



## SAMWELL

Up in the loft a woman was giving birth noisily, while below a man lay dying by the fire. Samwell Tarly could not say which frightened him more.

They'd covered poor Bannen with a pile of furs and stoked the fire high, yet all he could say was, "I'm cold. Please. I'm so cold." Sam was trying to feed him onion broth, but he could not swallow. The broth dribbled over his lips and down his chin as fast as Sam could spoon it in.

"That one's dead." Craster eyed the man with indifference as he worried at a sausage. "Be kinder to stick a knife in his chest than that spoon down his throat, you ask me."

"I don't recall as we did." Giant was no more than five feet tall—his true name was Bedwyck—but a fierce little man for all that. "Slayer, did you ask Craster for his counsel?"

Sam cringed at the name, but shook his head. He filled another spoon, brought it to Bannen's mouth, and tried to ease it between his lips.

"Food and fire," Giant was saying, "that was all we asked of you. And you grudge us the food."

"Be glad I didn't grudge you fire too." Craster was a thick man made thicker by the ragged smelly sheepskins he wore day and night. He had a broad flat nose, a mouth that drooped to one side, and a missing ear. And though his matted hair and tangled beard might be grey going white, his

hard knuckly hands still looked strong enough to hurt. “I fed you what I could, but you crows are always hungry. I’m a godly man, else I would have chased you off. You think I need the likes of him, dying on my floor? You think I need all your mouths, little man?” The wildling spat. “Crows. When did a black bird ever bring good to a man’s hall, I ask you? Never. Never.”

More broth ran from the corner of Bannen’s mouth. Sam dabbed it away with a corner of his sleeve. The ranger’s eyes were open but unseeing. “I’m cold,” he said again, so faintly. A maester might have known how to save him, but they had no maester. Kedge Whiteye had taken Bannen’s mangled foot off nine days past, in a gout of pus and blood that made Sam sick, but it was too little, too late. “I’m so cold,” the pale lips repeated.

About the hall, a ragged score of black brothers squatted on the floor or sat on rough-hewn benches, drinking cups of the same thin onion broth and gnawing on chunks of hardbread. A couple were wounded worse than Bannen, to look at them. Fornio had been delirious for days, and Ser Byam’s shoulder was oozing a foul yellow pus. When they’d left Castle Black, Brown Bernarr had been carrying bags of Myrish fire, mustard salve, ground garlic, tansy, poppy, kingscopper, and other healing herbs. Even sweetsleep, which gave the gift of painless death. But Brown Bernarr had died on the Fist and no one had thought to search for Maester Aemon’s medicines. Hake had known some herblore as well, being a cook, but Hake was also lost. So it was left to the surviving stewards to do what they could for the wounded, which was little enough. *At least they are dry here, with a fire to warm them. They need more food, though.*

They all needed more food. The men had been grumbling for days. Clubfoot Karl kept saying how Craster had to have a hidden larder, and Garth of Oldtown had begun to echo him, when he was out of the Lord Commander’s hearing. Sam had thought of begging for something more nourishing for the wounded men at least, but he did not have the courage. Craster’s eyes were cold and mean, and whenever the wildling looked his way his hands twitched a little, as if they wanted to curl up into fists. *Does he know I spoke to Gilly, the last time we were here?* he wondered. *Did she tell him I said we’d take her? Did he beat it out of her?*

“I’m cold,” said Bannen. “Please. I’m cold.”

For all the heat and smoke in Craster's hall, Sam felt cold himself. *And tired, so tired.* He needed sleep, but whenever he closed his eyes he dreamed of blowing snow and dead men shambling toward him with black hands and bright blue eyes.

Up in the loft, Gilly let out a shuddering sob that echoed down the long low windowless hall. "Push," he heard one of Craster's older wives tell her. "Harder. *Harder.* Scream if it helps." She did, so loud it made Sam wince.

Craster turned his head to glare. "I've had a bellyful o' that shrieking," he shouted up. "Give her a rag to bite down on, or I'll come up there and give her a taste o' my hand."

He would too, Sam knew. Craster had nineteen wives, but none who'd dare interfere once he started up that ladder. No more than the black brothers had two nights past, when he was beating one of the younger girls. There had been mutterings, to be sure. "He's killing her," Garth of Greenaway had said, and Clubfoot Karl laughed and said, "If he don't want the little sweetmeat he could give her to me." Black Bernarr cursed in a low angry voice, and Alan of Rosby got up and went outside so he wouldn't have to hear. "His roof, his rule," the ranger Ronnel Harclay had reminded them. "Craster's a friend to the Watch."

