



## SAMWELL

Sobbing, Sam took another step. *This is the last one, the very last, I can't go on, I can't.* But his feet moved again. One and then the other. They took a step, and then another, and he thought, *They're not my feet, they're someone else's, someone else is walking, it can't be me.*

When he looked down he could see them stumbling through the snow; shapeless things, and clumsy. His boots had been black, he seemed to remember, but the snow had caked around them, and now they were misshapen white balls. Like two clubfeet made of ice.

It would not stop, the snow. The drifts were up past his knees, and a crust covered his lower legs like a pair of white greaves. His steps were dragging, lurching. The heavy pack he carried made him look like some monstrous hunchback. And he was tired, so tired. *I can't go on. Mother have mercy, I can't.*

Every fourth or fifth step he had to reach down and tug up his swordbelt. He had lost the sword on the Fist, but the scabbard still weighed down the belt. He did have two knives; the dragonglass dagger Jon had given him and the steel one he cut his meat with. All that weight dragged heavy, and his belly was so big and round that if he forgot to tug the belt slipped right off and tangled round his ankles, no matter how tight he cinched it. He had tried belting it *above* his belly once, but then it came almost to his armpits. Grenn had laughed himself sick at the sight of it, and Dolorous Edd had

said, "I knew a man once who wore his sword on a chain around his neck like that. One day he stumbled, and the hilt went up his nose."

Sam was stumbling himself. There were rocks beneath the snow, and the roots of trees, and sometimes deep holes in the frozen ground. Black Bernarr had stepped in one and broken his ankle three days past, or maybe four, or . . . he did not know how long it had been, truly. The Lord Commander had put Bernarr on a horse after that.

Sobbing, Sam took another step. It felt more like he was falling down than walking, falling endlessly but never hitting the ground, just falling forward and forward. *I have to stop, it hurts too much. I'm so cold and tired, I need to sleep, just a little sleep beside a fire, and a bite to eat that isn't frozen.*

But if he stopped he died. He knew that. They all knew that, the few who were left. They had been fifty when they fled the Fist, maybe more, but some had wandered off in the snow, a few wounded had bled to death . . . and sometimes Sam heard shouts behind him, from the rear guard, and once an *awful* scream. When he heard that he had run, twenty yards or thirty, as fast and as far as he could, his half-frozen feet kicking up the snow. He would be running still if his legs were stronger. *They are behind us, they are still behind us, they are taking us one by one.*

Sobbing, Sam took another step. He had been cold so long he was forgetting what it was like to feel warm. He wore three pairs of hose, two layers of smallclothes beneath a double lambswool tunic, and over that a thick quilted coat that padded him against the cold steel of his chainmail. Over the hauberk he had a loose surcoat, over *that* a triple-thick cloak with a bone button that fastened tight under his chins. Its hood flopped forward over his forehead. Heavy fur mitts covered his hands over thin wool-and-leather gloves, a scarf was wrapped snugly about the lower half of his face, and he had a tight-fitting fleece-lined cap to pull down over his ears beneath the hood. And still the cold was in him. His feet especially. He couldn't even feel them now, but only yesterday they had hurt so bad he could hardly bear to stand on them, let alone walk. Every step made him want to scream. Was that yesterday? He could not remember. He had not slept since the Fist, not once since the horn had blown. Unless it was while he was walking.

Could a man walk while he was sleeping? Sam did not know, or else he had forgotten.

Sobbing, he took another step. The snow swirled down around him. Sometimes it fell from a white sky, and sometimes from a black, but that was all that remained of day and night. He wore it on his shoulders like a second cloak, and it piled up high atop the pack he carried and made it even heavier and harder to bear. The small of his back hurt abominably, as if someone had shoved a knife in there and was wiggling it back and forth with every step. His shoulders were in agony from the weight of the mail. He would have given most anything to take it off, but he was afraid to. Anyway he would have needed to remove his cloak and surcoat to get at it, and then the cold would have him.

*If only I was stronger . . .* He wasn't, though, and it was no good wishing. Sam was weak, and fat, so very fat, he could hardly bear his own weight, the mail was much too much for him. It felt as though it was rubbing his shoulders raw, despite the layers of cloth and quilt between the steel and skin. The only thing he could do was cry, and when he cried the tears froze on his cheeks.

