

On Braavos, it had seemed possible that Aemon might recover. Xhondo's talk of dragons had almost seemed to restore the old man to himself. That night he ate every bite Sam put before him. "No one ever looked for a girl," he said. "It was a prince that was promised, not a princess. Rhaegar, I thought... the smoke was from the fire that devoured Summerhall on the day of his birth, the salt from the tears shed for those who died. He shared my belief when he was young, but later he became persuaded that it was his own son who fulfilled the prophecy, for a comet had been seen above King's Landing on the night Aegon was conceived, and Rhaegar was certain the bleeding star had to be a comet. What fools we were, who thought ourselves so wise! The error crept in from the translation. Dragons are neither male nor female, Barth saw the truth of that, but now one and now the other, as changeable as flame. The language misled us all for a thousand years. *Daenerys* is the one, born amidst salt and smoke. The dragons prove it." Just talking of her seemed to make him stronger. "I must go to her. I *must*. Would that I was even ten years younger."

The old man had been so determined that he had even walked up the plank onto the *Cinnamon Wind* on his own two legs, after Sam made

arrangements for their passage. He had already given his sword and scabbard to Xhondo, to repay the big mate for the feathered cloak he'd ruined saving Sam from drowning. The only things of value that still remained to them were the books they had brought from the vaults of Castle Black. Sam parted with them glumly. "They were meant for the Citadel," he said, when Xhondo asked him what was wrong. When the mate translated those words, the captain laughed. "Quhuru Mo says the grey men will be having these books still," Xhondo told him, "only they will be buying them from Quhuru Mo. The maesters give good silver for books they are not having, and sometimes red and yellow gold."

The captain wanted Aemon's chain as well, but there Sam had refused. It was a great shame for any maester to surrender his chain, he had explained. Xhondo had to go over that part three times before Quhuru Mo accepted it. By the time the dealing was done, Sam was down to his boots and blacks and smallclothes, and the broken horn Jon Snow had found on the Fist of First Men. *I had no choice*, he told himself. *We could not stay on Braavos, and short of theft or beggary, there was no other way to pay for passage.* He would have counted it cheap at thrice the price if only they had gotten Maester Aemon safe to Oldtown.

Their passage south had been a stormy one, however, and every gale took its toll on the old man's strength and spirits. At Pentos he asked to be brought up onto deck so Sam might paint a picture of the city for him with words, but that was the last time he left the captain's bed. Soon after that, his wits began to wander once again. By the time the *Cinnamon Wind* swept past the Bleeding Tower into Tyrosh harbor, Aemon no longer spoke of trying to find a ship to take him east. Instead his talk turned back to Oldtown, and the archmaesters of the Citadel.

"You must tell them, Sam," he said. "The archmaesters. You must make them understand. The men who were at the Citadel when I was have been dead for fifty years. These others never knew me. My letters... in Oldtown, they must have read like the ravings of an old man whose wits had fled. You must convince them, where I could not. Tell them, Sam... tell them how it is upon the Wall... the wights and the white walkers, the creeping cold..."

“I will,” Sam promised. “I will add my voice to yours, maester. We will both tell them, the two of us together.”

“No,” the old man said. “It must be you. Tell them. The prophecy... my brother’s dream... Lady Melisandre has misread the signs. Stannis... Stannis has some of the dragon blood in him, yes. His brothers did as well. Rhaelle, Egg’s little girl, she was how they came by it... their father’s mother... she used to call me Uncle Maester when she was a little girl. I remembered that, so I allowed myself to hope... perhaps I wanted to... we all deceive ourselves, when we want to believe. Melisandre most of all, I think. The sword is wrong, she has to know that... light without heat... an empty glamor... the sword is *wrong*, and the false light can only lead us deeper into darkness, Sam. *Daenerys* is our hope. Tell them that, at the Citadel. Make them listen. They must send her a maester. Daenerys must be counseled, taught, *protected*. For all these years I’ve lingered, waiting, watching, and now that the day has dawned I am too old. I am dying, Sam.” Tears ran from his blind white eyes at that admission. “Death should hold no fear for a man as old as me, but it does. Isn’t that silly? It is always dark where I am, so why should I fear the darkness? Yet I cannot help but wonder what will follow, when the last warmth leaves my body. Will I feast forever in the Father’s golden hall as the septons say? Will I talk with Egg again, find Daeon whole and happy, hear my sisters singing to their children? What if the horselords have the truth of it? Will I ride through the night sky forever on a stallion made of flame? Or must I return again to this vale of sorrow? Who can say, truly? Who has been beyond the wall of death to see? Only the wights, and we know what they are like. We know.”