*A friend,* thought Sam, as he listened to Gilly's muffled shrieks. Craster was a brutal man who ruled his wives and daughters with an iron hand, but his keep was a refuge all the same. "Frozen crows," Craster sneered when they straggled in, those few who had survived the snow, the wights, and the bitter cold. "And not so big a flock as went north, neither." Yet he had given them space on his floor, a roof to keep the snow off, a fire to dry them out, and his wives had brought them cups of hot wine to put some warmth in their bellies. "Bloody crows," he called them, but he'd fed them too, meager though the fare might be.

*We are guests,* Sam reminded himself. *Gilly is his. His daughter, his wife. His roof, his rule.*

The first time he'd seen Craster's Keep, Gilly had come begging for help, and Sam had lent her his black cloak to conceal her belly when she went to find Jon Snow. *Knights are supposed to defend women and children.* Only a few of the black brothers were knights, but even so . . . *We all say the*

words, Sam thought. *I am the shield that guards the realms of men.* A woman was a woman, even a wildling woman. *We should help her. We should.* It was her child Gilly feared for; she was frightened that it might be a boy. Craster raised up his daughters to be his wives, but there were neither men nor boys to be seen about his compound. Gilly had told Jon that Craster gave his sons to the gods. *If the gods are good, they will send her a daughter,* Sam prayed.

Up in the loft, Gilly choked back a scream. “That’s it,” a woman said. “Another push, now. Oh, I see his head.”

*Hers,* Sam thought miserably. *Her head, hers.*

“Cold,” said Bannen, weakly. “Please. I’m so cold.” Sam put the bowl and spoon aside, tossed another fur across the dying man, put another stick on the fire. Gilly gave a shriek, and began to pant. Craster gnawed on his hard black sausage. He had sausages for himself and his wives, he said, but none for the Watch. “Women,” he complained. “The way they wail . . . I had me a fat sow once birthed a litter of eight with no more’n a grunt.” Chewing, he turned his head to squint contemptuously at Sam. “She was near as fat as you, boy. Slayer.” He laughed.

It was more than Sam could stand. He stumbled away from the firepit, stepping awkwardly over and around the men sleeping and squatting and dying upon the hard-packed earthen floor. The smoke and screams and moans were making him feel faint. Bending his head, he pushed through the hanging deerhide flaps that served Craster for a door and stepped out into the afternoon.

The day was cloudy, but still bright enough to blind him after the gloom of the hall. Some patches of snow weighed down the limbs of surrounding trees and blanketed the gold and russet hills, but fewer than there had been. The storm had passed on, and the days at Craster’s Keep had been . . . well, not warm perhaps, but not so bitter cold. Sam could hear the soft *drip-drip-drip* of water melting off the icicles that bearded the edge of the thick sod roof. He took a deep shuddering breath and looked around.

To the west Ollo Lophand and Tim Stone were moving through the horselines, feeding and watering the remaining garrons.

Downwind, other brothers were skinning and butchering the animals deemed too weak to go on. Spearmen and archers walked sentry behind the earthen dikes that were Craster's only defense against whatever hid in the wood beyond, while a dozen firepits sent up thick fingers of blue-grey smoke. Sam could hear the distant echoes of axes at work in the forest, where a work detail was harvesting enough wood to keep the blazes burning all through the night. Nights were the bad time. When it got dark. And *cold*.

There had been no attacks while they had been at Craster's, neither wights nor Others. Nor would there be, Craster said. "A godly man got no cause to fear such. I said as much to that Mance Rayder once, when he come sniffing round. He never listened, no more'n you crows with your swords and your bloody fires. That won't help you none when the white cold comes. Only the gods will help you then. You best get right with the gods."

Gilly had spoken of the white cold as well, and she'd told them what sort of offerings Craster made to his gods. Sam had wanted to kill him when he heard. *There are no laws beyond the Wall*, he reminded himself, *and Craster's a friend to the Watch*.

A ragged shout went up from behind the daub-and-wattle hall. Sam went to take a look. The ground beneath his feet was a slush of melting snow and soft mud that Dolorous Edd insisted was made of Craster's shit. It was thicker than shit, though; it sucked at Sam's boots so hard he felt one pull loose.

Back of a vegetable garden and empty sheepfold, a dozen black brothers were loosing arrows at a butt they'd built of hay and straw. The slender blond steward they called Sweet Donnel had laid a shaft just off the bull's eye at fifty yards. "Best that, old man," he said.