Sobbing, he took another step. The crust was broken where he set his feet, otherwise he did not think he could have moved at all. Off to the left and right, half-seen through the silent trees, torches turned to vague orange haloes in the falling snow. When he turned his head he could see them, slipping silent through the wood, bobbing up and down and back and forth. *The Old Bear's ring of fire*, he reminded himself, *and woe to him who leaves it*. As he walked, it seemed as if he were chasing the torches ahead of him, but they had legs as well, longer and stronger than his, so he could never catch them.

Yesterday he begged for them to let him be one of the torchbearers, even if it meant walking outside of the column with the darkness pressing close. He wanted the fire, dreamed of the fire. *If I had the fire, I would not be cold*. But someone reminded him that he'd *had* a torch at the start, but he'd dropped it in the snow and snuffed the fire out. Sam didn't remember dropping any torch, but he supposed it was true. He was too weak to hold his arm up for long. Was it Edd who reminded him about the torch, or

Grenn? He couldn't remember that either. *Fat and weak and useless, even my wits are freezing now.* He took another step.

He had wrapped his scarf over his nose and mouth, but it was covered with snot now, and so stiff he feared it must be frozen to his face. Even breathing was hard, and the air was so cold it hurt to swallow it. "Mother have mercy," he muttered in a hushed husky voice beneath the frozen mask. "Mother have mercy, Mother have mercy, Mother have mercy." With each prayer he took another step, dragging his legs through the snow. "Mother have mercy, Mother have mercy, Mother have mercy."

His own mother was a thousand leagues south, safe with his sisters and his little brother Dickon in the keep at Horn Hill. *She can't hear me, no more than the Mother Above.* The Mother was merciful, all the septons agreed, but the Seven had no power beyond the Wall. This was where the old gods ruled, the nameless gods of the trees and the wolves and the snows. "Mercy," he whispered then, to whatever might be listening, old gods or new, or demons too, "oh, mercy, mercy me, mercy me."

*Maslyn screamed for mercy.* Why had he suddenly remembered that? It was nothing he wanted to remember. The man had stumbled backward, dropping his sword, pleading, yielding, even yanking off his thick black glove and thrusting it up before him as if it were a gauntlet. He was still shrieking for quarter as the wight lifted him in the air by the throat and near ripped the head off him. *The dead have no mercy left in them, and the Others . . . no, I mustn't think of that, don't think, don't remember, just walk, just walk, just walk.*

Sobbing, he took another step.

A root beneath the crust caught his toe, and Sam tripped and fell heavily to one knee, so hard he bit his tongue. He could taste the blood in his mouth, warmer than anything he had tasted since the Fist. *This is the end,* he thought. Now that he had fallen he could not seem to find the strength to rise again. He groped for a tree branch and clutched it tight, trying to pull himself back to his feet, but his stiff legs would not support him. The mail was too heavy, and he was too fat besides, and too weak, and too tired.

"Back on your feet, Piggy," someone growled as he went past, but Sam paid him no mind. *I'll just lie down in the snow and close my eyes.* It

wouldn't be so bad, dying here. He couldn't possibly be any colder, and after a little while he wouldn't be able to feel the ache in his lower back or the terrible pain in his shoulders, no more than he could feel his feet. *I won't be the first to die, they can't say I was.* Hundreds had died on the Fist, they had died all around him, and more had died after, he'd seen them. Shivering, Sam released his grip on the tree and eased himself down in the snow. It was cold and wet, he knew, but he could scarcely feel it through all his clothing. He stared upward at the pale white sky as snowflakes drifted down upon his stomach and his chest and his eyelids. *The snow will cover me like a thick white blanket. It will be warm under the snow, and if they speak of me they'll have to say I died a man of the Night's Watch. I did. I did. I did my duty. No one can say I forswore myself. I'm fat and I'm weak and I'm craven, but I did my duty.*