There was little and less that Sam could say to that, but he had given the old man what little comfort he could. And Gilly came in afterward and sang a song for him, a nonsense song thing that she learned from some of Craster’s other wives. It made the old man smile and helped him go to sleep.

That had been one of his last good days. After that the old man spent more time sleeping than awake, curled up beneath a pile of furs in the captain’s cabin. Sometimes he would mutter in his sleep. When he woke

he'd call for Sam, insisting that he had to tell him something, but oft as not he would have forgotten what he meant to say by the time that Sam arrived. Even when he did recall, his talk was all a jumble. He spoke of dreams and never named the dreamer, of a glass candle that could not be lit and eggs that would not hatch. He said the sphinx was the riddle, not the riddler, whatever that meant. He asked Sam to read for him from a book by Septon Barth, whose writings had been burned during the reign of Baelor the Blessed. Once he woke up weeping. "The dragon must have three heads," he wailed, "but I am too old and frail to be one of them. I should be with her, showing her the way, but my body has betrayed me."

As the *Cinnamon Wind* made her way through the Stepstones, Maester Aemon forgot Sam's name oft as not. Some days he took him for one of his dead brothers. "He was too frail for such a long voyage," Sam told Gilly on the forecandle, after another sip of the rum. "Jon should have seen that. Aemon was a hundred and two years old, he should never have been sent to sea. If he had stayed at Castle Black, he might have lived another ten years."

"Or else she might have burned him. The red woman." Even here, a thousand leagues from the Wall, Gilly was reluctant to say Lady Melisandre's name aloud. "She wanted king's blood for her fires. Val knew she did. Lord Snow too. That was why they made me take Dalla's babe away and leave my own behind in his place. Maester Aemon went to sleep and didn't wake up, but if he had stayed, she would have burned him."

*He will still burn*, Sam thought miserably, *only now I have to do it*. The Targaryens always gave their fallen to the flames. Quhuru Mo would not allow a funeral pyre aboard the *Cinnamon Wind*, so Aemon's corpse had been stuffed inside a cask of blackbelly rum to preserve it until the ship reached Oldtown.

"The night before he died, he asked if he might hold the babe," Gilly went on. "I was afraid he might drop him, but he never did. He rocked him and hummed a song for him, and Dalla's boy reached up and touched his face. The way he pulled his lip I thought he might be hurting him, but it only made the old man laugh." She stroked Sam's hand. "We could name

the little one Maester, if you like. When he's old enough, not now. We could."

"*Maester* is not a name. You could call him Aemon, though."

Gilly thought about that. "Dalla brought him forth during battle, as the swords sang all around her. That should be his name. Aemon Battleborn. Aemon Steelsong."

*A name even my lord father might like. A warrior's name.* The boy was Mance Rayder's son and Craster's grandson, after all. He had none of Sam's craven blood. "Yes. Call him that."

"When he is two," she promised, "not before."

"Where is the boy?" Sam thought to ask. Between rum and sorrow, it had taken him that long to realize that Gilly did not have the babe with her.

"Kojja has him. I asked her to take him for a while."

"Oh." Kojja Mo was the captain's daughter, taller than Sam and slender as a spear, with skin as black and smooth as polished jet. She captained the ship's red archers too, and pulled a double-curved goldenheart bow that could send a shaft four hundred yards. When the pirates had attacked them in the Stepstones, Kojja's arrows had slain a dozen of them whilst Sam's own shafts were falling in the water. The only thing Kojja Mo loved better than her bow was bouncing Dalla's boy upon her knee and singing to him in the Summer Tongue. The wildling prince had become the darling of all the women in the crew, and Gilly seemed to trust them with him as she had never trusted any man.

"That was kind of Kojja," Sam said.

"I was afraid of her at first," said Gilly. "She was so black, and her teeth were so big and white, I was afraid she was a beastling or a monster, but she's not. She's good. I like her."