"Aye. I will." Ulmer, stooped and grey-bearded and loose of skin and limb, stepped to the mark and pulled an arrow from the quiver at his waist. In his youth he had been an outlaw, a member of the infamous Kingswood Brotherhood. He claimed he'd once put an arrow through the hand of the White Bull of the Kingsguard to steal a kiss from the lips of a Dornish

princess. He had stolen her jewels too, and a chest of golden dragons, but it was the kiss he liked to boast of in his cups.

He notched and drew, all smooth as summer silk, then let fly. His shaft struck the butt an inch inside of Donnel Hill's. "Will that do, lad?" he asked, stepping back.

"Well enough," said the younger man, grudgingly. "The crosswind helped you. It blew more strongly when I loosed."

"You ought to have allowed for it, then. You have a good eye and a steady hand, but you'll need a deal more to best a man of the kingswood. Fletcher Dick it was who showed me how to bend the bow, and no finer archer ever lived. Have I told you about old Dick, now?"

"Only three hundred times." Every man at Castle Black had heard Ulmer's tales of the great outlaw band of yore; of Simon Toyne and the Smiling Knight, Oswyn Longneck the Thrice-Hanged, Wenda the White Fawn, Fletcher Dick, Big Belly Ben, and all the rest. Searching for escape, Sweet Donnel looked about and spied Sam standing in the muck. "*Slayer*," he called. "Come, show us how you slew the Other." He held out the tall yew longbow.

Sam turned red. "It wasn't an arrow, it was a dagger, dragonglass . . ." He knew what would happen if he took the bow. He would miss the butt and send the arrow sailing over the dike off into the trees. Then he'd hear the laughter.

"No matter," said Alan of Rosby, another fine bowman. "We're all keen to see the Slayer shoot. Aren't we, lads?"

He could not face them; the mocking smiles, the mean little jests, the contempt in their eyes. Sam turned to go back the way he'd come, but his right foot sank deep in the muck, and when he tried to pull it out his boot came off. He had to kneel to wrench it free, laughter ringing in his ears. Despite all his socks, the snowmelt had soaked through to his toes by the time he made his escape. *Useless*, he thought miserably. *My father saw me true. I have no right to be alive when so many brave men are dead.*

Grenn was tending the firepit south of the compound gate, stripped to the waist as he split logs. His face was red with exertion, the sweat steaming off

his skin. But he grinned as Sam came chuffing up. “The Others get your boot, Slayer?”

*Him too?* “It was the mud. Please don’t call me that.”

“Why not?” Grenn sounded honestly puzzled. “It’s a good name, and you came by it fairly.”

Pyp always teased Grenn about being thick as a castle wall, so Sam explained patiently. “It’s just a different way of calling me a coward,” he said, standing on his left leg and wriggling back into his muddy boot. “They’re mocking me, the same way they mock Bedwyck by calling him ‘Giant.’”

“He’s not a giant, though,” said Grenn, “and Paul was never small. Well, maybe when he was a babe at the breast, but not after. You *did* slay the Other, though, so it’s not the same.”

“I just . . . I never . . . I was *scared!*”

“No more than me. It’s only Pyp who says I’m too dumb to be frightened. I get as frightened as anyone.” Grenn bent to scoop up a split log, and tossed it into the fire. “I used to be scared of Jon, whenever I had to fight him. He was so quick, and he fought like he meant to kill me.” The green damp wood sat in the flames, smoking before it took fire. “I never said, though. Sometimes I think everyone is just pretending to be brave, and none of us really are. Maybe pretending is how you *get* brave, I don’t know. Let them call you Slayer, who cares?”

“You never liked Ser Alliser to call you Aurochs.”

“He was saying I was big and stupid.” Grenn scratched at his beard. “If Pyp wanted to call me Aurochs, though, he could. Or you, or Jon. An aurochs is a fierce strong beast, so that’s not so bad, and I *am* big, and getting bigger. Wouldn’t you rather be Sam the Slayer than Ser Piggy?”

“Why can’t I just be Samwell Tarly?” He sat down heavily on a wet log that Grenn had yet to split. “It was the dragonglass that slew it. Not me, the dragonglass.”

He had told them. He had told them all. Some of them didn’t believe him, he knew. Dirk had shown Sam his dirk and said, “I got iron, what do I want with glass?” Black Bernarr and the three Garths made it plain that they

doubted his whole story, and Rolley of Sisterton came right out and said, “More like you stabbed some rustling bushes and it turned out to be Small Paul taking a shit, so you came up with a lie.”

But Dywen listened, and Dolorous Edd, and they made Sam and Grenn tell the Lord Commander. Mormont frowned all through the tale and asked pointed questions, but he was too cautious a man to shun any possible advantage. He asked Sam for all the dragonglass in his pack, though that was little enough. Whenever Sam thought of the cache Jon had found buried beneath the Fist, it made him want to cry. There’d been dagger blades and spearheads, and two or three hundred arrowheads at least. Jon had made daggers for himself, Sam, and Lord Commander Mormont, and he’d given Sam a spearhead, an old broken horn, and some arrowheads. Grenn had taken a handful of arrowheads as well, but that was all.