The ravens had been his responsibility. That was why they had brought him along. He hadn't wanted to go, he'd told them so, he'd told them all what a big coward he was. But Maester Aemon was very old and blind besides, so they had to send Sam to tend to the ravens. The Lord Commander had given him his orders when they made their camp on the Fist. "You're no fighter. We both know that, boy. If it happens that we're attacked, don't go trying to prove otherwise, you'll just get in the way. You're to send a message. And don't come running to ask what the letter should say. Write it out yourself, and send one bird to Castle Black and another to the Shadow Tower." The Old Bear pointed a gloved finger right in Sam's face. "I don't care if you're so scared you foul your breeches, and I don't care if a thousand wildlings are coming over the walls howling for your blood, *you get those birds off*, or I swear I'll hunt you through all seven hells and make you damn sorry that you didn't." And Mormont's own raven had bobbed its head up and down and croaked, "*Sorry, sorry, sorry.*"

Sam *was* sorry; sorry he hadn't been braver, or stronger, or good with swords, that he hadn't been a better son to his father and a better brother to Dickon and the girls. He was sorry to die too, but better men had died on the Fist, good men and true, not squeaking fat boys like him. At least he would not have the Old Bear hunting him through hell, though. *I got the birds off. I did that right, at least.* He had written out the messages ahead of time, short messages and simple, telling of an attack on the Fist of the First

Men, and then he had tucked them away safe in his parchment pouch, hoping he would never need to send them.

When the horns blew Sam had been sleeping. He thought he was dreaming them at first, but when he opened his eyes snow was falling on the camp and the black brothers were all grabbing bows and spears and running toward the ringwall. Chett was the only one nearby, Maester Aemon's old steward with the face full of boils and the big wen on his neck. Sam had never seen so much fear on a man's face as he saw on Chett's when that third blast came moaning through the trees. "Help me get the birds off," he pleaded, but the other steward had turned and run off, dagger in hand. *He has the dogs to care for*, Sam remembered. Probably the Lord Commander had given him some orders as well.

His fingers had been so stiff and clumsy in the gloves, and he was shaking from fear and cold, but he found the parchment pouch and dug out the messages he'd written. The ravens were shrieking furiously, and when he opened the Castle Black cage one of them flew right in his face. Two more escaped before Sam could catch one, and when he did it pecked him through his glove, drawing blood. Yet somehow he held on long enough to attach the little roll of parchment. The warhorn had fallen silent by then, but the Fist rang with shouted commands and the clatter of steel. "*Fly!*" Sam called as he tossed the raven into the air.

The birds in the Shadow Tower cage were screaming and fluttering about so madly that he was afraid to open the door, but he made himself do it anyway. This time he caught the first raven that tried to escape. A moment later, it was clawing its way up through the falling snow, bearing word of the attack.

His duty done, he finished dressing with clumsy, frightened fingers, donning his cap and surcoat and hooded cloak and buckling on his swordbelt, buckling it real tight so it wouldn't fall down. Then he found his pack and stuffed all his things inside, spare smallclothes and dry socks, the dragonglass arrowheads and spearhead Jon had given him and the old horn too, his parchments, inks, and quills, the maps he'd been drawing, and a rock-hard garlic sausage he'd been saving since the Wall. He tied it all up and shouldered the pack onto his back. *The Lord Commander said I wasn't to rush to the ringwall*, he recalled, *but he said I shouldn't come running to*

*him either.* Sam took a deep breath and realized that he did not know what to do next.

He remembered turning in a circle, lost, the fear growing inside him as it always did. There were dogs barking and horses trumpeting, but the snow muffled the sounds and made them seem far away. Sam could see nothing beyond three yards, not even the torches burning along the low stone wall that ringed the crown of the hill. *Could the torches have gone out?* That was too scary to think about. *The horn blew thrice long, three long blasts means Others.* The white walkers of the wood, the cold shadows, the monsters of the tales that made him squeak and tremble as a boy, riding their giant ice-spiders, hungry for blood . . .

Awkwardly he drew his sword, and plodded heavily through the snow holding it. A dog ran past barking, and he saw some of the men from the Shadow Tower, big bearded men with longaxes and eight-foot spears. He felt safer for their company, so he followed them to the wall. When he saw the torches still burning atop the ring of stones a shudder of relief went through him.

The black brothers stood with swords and spears in hand, watching the snow fall, waiting. Ser Mallador Locke went by on his horse, wearing a snow-speckled helm. Sam stood well back behind the others, looking for Grenn or Dolorous Edd. *If I have to die, let me die beside my friends,* he remembered thinking. But all the men around him were strangers, Shadow Tower men under the command of the ranger named Blane.