"I know you do." For most of her life the only man Gilly had known had been the terrifying Craster. The rest of her world had been female. *Men frighten her, but women don't*, Sam realized. He could understand that. Back at Horn Hill he had preferred the company of girls as well. His sisters had been kind to him, and though the other girls would sometimes taunt him,

cruel words were easier to shrug off than the blows and buffets he got from the other castle boys. Even now, on the *Cinnamon Wind*, Sam felt more comfortable with Kojja Mo than with her father, though that might be because she spoke the Common Tongue and he did not.

“I like you too, Sam,” whispered Gilly. “And I like this drink. It tastes like fire.”

Yes, Sam thought, *a drink for dragons*. Their cups were empty, so he went over to the cask and filled them once again. The sun was low in the west, he saw, swollen to thrice its proper size. Its ruddy light made Gilly’s face seem flushed and red. They drank a cup to Kojja Mo, and one to Dalla’s boy, and one to Gilly’s babe back on the Wall. And after that nothing would do but to drink two cups for Aemon of House Targaryen. “May the Father judge him justly,” Sam said, sniffing. The sun was almost gone by the time they were done with Maester Aemon. Only a long thin line of red still glowed upon the western horizon, like a slash across the sky. Gilly said that the drink was making the ship spin round, so Sam helped her down the ladder to the women’s quarters in the bow of the ship.

There was a lantern hanging just inside the cabin, and he managed to bang his head on it going in. “Ow,” he said, and Gilly said, “Are you hurt? Let me see.” She leaned close...

...and kissed his mouth.

Sam found himself kissing her back. *I said the words*, he thought, but her hands were tugging at his blacks, pulling at the laces of his breeches. He broke off the kiss long enough to say, “We can’t,” but Gilly said, “We can,” and covered his mouth with her own again. The *Cinnamon Wind* was spinning all around them and he could taste the rum on Gilly’s tongue and the next thing her breasts were bare and he was touching them. *I said the words*, Sam thought again, but one of her nipples found its way between his lips. It was pink and hard and when he sucked on it her milk filled his mouth, mingling with the taste of rum, and he had never tasted anything so fine and sweet and good. *If I do this I am no better than Dareon*, Sam thought, but it felt too good to stop. And suddenly his cock was out, jutting upward from his breeches like a fat pink mast. It looked so silly standing

there that he might have laughed, but Gilly pushed him back onto her pallet, hiked her skirts up around her thighs, and lowered herself onto him with a little whimpery sound. That was even better than her nipples. *She's so wet*, he thought, gasping. *I never knew a woman could get so wet down there*. "I am your wife now," she whispered, sliding up and down on him. And Sam groaned and thought, *No, no, you can't be, I said the words, I said the words*, but the only word he said was, "Yes."

Afterward she went to sleep with her arms around him and her face across his chest. Sam needed sleep as well, but he was drunk on rum and mother's milk and Gilly. He knew he ought to crawl back to his own hammock in the men's cabin, but she felt so good curled up against him that somehow he could not move.

Others came in, men and women both, and he listened to them kissing and laughing and mating with one another. *Summer Islanders. That's how they mourn. They answer death with life*. Sam had read that somewhere, a long time ago. He wondered if Gilly knew, if Kojja Mo had told her what to do.

He breathed the fragrance of her hair and stared at the lantern swinging overhead. *Even the Crone herself could not lead me safely out of this*. The best thing he could do would be to slip away and jump into the sea. *If I'm drowned, no one need ever know that I shamed myself and broke my vows, and Gilly can find herself a better man, one who is not some big fat coward*.

He awoke the next morning in his own hammock in the men's cabin, with Xhondo bellowing about the wind. "*Wind is up*," the mate kept shouting. "*Wake and work, Black Sam. Wind is up*." What Xhondo lacked in vocabulary he made up for in volume. Sam rolled from his hammock to his feet, and regretted it at once. His head was fit to split, one of the blisters on his palm had torn open in the night, and he felt as if he were about to retch.

Xhondo had no mercy, though, so all that Sam could do was struggle back into his blacks. He found them on the deck beneath his hammock, all bundled up in one damp heap. He sniffed at them to see how foul they were, and inhaled the smell of salt and sea and tar, wet canvas and mildew, fruit



and fish and blackbelly rum, strange spices and exotic woods, and a heady bouquet of his own dried sweat. But Gilly's smell was on them too, the clean smell of her hair and the sweet smell of her milk, and that made him glad to wear them. He would have given much and more for warm dry socks, though. Some sort of fungus had begun to grow between his toes.