So now all they had was Mormont’s dagger and the one Sam had given Grenn, plus nineteen arrows and a tall hardwood spear with a black dragonglass head. The sentries passed the spear along from watch to watch, while Mormont had divided the arrows among his best bowmen. Muttering Bill, Garth Greyfeather, Ronnel Harclay, Sweet Donnel Hill, and Alan of Rosby had three apiece, and Ulmer had four. But even if they made every shaft tell, they’d soon be down to fire arrows like all the rest. They had loosed hundreds of fire arrows on the Fist, yet still the wights kept coming.

*It will not be enough*, Sam thought. Craster’s sloping palisades of mud and melting snow would hardly slow the wights, who’d climbed the much steeper slopes of the Fist to swarm over the ringwall. And instead of three hundred brothers drawn up in disciplined ranks to meet them, the wights would find forty-one ragged survivors, nine too badly hurt to fight. Forty-four had come straggling into Craster’s out of the storm, out of the sixty-odd who’d cut their way free of the Fist, but three of those had died of their wounds, and Bannen would soon make four.

“Do you think the wights are gone?” Sam asked Grenn. “Why don’t they come finish us?”

“They only come when it’s cold.”

“Yes,” said Sam, “but is it the cold that brings the wights, or the wights that bring the cold?”



“Who cares?” Grenn’s axe sent wood chips flying. “They come together, that’s what matters. Hey, now that we know that dragonglass kills them, maybe they won’t come at all. Maybe they’re frightened of *us* now!”

Sam wished he could believe that, but it seemed to him that when you were dead, fear had no more meaning than pain or love or duty. He wrapped his hands around his legs, sweating under his layers of wool and leather and fur. The dragonglass dagger had melted the pale thing in the woods, true . . . but Grenn was talking like it would do the same to the wights. *We don’t know that*, he thought. *We don’t know anything, really. I wish Jon was here.* He liked Grenn, but he couldn’t talk to him the same way. *Jon wouldn’t call me Slayer, I know. And I could talk to him about Gilly’s baby.* Jon had ridden off with Qhorin Halfhand, though, and they’d had no word of him since. *He had a dragonglass dagger too, but did he think to use it? Is he lying dead and frozen in some ravine . . . or worse, is he dead and walking?*

He could not understand why the gods would want to take Jon Snow and Bannen and leave him, craven and clumsy as he was. He *should* have died on the Fist, where he’d pissed himself three times and lost his sword besides. And he *would* have died in the woods if Small Paul had not come along to carry him. *I wish it was all a dream. Then I could wake up.* How fine that would be, to wake back on the Fist of the First Men with all his brothers still around him, even Jon and Ghost. Or even better, to wake in Castle Black behind the Wall and go to the common room for a bowl of Three-Finger Hobb’s thick cream of wheat, with a big spoon of butter melting in the middle and a dollop of honey besides. Just the thought of it made his empty stomach rumble.

“*Snow.*”

Sam glanced up at the sound. Lord Commander Mormont’s raven was circling the fire, beating the air with wide black wings.

“*Snow,*” the bird cawed. “*Snow, snow.*”

Wherever the raven went, Mormont soon followed. The Lord Commander emerged from beneath the trees, mounted on his garron between old Dywen and the fox-faced ranger Ronnel Harclay, who’d been raised to Thoren Smallwood’s place. The spearmen at the gate shouted a challenge, and the Old Bear returned a gruff, “Who in seven hells do you

*think* goes there? Did the Others take your eyes?” He rode between the gateposts, one bearing a ram’s skull and the other the skull of a bear, then reined up, raised a fist, and whistled. The raven came flapping down at his call.

“My lord,” Sam heard Ronnel Harclay say, “we have only twenty-two mounts, and I doubt half will reach the Wall.”

“I know that,” Mormont grumbled. “We must go all the same. Craster’s made that plain.” He glanced to the west, where a bank of dark clouds hid the sun. “The gods gave us a respite, but for how long?” Mormont swung down from the saddle, jolting his raven back into the air. He saw Sam then, and bellowed, “*Tarly!*”

“Me?” Sam got awkwardly to his feet.

“*Me?*” The raven landed on the old man’s head. “*Me?*”

“Is your name Tarly? Do you have a brother hereabouts? Yes, you. Close your mouth and come with me.”

“With you?” The words tumbled out in a squeak.