“Here they come,” he heard a brother say.

“Notch,” said Blane, and twenty black arrows were pulled from as many quivers, and notched to as many bowstrings.

“Gods be good, there’s hundreds,” a voice said softly.

“Draw,” Blane said, and then, “hold.” Sam could not see and did not want to see. The men of the Night’s Watch stood behind their torches, waiting with arrows pulled back to their ears, as *something* came up that dark, slippery slope through the snow. “Hold,” Blane said again, “hold, hold.” And then, “Loose.”

The arrows whispered as they flew.

A ragged cheer went up from the men along the ringwall, but it died quickly. "They're not stopping, m'lord," a man said to Blane, and another shouted, "*More!* Look there, coming from the trees," and yet another said, "Gods ha' mercy, they's crawling. They's almost here, *they's on us!*" Sam had been backing away by then, shaking like the last leaf on the tree when the wind kicks up, as much from cold as from fear. It had been very cold that night. *Even colder than now. The snow feels almost warm. I feel better now. A little rest was all I needed. Maybe in a little while I'll be strong enough to walk again. In a little while.*

A horse stepped past his head, a shaggy grey beast with snow in its mane and hooves crusted with ice. Sam watched it come and watched it go. Another appeared from out of the falling snow, with a man in black leading it. When he saw Sam in his path he cursed him and led the horse around. *I wish I had a horse*, he thought. *If I had a horse I could keep going. I could sit, and even sleep some in the saddle.* Most of their mounts had been lost at the Fist, though, and those that remained carried their food, their torches, and their wounded. Sam wasn't wounded. *Only fat and weak, and the greatest craven in the Seven Kingdoms.*

He was *such* a coward. Lord Randyll, his father, had always said so, and he had been right. Sam was his heir, but he had never been worthy, so his father had sent him away to the Wall. His little brother Dickon would inherit the Tarly lands and castle, and the greatsword Heartsbane that the lords of Horn Hill had borne so proudly for centuries. He wondered whether Dickon would shed a tear for his brother who died in the snow, somewhere off beyond the edge of the world. *Why should he? A coward's not worth weeping over.* He had heard his father tell his mother as much, half a hundred times. The Old Bear knew it too.

"Fire arrows," the Lord Commander roared that night on the Fist, when he appeared suddenly astride his horse, "give them flame." It was then he noticed Sam there quaking. "*Tarly!* Get out of here! Your place is with the ravens."

"I . . . I . . . I got the messages away."

"Good." On Mormont's shoulder his own raven echoed, "*Good, good.*" The Lord Commander looked huge in fur and mail. Behind his black iron



visor, his eyes were fierce. “You’re in the way here. Go back to your cages. If I need to send another message, I don’t want to have to find you first. See that the birds are ready.” He did not wait for a response, but turned his horse and trotted around the ring, shouting, “Fire! Give them fire!”

Sam did not need to be told twice. He went back to the birds, as fast as his fat legs could carry him. *I should write the message ahead of time*, he thought, *so we can get the birds away as fast as need be*. It took him longer than it should have to light his little fire, to warm the frozen ink. He sat beside it on a rock with quill and parchment, and wrote his messages.

*Attacked amidst snow and cold, but we’ve thrown them back with fire arrows*, he wrote, as he heard Thoren Smallwood’s voice ring out with a command of, “Notch, draw . . . loose.” The flight of arrows made a sound as sweet as a mother’s prayer. “Burn, you dead bastards, burn,” Dywen sang out, cackling. The brothers cheered and cursed. *All safe*, he wrote. *We remain on the Fist of the First Men*. Sam hoped they were better archers than him.

He put that note aside and found another blank parchment. *Still fighting on the Fist, amidst heavy snow*, he wrote when someone shouted, “They’re still coming.” *Result uncertain*. “Spears,” someone said. It might have been Ser Mallador, but Sam could not swear to it. *Wights attacked us on the Fist, in snow*, he wrote, *but we drove them off with fire*. He turned his head. Through the drifting snow, all he could see was the huge fire at the center of the camp, with mounted men moving restlessly around it. The reserve, he knew, ready to ride down anything that breached the ringwall. They had armed themselves with torches in place of swords, and were lighting them in the flames.