The chest of books had not been near enough to buy passage for four from Braavos to Oldtown. The *Cinnamon Wind* was shorthanded, however, so Quhuru Mo had agreed that he would take them, provided that they worked their way. When Sam had protested that Maester Aemon was too weak, the boy a babe in arms, and Gilly terrified of the sea, Xhondo only laughed, "Black Sam is big fat man. Black Sam will work for four."

If truth be told, Sam was so fumble-fingered that he doubted he was even doing the work of one good man, but he did try. He scrubbed decks and rubbed them smooth with stones, he hauled on anchor chains, he coiled rope and hunted rats, he sewed up torn sails, patched leaks with bubbling hot tar, boned fish and chopped fruit for the cook. Gilly tried as well. She was better in the rigging than Sam was, though from time to time the sight of so much empty water still made her close her eyes.

Gilly, Sam thought, what am I going to do with Gilly?

It was a long hot sticky day, made longer by his pounding head. Sam busied himself with ropes and sails and the other tasks that Xhondo set him, and tried not to let his eyes wander to the cask of rum that held old Maester Aemon's body... or to Gilly. He could not face the wildling girl right now, not after what they'd done last night. When she came up on deck he went below. When she went forward he went aft. When she smiled at him he turned away, feeling wretched. *I should have jumped into the sea whilst she was still asleep*, he thought. *I have always been a craven, but I was never an oathbreaker till now.*

If Maester Aemon had not died, Sam could have asked him what to do. If Jon Snow had been aboard, or even Pyp and Greenn, he might have turned to them. Instead he had Xhondo. *Xhondo would not understand what I was saying. Or if he did, he'd just tell me to fuck the girl again.* "Fuck" had been

the first word of the Common Tongue that Xhondo had learned, and he was very fond of it.

He was fortunate that the *Cinnamon Wind* was so big. Aboard the *Blackbird* Gilly could have run him down in hardly any time at all. “Swan ships,” the great vessels from the Summer Isles were called in the Seven Kingdoms, for their billowing white sails and for their figureheads, most of which depicted birds. Large as they were, they rode the waves with a grace that was all their own. With a good brisk wind behind them, the *Cinnamon Wind* could outrun any galley, though she was helpless when becalmed. And she offered plenty of places for a craven to hide.

Near the end of Sam’s watch, he was finally cornered. He was climbing down a ladder when Xhondo seized him by the collar. “*Black Sam come with Xhondo,*” he said, dragging him across the deck and dumping him at the feet of Kojja Mo.

Far off to the north, a haze was visible low on the horizon. Kojja pointed at it. “There is the coast of Dorne. Sand and rocks and scorpions, and no good anchorage for hundreds of leagues. You can swim there if you like, and walk to Oldtown. You will need to cross the deep desert and climb some mountains and swim the Torentine. Or else you could go to Gilly.”

“You do not understand. Last night we...”

“...honored your dead, and the gods who made you both. Xhondo did the same. I had the child, else I would have been with him. All you Westerosi make a shame of loving. There is no shame in loving. If your septons say there is, your seven gods must be demons. In the isles we know better. Our gods gave us legs to run with, noses to smell with, hands to touch and feel. What mad cruel god would give a man eyes and tell him he must forever keep them shut, and never look at all the beauty in the world? Only a monster god, a demon of the darkness.” Kojja put her hand between Sam’s legs. “The gods gave you this for a reason too, for... what is your Westerosi word?”

“*Fucking,*” Xhondo offered helpfully.

“Yes, for fucking. For the giving of pleasure and the making of children. There is no shame in that.”

Sam backed away from her. “I took a vow. *I will take no wife, and father no children.* I said the words.”

“She knows the words you said. She is a child in some ways, but she is not blind. She knows why you wear the black, why you go to Oldtown. She knows she cannot keep you. She wants you for a little while, is all. She lost her father and her husband, her mother and her sisters, her home, her *world*. All she has is you, and the babe. So you go to her, or swim.”

Sam looked despairingly at the haze that marked the distant shoreline. He could never swim so far, he knew.

He went to Gilly. “What we did... if I could take a wife, I would sooner have you than any princess or highborn maiden, but I can’t. I am still a crow. I said the words, Gilly. I went with Jon into the woods and said the words before a heart tree.”

“The trees watch over us,” Gilly whispered, brushing the tears from his cheeks. “In the forest, they see all... but there are no trees here. Only water, Sam. Only water.”