Lord Commander Mormont gave him a withering look. “You are a man of the Night’s Watch. Try not to soil your smallclothes every time I look at you. Come, I said.” His boots made squishing sounds in the mud, and Sam had to hurry to keep up. “I’ve been thinking about this dragonglass of yours.”

“It’s not *mine*,” Sam said.

“Jon Snow’s dragonglass, then. If dragonglass daggers are what we need, why do we have only two of them? Every man on the Wall should be armed with one the day he says his words.”

“We never knew . . .”

“We *never knew!* But we must have known once. The Night’s Watch has forgotten its true purpose, Tarly. You don’t build a wall seven hundred feet high to keep savages in skins from stealing women. The Wall was made *to guard the realms of men* . . . and not against other men, which is all the wildlings are when you come right down to it. Too many years, Tarly, too many hundreds and thousands of years. We lost sight of the true enemy.

And now he's here, but we don't know how to fight him. Is dragonglass made by dragons, as the smallfolk like to say?"

"The m-maesters think not," Sam stammered. "The maesters say it comes from the fires of the earth. They call it obsidian."

Mormont snorted. "They can call it lemon pie for all I care. If it kills as you claim, I want more of it."

Sam stumbled. "Jon found more, on the Fist. Hundreds of arrowheads, spearheads as well . . ."

"So you said. Small good it does us there. To reach the Fist again we'd need to be armed with the weapons we won't have until we reach the bloody Fist. And there are still the wildlings to deal with. We need to find dragonglass someplace else."

Sam had almost forgotten about the wildlings, so much had happened since. "The children of the forest used dragonglass blades," he said. "They'd know where to find obsidian."

"The children of the forest are all dead," said Mormont. "The First Men killed half of them with bronze blades, and the Andals finished the job with iron. Why a glass dagger should—"

The Old Bear broke off as Craster emerged from between the deerhide flaps of his door. The wildling smiled, revealing a mouth of brown rotten teeth. "I have a son."

"*Son*," cawed Mormont's raven. "*Son, son, son.*"

The Lord Commander's face was stiff. "I'm glad for you."

"Are you, now? Me, I'll be glad when you and yours are gone. Past time, I'm thinking."

"As soon as our wounded are strong enough . . ."

"They're strong as they're like to get, old crow, and both of us know it. Them that's dying, you know them too, cut their bloody throats and be done with it. Or leave them, if you don't have the stomach, and I'll sort them out myself."

Lord Commander Mormont bristled. "Thoren Smallwood claimed you were a friend to the Watch—"

“Aye,” said Craster. “I gave you all I could spare, but winter’s coming on, and now the girl’s stuck me with another squalling mouth to feed.”

“We could take him,” someone squeaked.

Craster’s head turned. His eyes narrowed. He spat on Sam’s foot. “What did you say, Slayer?”

Sam opened and closed his mouth. “I . . . I . . . I only meant . . . if you didn’t want him . . . his mouth to feed . . . with winter coming on, we . . . we could take him, and . . .”

“My son. My blood. You think I’d give him to you crows?”

“I only thought . . .” *You have no sons, you expose them, Gilly said as much, you leave them in the woods, that’s why you have only wives here, and daughters who grow up to be wives.*

“Be quiet, Sam,” said Lord Commander Mormont. “You’ve said enough. Too much. Inside.”

“M-my lord—”

*“Inside!”*

Red-faced, Sam pushed through the deerhides, back into the gloom of the hall. Mormont followed. “How great a fool are you?” the old man said within, his voice choked and angry. “Even if Craster gave us the child, he’d be dead before we reached the Wall. We need a newborn babe to care for near as much as we need more snow. Do you have milk to feed him in those big teats of yours? Or did you mean to take the mother too?”

“She wants to come,” Sam said. “She begged me . . .”

Mormont raised a hand. “I will hear no more of this, Tarly. You’ve been told and *told* to stay well away from Craster’s wives.”

“She’s his daughter,” Sam said feebly.

“Go see to Bannen. Now. Before you make me wroth.”

“Yes, my lord.” Sam hurried off quivering.

But when he reached the fire, it was only to find Giant pulling a fur cloak up over Bannen’s head. “He said he was cold,” the small man said. “I hope he’s gone someplace warm, I do.”

“His wound . . .” said Sam.

“Bugger his wound.” Dirk prodded the corpse with his foot. “His *foot* was hurt. I knew a man back in my village lost a foot. He lived to nine-and-forty.”

“The cold,” said Sam. “He was never warm.”

“He was never *fed*,” said Dirk. “Not proper. That bastard Craster starved him dead.”