*Wights all around us*, he wrote, when he heard the shouts from the north face. *Coming up from north and south at once. Spears and swords don’t stop them, only fire*. “Loose, loose, loose,” a voice screamed in the night, and another shouted, “Bloody huge,” and a third voice said, “A giant!” and a fourth insisted, “A bear, a bear!” A horse shrieked and the hounds began to bay, and there was so much shouting that Sam couldn’t make out the voices anymore. He wrote faster, note after note. *Dead wildlings, and a giant, or maybe a bear, on us, all around*. He heard the crash of steel on wood, which could only mean one thing. *Wights over the ringwall. Fighting*

*inside the camp. A dozen mounted brothers pounded past him toward the east wall, burning brands streaming flames in each rider's hand. Lord Commander Mormont is meeting them with fire. We've won. We're winning. We're holding our own. We're cutting our way free and retreating for the Wall. We're trapped on the Fist, hard pressed.*

One of the Shadow Tower men came staggering out of the darkness to fall at Sam's feet. He crawled within a foot of the fire before he died. *Lost, Sam wrote, the battle's lost. We're all lost.*

Why must he remember the fight at the Fist? He didn't want to remember. Not *that*. He tried to make himself remember his mother, or his little sister Talla, or that girl Gilly at Craster's Keep. Someone was shaking him by the shoulder. "Get up," a voice said. "Sam, you can't go to sleep here. Get up and keep walking."

*I wasn't asleep, I was remembering.* "Go away," he said, his words frosting in the cold air. "I'm well. I want to rest."

"Get up." Grenn's voice, harsh and husky. He loomed over Sam, his blacks crusty with snow. "There's no resting, the Old Bear said. You'll die."

"Grenn." He smiled. "No, truly, I'm good here. You just go on. I'll catch you after I've rested a bit longer."

"You won't." Grenn's thick brown beard was frozen all around his mouth. It made him look like some old man. "You'll freeze, or the Others will get you. Sam, *get up!*"

The night before they left the Wall, Pyp had teased Grenn the way he did, Sam remembered, smiling and saying how Grenn was a good choice for the ranging, since he was too stupid to be terrified. Grenn hotly denied it until he realized what he was saying. He was stocky and thick-necked and strong—Ser Alliser Thorne had called him "Aurochs," the same way he called Sam "Ser Piggy" and Jon "Lord Snow"—but he had always treated Sam nice enough. *That was only because of Jon, though. If it weren't for Jon, none of them would have liked me.* And now Jon was gone, lost in the Skirling Pass with Qhorin Halfhand, most likely dead. Sam would have cried for him, but those tears would only freeze as well, and he could scarcely keep his eyes open now.

A tall brother with a torch stopped beside them, and for a wonderful moment Sam felt the warmth on his face. "Leave him," the man said to Grenn. "If they can't walk, they're done. Save your strength for yourself, Grenn."

"He'll get up," Grenn replied. "He only needs a hand."

The man moved on, taking the blessed warmth with him. Grenn tried to pull Sam to his feet. "That hurts," he complained. "Stop it. Grenn, you're hurting my arm. Stop it."

"You're too bloody heavy." Grenn jammed his hands into Sam's armpits, gave a grunt, and hauled him upright. But the moment he let go, the fat boy sat back down in the snow. Grenn kicked him, a solid thump that cracked the crust of snow around his boot and sent it flying everywhere. "Get *up!*" He kicked him again. "Get up and walk. You have to walk."

Sam fell over sideways, curling up into a tight ball to protect himself from the kicks. He hardly felt them through all his wool and leather and mail, but even so, they hurt. *I thought Grenn was my friend. You shouldn't kick your friends. Why won't they let me be? I just need to rest, that's all, to rest and sleep some, and maybe die a little.*

"If you take the torch, I can take the fat boy."

Suddenly he was jerked up into the cold air, away from his sweet soft snow; he was floating. There was an arm under his knees, and another one under his back. Sam raised his head and blinked. A face loomed close, a broad brutal face with a flat nose and small dark eyes and a thicket of coarse brown beard. He had seen the face before, but it took him a moment to remember. *Paul. Small Paul.* Melting ice ran down into his eyes from the heat of the torch. "Can you carry him?" he heard Grenn ask.

"I carried a calf once was heavier than him. I carried him down to his mother so he could get a drink of milk."

Sam's head bobbed up and down with every step that Small Paul took. "Stop it," he muttered, "put me down, I'm not a baby. I'm a man of the Night's Watch." He sobbed. "Just let me die."

"Be quiet, Sam," said Grenn. "Save your strength. Think about your sisters and brother. Maester Aemon. Your favorite foods. Sing a song if you

like.”

“Aloud?”

“In your head.”

Sam knew a hundred songs, but when he tried to think of one he couldn’t. The words had all gone from his head. He sobbed again and said, “I don’t know any songs, Grenn. I did know some, but now I don’t.”

“Yes you do,” said Grenn. “How about ‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair,’ everybody knows that one. *A bear there was, a bear, a bear! All black and brown and covered with hair!*”

“No, not that one,” Sam pleaded. The bear that had come up the Fist had no hair left on its rotted flesh. He didn’t want to think about bears. “No songs. Please, Grenn.”

“Think about your ravens, then.”

“They were never mine.” *They were the Lord Commander’s ravens, the ravens of the Night’s Watch.* “They belonged to Castle Black and the Shadow Tower.”

Small Paul frowned. “Chett said I could have the Old Bear’s raven, the one that talks. I saved food for it and everything.” He shook his head. “I forgot, though. I left the food where I hid it.” He plodded onward, pale white breath coming from his mouth with every step, then suddenly said, “Could I have one of your ravens? Just the one. I’d never let Lark eat it.”

“They’re gone,” said Sam. “I’m sorry.” *So sorry.* “They’re flying back to the Wall now.” He had set the birds free when he’d heard the warhorns sound once more, calling the Watch to horse. *Two short blasts and a long one, that was the call to mount up.* But there was no reason to mount, unless to abandon the Fist, and that meant the battle was lost. The fear bit him so strong then that it was all Sam could do to open the cages. Only as he watched the last raven flap up into the snowstorm did he realize that he had forgotten to send any of the messages he’d written.

“No,” he’d squealed, “oh, no, oh, no.” The snow fell and the horns blew; *ahooo ahooo ahooooooooooooooooooooo, they cried,* to horse, to horse, to horse. Sam saw two ravens perched on a rock and ran after them, but the birds flapped off lazily through the swirling snow, in opposite directions.

He chased one, his breath puffing out his nose in thick white clouds, stumbled, and found himself ten feet from the ringwall.

After that . . . he remembered the dead coming over the stones with arrows in their faces and through their throats. Some were all in ringmail and some were almost naked . . . wildings, most of them, but a few wore faded blacks. He remembered one of the Shadow Tower men shoving his spear through a wight's pale soft belly and out his back, and how the thing staggered right up the shaft and reached out his black hands and twisted the brother's head around until blood came out his mouth. That was when his bladder let go the first time, he was almost sure.

He did not remember running, but he must have, because the next he knew he was near the fire half a camp away, with old Ser Ottyn Wythers and some archers. Ser Ottyn was on his knees in the snow, staring at the chaos around them, until a riderless horse came by and kicked him in the face. The archers paid him no mind. They were loosing fire arrows at shadows in the dark. Sam saw one wight hit, saw the flames engulf it, but there were a dozen more behind it, and a huge pale shape that must have been the bear, and soon enough the bowmen had no arrows.

And then Sam found himself on a horse. It wasn't his own horse, and he never recalled mounting up either. Maybe it was the horse that had smashed Ser Ottyn's face in. The horns were still blowing, so he kicked the horse and turned him toward the sound.

In the midst of carnage and chaos and blowing snow, he found Dolorous Edd sitting on his garron with a plain black banner on a spear. "Sam," Edd said when he saw him, "would you wake me, please? I am having this terrible nightmare."

More men were mounting up every moment. The warhorns called them back. *Ahooo ahooo ahooooooooooooooooooooo*. "They're over the west wall, m'lord," Thoren Smallwood screamed at the Old Bear, as he fought to control his horse. "I'll send reserves . . ."

"*NO!*" Mormont had to bellow at the top of his lungs to be heard over the horns. "Call them back, we have to cut our way out." He stood in his stirrups, his black cloak snapping in the wind, the fire shining off his armor.