Sam looked around anxiously, but Craster had not returned to the hall. If he had, things might have grown ugly. The wildling hated bastards, though the rangers said he was baseborn himself, fathered on a wildling woman by some long-dead crow.

“Craster’s got his own to feed,” said Giant. “All these women. He’s given us what he can.”

“Don’t you bloody believe it. The day we leave, he’ll tap a keg o’ mead and sit down to feast on ham and honey. And *laugh* at us, out starving in the snow. He’s a bloody wildling, is all he is. There’s none o’ them friends of the Watch.” He kicked at Bannen’s corpse. “Ask him if you don’t believe me.”

They burned the ranger’s corpse at sunset, in the fire that Grenn had been feeding earlier that day. Tim Stone and Garth of Oldtown carried out the naked corpse and swung him twice between them before heaving him into the flames. The surviving brothers divided up his clothes, his weapons, his armor, and everything else he owned. At Castle Black, the Night’s Watch buried its dead with all due ceremony. They were not at Castle Black, though. *And bones do not come back as wights.*

“His name was Bannen,” Lord Commander Mormont said, as the flames took him. “He was a brave man, a good ranger. He came to us from . . . where did he come from?”

“Down White Harbor way,” someone called out.

Mormont nodded. “He came to us from White Harbor, and never failed in his duty. He kept his vows as best he could, rode far, fought fiercely. We shall never see his like again.”

“*And now his watch is ended*,” the black brothers said, in solemn chant.

“And now his watch is ended,” Mormont echoed.

*“Ended,”* cried his raven. *“Ended.”*

Sam was red-eyed and sick from the smoke. When he looked at the fire, he thought he saw Bannen sitting up, his hands coiling into fists as if to fight off the flames that were consuming him, but it was only for an instant, before the swirling smoke hid all. The worst thing was the *smell*, though. If it had been a foul unpleasant smell he might have stood it, but his burning brother smelled so much like roast pork that Sam’s mouth began to water, and that was so horrible that as soon as the bird squawked *“Ended”* he ran behind the hall to throw up in the ditch.

He was there on his knees in the mud when Dolorous Edd came up. “Digging for worms, Sam? Or are you just sick?”

“Sick,” said Sam weakly, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “The smell . . .”

“Never knew Bannen could smell so good.” Edd’s tone was as morose as ever. “I had half a mind to carve a slice off him. If we had some applesauce, I might have done it. Pork’s always best with applesauce, I find.” Edd undid his laces and pulled out his cock. “You best not die, Sam, or I fear I might succumb. There’s bound to be more crackling on you than Bannen ever had, and I never could resist a bit of crackling.” He sighed as his piss arced out, yellow and steaming. “We ride at first light, did you hear? Sun or snow, the Old Bear tells me.”

*Sun or snow.* Sam glanced up anxiously at the sky. “Snow?” he squeaked. “We . . . ride? All of us?”

“Well, no, some will need to walk.” He shook himself. “Dywen now, he says we need to learn to ride dead horses, like the Others do. He claims it would save on feed. How much could a dead horse eat?” Edd laced himself back up. “Can’t say I fancy the notion. Once they figure a way to work a dead horse, we’ll be next. Likely I’ll be the first too. ‘Edd,’ they’ll say, ‘dying’s no excuse for lying down no more, so get on up and take this spear, you’ve got the watch tonight.’ Well, I shouldn’t be so gloomy. Might be I’ll die before they work it out.”

*Might be we’ll all die, and sooner than we’d like,* Sam thought, as he climbed awkwardly to his feet.

When Craster learned that his unwanted guests would be departing on the morrow, the wildling became almost amiable, or as close to amiable as Craster ever got. “Past time,” he said, “you don’t belong here, I told you that. All the same, I’ll see you off proper, with a feast. Well, a feed. My wives can roast them horses you slaughtered, and I’ll find some beer and bread.” He smiled his brown smile. “Nothing better than beer and horsemeat. If you can’t ride ’em, eat ’em, that’s what I say.”

His wives and daughters dragged out the benches and the long log tables, and cooked and served as well. Except for Gilly, Sam could hardly tell the women apart. Some were old and some were young and some were only girls, but a lot of them were Craster’s daughters as well as his wives, and they all looked sort of alike. As they went about their work, they spoke in soft voices to each other, but never to the men in black.

Craster owned but one chair. He sat in it, clad in a sleeveless sheepskin jerkin. His thick arms were covered with white hair, and about one wrist was a twisted ring of gold. Lord Commander Mormont took the place at the top of the bench to his right, while the brothers crowded in knee to knee; a dozen remained outside to guard the gate and tend the fires.