“*Spearhead!*” he roared. “Form wedge, we ride. Down the south face, then east!”

“My lord, the south slope’s crawling with them!”

“The others are too steep,” Mormont said. “We have—”

His garron screamed and reared and almost threw him as the bear came staggering through the snow. Sam pissed himself all over again. *I didn’t think I had any more left inside me.* The bear was dead, pale and rotting, its fur and skin all sloughed off and half its right arm burned to bone, yet still it came on. Only its eyes lived. *Bright blue, just as Jon said.* They shone like frozen stars. Thoren Smallwood charged, his longsword shining all orange and red from the light of the fire. His swing near took the bear’s head off. And then the bear took his.

“*RIDE!*” the Lord Commander shouted, wheeling.

They were at the gallop by the time they reached the ring. Sam had always been too frightened to jump a horse before, but when the low stone wall loomed up before him he knew he had no choice. He kicked and closed his eyes and whimpered, and the garron took him over, somehow, *somehow*, the garron took him over. The rider to his right came crashing down in a tangle of steel and leather and screaming horseflesh, and then the wights were swarming over him and the wedge was closing up. They plunged down the hillside at a run, through clutching black hands and burning blue eyes and blowing snow. Horses stumbled and rolled, men were swept from their saddles, torches spun through the air, axes and swords hacked at dead flesh, and Samwell Tarly sobbed, clutching desperately to his horse with a strength he never knew he had.

He was in the middle of the flying spearhead with brothers on either side, and before and behind him as well. A dog ran with them for a ways, bounding down the snowy slope and in and out among the horses, but it could not keep up. The wights stood their ground and were ridden down and trampled underhoof. Even as they fell they clutched at swords and stirrups and the legs of passing horses. Sam saw one claw open a garron’s belly with its right hand while it clung to the saddle with its left.

Suddenly the trees were all about them, and Sam was splashing through a frozen stream with the sounds of slaughter dwindling behind. He turned,

breathless with relief . . . until a man in black leapt from the brush and yanked him out of the saddle. Who he was, Sam never saw; he was up in an instant, and galloping away the next. When he tried to run after the horse, his feet tangled in a root and he fell hard on his face and lay weeping like a baby until Dolorous Edd found him there.

That was his last coherent memory of the Fist of the First Men. Later, hours later, he stood shivering among the other survivors, half mounted and half afoot. They were miles from the Fist by then, though Sam did not remember how. Dywen had led down five packhorses, heavy laden with food and oil and torches, and three had made it this far. The Old Bear made them redistribute the loads, so the loss of any one horse and its provisions would not be such a catastrophe. He took garrons from the healthy men and gave them to the wounded, organized the walkers, and set torches to guard their flanks and rear. *All I need do is walk*, Sam told himself, as he took that first step toward home. But before an hour was gone he had begun to struggle, and to lag . . .

They were lagging now as well, he saw. He remembered Pyp saying once how Small Paul was the strongest man in the Watch. *He must be, to carry me*. Yet even so, the snow was growing deeper, the ground more treacherous, and Paul's strides had begun to shorten. More horsemen passed, wounded men who looked at Sam with dull incurious eyes. Some torch bearers went by as well. "You're falling behind," one told them. The next agreed. "No one's like to wait for you, Paul. Leave the pig for the dead men."

"He promised I could have a bird," Small Paul said, even though Sam hadn't, not truly. *They aren't mine to give*. "I want me a bird that talks, and eats corn from my hand."

"Bloody fool," the torch man said. Then he was gone.

It was a while after when Grenn stopped suddenly. "We're alone," he said in a hoarse voice. "I can't see the other torches. Was that the rear guard?"

Small Paul had no answer for him. The big man gave a grunt and sank to his knees. His arms trembled as he lay Sam gently in the snow. "I can't carry you no more. I would, but I can't." He shivered violently.

The wind sighed through the trees, driving a fine spray of snow into their faces. The cold was so bitter that Sam felt naked. He looked for the other torches, but they were gone, every one of them. There was only the one Grenn carried, the flames rising from it like pale orange silks. He could see through them, to the black beyond. *That torch will burn out soon*, he thought, *and we are all alone, without food or friends or fire.*

But that was wrong. They weren't alone at all.

The lower branches of the great green sentinel shed their burden of snow with a soft wet *plop*. Grenn spun, thrusting out his torch. "Who goes there?" A horse's head emerged from the darkness. Sam felt a moment's relief, until he saw the horse. Hoarfrost covered it like a sheen of frozen sweat, and a nest of stiff black entrails dragged from its open belly. On its back was a rider pale as ice. Sam made a whimpery sound deep in his throat. He was so scared he might have pissed himself all over again, but the cold was in him, a cold so savage that his bladder felt frozen solid. The Other slid gracefully from the saddle to stand upon the snow. Sword-slim it was, and milky white. Its armor rippled and shifted as it moved, and its feet did not break the crust of the new-fallen snow.

Small Paul unslung the long-hafted axe strapped across his back. "Why'd you hurt that horse? That was Mawney's horse."

Sam groped for the hilt of his sword, but the scabbard was empty. He had lost it on the Fist, he remembered too late.

"Get away!" Grenn took a step, thrusting the torch out before him. "*Away*, or you burn." He poked at it with the flames.

The Other's sword gleamed with a faint blue glow. It moved toward Grenn, lightning quick, slashing. When the ice blue blade brushed the flames, a screech stabbed Sam's ears sharp as a needle. The head of the torch tumbled sideways to vanish beneath a deep drift of snow, the fire snuffed out at once. And all Grenn held was a short wooden stick. He flung it at the Other, cursing, as Small Paul charged in with his axe.

The fear that filled Sam then was worse than any fear he had ever felt before, and Samwell Tarly knew every kind of fear. "Mother have mercy," he wept, forgetting the old gods in his terror. "Father protect me, oh oh . . ." His fingers found his dagger and he filled his hand with that.



The wights had been slow clumsy things, but the Other was light as snow on the wind. It slid away from Paul's axe, armor rippling, and its crystal sword twisted and spun and slipped between the iron rings of Paul's mail, through leather and wool and bone and flesh. It came out his back with a *hissssssssssss* and Sam heard Paul say, "Oh," as he lost the axe. Impaled, his blood smoking around the sword, the big man tried to reach his killer with his hands and almost had before he fell. The weight of him tore the strange pale sword from the Other's grip.

*Do it now. Stop crying and fight, you baby. Fight, craven.* It was his father he heard, it was Alliser Thorne, it was his brother Dickon and the boy Rast. *Craven, craven, craven.* He giggled hysterically, wondering if they would make a wight of him, a huge fat white wight always tripping over its own dead feet. *Do it, Sam.* Was that Jon, now? Jon was dead. *You can do it, you can, just do it.* And then he was stumbling forward, falling more than running, really, closing his eyes and shoving the dagger blindly out before him with both hands. He heard a *crack*, like the sound ice makes when it breaks beneath a man's foot, and then a screech so shrill and sharp that he went staggering backward with his hands over his muffled ears, and fell hard on his arse.

When he opened his eyes the Other's armor was running down its legs in rivulets as pale blue blood hissed and steamed around the black dragonglass dagger in its throat. It reached down with two bone-white hands to pull out the knife, but where its fingers touched the obsidian they *smoked*.

Sam rolled onto his side, eyes wide as the Other shrank and puddled, dissolving away. In twenty heartbeats its flesh was gone, swirling away in a fine white mist. Beneath were bones like milkglass, pale and shiny, and they were melting too. Finally only the dragonglass dagger remained, wreathed in steam as if it were alive and sweating. Grenn bent to scoop it up and flung it down again at once. "Mother, that's *cold*."

"Obsidian." Sam struggled to his knees. "Dragonglass, they call it. Dragonglass. *Dragon* glass." He giggled, and cried, and doubled over to heave his courage out onto the snow.

Grenn pulled Sam to his feet, checked Small Paul for a pulse and closed his eyes, then snatched up the dagger again. This time he was able to hold

it.

“You keep it,” Sam said. “You’re not craven like me.”

“So craven you killed an Other.” Grenn pointed with the knife. “Look there, through the trees. Pink light. Dawn, Sam. Dawn. That must be east. If we head that way, we should catch Mormont.”

“If you say.” Sam kicked his left foot against a tree, to knock off all the snow. Then the right. “I’ll try.” Grimacing, he took a step. “I’ll try hard.” And then another.