Sam found a place between Grenn and Orphan Oss, his stomach rumbling. The charred horsemeat dripped with grease as Craster’s wives turned the spits above the firepit, and the smell of it set his mouth to watering again, but that reminded him of Bannen. Hungry as he was, Sam knew he would retch if he so much as tried a bite. How could they eat the poor faithful garrons who had carried them so far? When Craster’s wives brought onions, he seized one eagerly. One side was black with rot, but he cut that part off with his dagger and ate the good half raw. There was bread as well, but only two loaves. When Ulmer asked for more, the woman only shook her head. That was when the trouble started.

“Two loaves?” Clubfoot Karl complained from down the bench. “How stupid are you women? We need more bread than this!”

Lord Commander Mormont gave him a hard look. “Take what you’re given, and be thankful. Would you sooner be out in the storm eating snow?”

“We’ll be there soon enough.” Clubfoot Karl did not flinch from the Old Bear’s wrath. “I’d sooner eat what Craster’s hiding, my lord.”

Craster narrowed his eyes. "I gave you crows enough. I got me women to feed."

Dirk speared a chunk of horsemeat. "Aye. So you admit you got a secret larder. How else to make it through a winter?"

"I'm a godly man . . ." Craster started.

"You're a niggardly man," said Karl, "and a liar."

"Hams," Garth of Oldtown said, in a reverent voice. "There were pigs, last time we come. I bet he's got hams hid someplace. Smoked and salted hams, and bacon too."

"Sausage," said Dirk. "Them long black ones, they're like rocks, they keep for years. I bet he's got a hundred hanging in some cellar."

"Oats," suggested Ollo Lophand. "Corn. Barley."

"*Corn*," said Mormont's raven, with a flap of the wings. "*Corn, corn, corn, corn, corn.*"

"*Enough*," said Lord Commander Mormont over the bird's raucous calls. "Be quiet, all of you. This is folly."

"Apples," said Garth of Greenaway. "Barrels and barrels of crisp autumn apples. There are apple trees out there, I saw 'em."

"Dried berries. Cabbages. Pine nuts."

"*Corn. Corn. Corn.*"

"Salt mutton. There's a sheepfold. He's got casks and casks of mutton laid by, you know he does."

Craster looked fit to spit them all by then. Lord Commander Mormont rose. "*Silence*. I'll hear no more such talk."

"Then stuff bread in your ears, old man." Clubfoot Karl pushed back from the table. "Or did you swallow your bloody crumb already?"

Sam saw the Old Bear's face go red. "Have you forgotten who I am? Sit, eat, and be silent. That is a *command*."

No one spoke. No one moved. All eyes were on the Lord Commander and the big clubfooted ranger, as the two of them stared at each other across the table. It seemed to Sam that Karl broke first, and was about to sit, though sullenly . . .



. . . but Craster stood, and his axe was in his hand. The big black steel axe that Mormont had given him as a guest gift. “No,” he growled. “You’ll not sit. No one who calls me niggard will sleep beneath my roof nor eat at my board. Out with you, cripple. And you and you and you.” He jabbed the head of the axe toward Dirk and Garth and Garth in turn. “Go sleep in the cold with empty bellies, the lot o’ you, or . . .”

“Bloody *bastard!*” Sam heard one of the Garths curse. He never saw which one.

“*Who calls me bastard?*” Craster roared, sweeping platter and meat and wine cups from the table with his left hand while lifting the axe with his right.

“It’s no more than all men know,” Karl answered.

Craster moved quicker than Sam would have believed possible, vaulting across the table with axe in hand. A woman screamed, Garth Greenaway and Orphan Oss drew knives, Karl stumbled back and tripped over Ser Byam lying wounded on the floor. One instant Craster was coming after him spitting curses. The next he was spitting blood. Dirk had grabbed him by the hair, yanked his head back, and opened his throat ear to ear with one long slash. Then he gave him a rough shove, and the wildling fell forward, crashing face first across Ser Byam. Byam screamed in agony as Craster drowned in his own blood, the axe slipping from his fingers. Two of Craster’s wives were wailing, a third cursed, a fourth flew at Sweet Donnel and tried to scratch his eyes out. He knocked her to the floor. The Lord Commander stood over Craster’s corpse, dark with anger. “The gods will curse us,” he cried. “There is no crime so foul as for a guest to bring murder into a man’s hall. By all the laws of the hearth, we—”

“There are no laws beyond the Wall, old man. Remember?” Dirk grabbed one of Craster’s wives by the arm, and shoved the point of his bloody dirk up under her chin. “Show us where he keeps the food, or you’ll get the same as he did, woman.”

“Unhand her.” Mormont took a step. “I’ll have your head for this, you—”

Garth of Greenaway blocked his path, and Ollo Lophand yanked him back. They both had blades in hand. “Hold your tongue,” Ollo warned. Instead the Lord Commander grabbed for his dagger. Ollo had only one

hand, but that was quick. He twisted free of the old man's grasp, shoved the knife into Mormont's belly, and yanked it out again, all red. And then the world went mad.

Later, much later, Sam found himself sitting crosslegged on the floor, with Mormont's head in his lap. He did not remember how they'd gotten there, or much of anything else that had happened after the Old Bear was stabbed. Garth of Greenaway had killed Garth of Oldtown, he recalled, but not why. Rolley of Sisterton had fallen from the loft and broken his neck after climbing the ladder to have a taste of Craster's wives. Grenn . . .

Grenn had shouted and slapped him, and then he'd run away with Giant and Dolorous Edd and some others. Craster still sprawled across Ser Byam, but the wounded knight no longer moaned. Four men in black sat on the bench eating chunks of burned horsemeat while Ollo coupled with a weeping woman on the table.

"Tarly." When he tried to speak, the blood dribbled from the Old Bear's mouth down into his beard. "Tarly, go. *Go.*"

"Where, my lord?" His voice was flat and lifeless. *I am not afraid.* It was a queer feeling. "There's no place to go."

"The Wall. Make for the Wall. Now."

"*Now,*" squawked the raven. "*Now. Now.*" The bird walked up the old man's arm to his chest, and plucked a hair from his beard.

"You must. Must tell them."

"Tell them what, my lord?" Sam asked politely.

"All. The Fist. The wildlings. Dragonglass. This. *All.*" His breathing was very shallow now, his voice a whisper. "Tell my son. Jorah. Tell him, take the black. My wish. Dying wish."

"*Wish?*" The raven cocked its head, beady black eyes shining. "*Corn?*" the bird asked.

"No corn," said Mormont feebly. "Tell Jorah. Forgive him. My son. Please. Go."

"It's too far," said Sam. "I'll never reach the Wall, my lord." He was so very tired. All he wanted was to sleep, to sleep and sleep and never wake, and he knew that if he just stayed here soon enough Dirk or Ollo Lophand

or Clubfoot Karl would get angry with him and grant his wish, just to see him die. "I'd sooner stay with you. See, I'm not frightened anymore. Of you, or . . . of anything."

"You should be," said a woman's voice.

Three of Craster's wives were standing over them. Two were haggard old women he did not know, but Gilly was between them, all bundled up in skins and cradling a bundle of brown and white fur that must have held her baby. "We're not supposed to talk to Craster's wives," Sam told them. "We have orders."

"That's done now," said the old woman on the right.

"The blackest crows are down in the cellar, gorging," said the old woman on the left, "or up in the loft with the young ones. They'll be back soon, though. Best you be gone when they do. The horses run off, but Dyah's caught two."

"You said you'd help me," Gilly reminded him.

"I said Jon would help you. Jon's brave, and he's a good fighter, but I think he's dead now. I'm a craven. And fat. Look how fat I am. Besides, Lord Mormont's hurt. Can't you see? I couldn't leave the Lord Commander."

"Child," said the other old woman, "that old crow's gone before you. Look."

Mormont's head was still in his lap, but his eyes were open and staring and his lips no longer moved. The raven cocked its head and squawked, then looked up at Sam. "*Corn?*"

"No corn. He has no corn." Sam closed the Old Bear's eyes and tried to think of a prayer, but all that came to mind was, "Mother have mercy. Mother have mercy. Mother have mercy."

"Your mother can't help you none," said the old woman on the left. "That dead old man can't neither. You take his sword and you take that big warm fur cloak o' his and you take his horse if you can find him. And you go."

"The girl don't lie," the old woman on the right said. "She's my girl, and I beat the lying out of her early on. You said you'd help her. Do what Ferny says, boy. Take the girl and be quick about it."

“*Quick*,” the raven said. “*Quick quick quick*.”

“Where?” asked Sam, puzzled. “Where should I take her?”

“Someplace warm,” the two old women said as one.

Gilly was crying. “Me and the babe. Please. I’ll be your wife, like I was Craster’s. Please, ser crow. He’s a boy, just like Nella said he’d be. If you don’t take him, *they* will.”

“They?” said Sam, and the raven cocked its black head and echoed, “*They. They. They.*”

“The boy’s brothers,” said the old woman on the left. “Craster’s sons. The white cold’s rising out there, crow. I can feel it in my bones. These poor old bones don’t lie. They’ll be here soon, the sons.”