

SAMWELL

Sam stood before the window, rocking nervously as he watched the last light of the sun vanish behind a row of sharp-peaked rooftops. *He must have gotten drunk again*, he thought glumly. *Or else he's met another girl.* He did not know whether to curse or weep. Dareon was supposed to be his brother. *Ask him to sing, and no one could be better. Ask him to do aught else...*

The mists of evening had begun to rise, sending grey fingers up the walls of the buildings that lined the old canal. "He promised he'd be back," Sam said. "You heard him too."

Gilly looked at him with eyes red-rimmed and puffy. Her hair hung about her face, unwashed and tangled. She looked like some wary animal peering through a bush. It had been days since they'd last had a fire, yet the wildling girl liked to huddle near the hearth, as if the cold ashes still held some lingering warmth. "He doesn't like it here with us," she said, whispering so as not to wake the babe. "It's sad here. He likes it where the wine is, and the smiles."

Yes, thought Sam, *and the wine is everywhere but here*. Braavos was full of inns, alehouses, and brothels. And if Dareon preferred a fire and a cup of mulled wine to stale bread and the company of a weeping woman, a fat craven, and a sick old man, who could blame him? *I could blame him. He said he would be back before the gloaming; he said he would bring us wine and food.*

He looked out the window once more, hoping against hope to see the singer hurrying home. Darkness was falling across the secret city, creeping through the alleys and down the canals. The good folk of Braavos would soon be shuttering their windows and sliding bars across their doors. Night belonged to the bravos and the courtesans. *Dareon's new friends*, Sam thought bitterly. They were all the singer could talk about of late. He was trying to write a song about one courtesan, a woman called the Moonshadow who had heard him singing beside the Moon Pool and

rewarded him with a kiss. “You should have asked her for silver,” Sam had said. “It’s coin we need, not kisses.” But the singer only smiled. “Some kisses are worth more than yellow gold, Slayer.”

That made him angry too. Dareon was not supposed to be making up songs about courtesans. He was supposed to be singing about the Wall and the valor of the Night’s Watch. Jon had hoped that perhaps his songs might persuade a few young men to take the black. Instead he sang of golden kisses, silvery hair, and red, red lips. No one ever took the black for red, red lips.

Sometimes his playing would wake the babe too. Then the child would begin to wail, Dareon would shout at him to be quiet, Gilly would weep, and the singer would storm out and not return for days. “All that weeping makes me want to slap her,” he complained, “and I can scarce sleep for her sobbing.”

You would weep as well if you had a son and lost him, Sam almost said. He could not blame Gilly for her grief. Instead, he blamed Jon Snow and wondered when Jon’s heart had turned to stone. Once he asked Maester Aemon that very question, when Gilly was down at the canal fetching water for them. “When you raised him up to be the lord commander,” the old man answered.

Even now, rotting here in this cold room beneath the eaves, part of Sam did not want to believe that Jon had done what Maester Aemon thought. *It must be true, though. Why else would Gilly weep so much?* All he had to do was ask her whose child she was nursing at her breast, but he did not have the courage. He was afraid of the answer he might get. *I am still a craven, Jon.* No matter where he went in this wide world, his fears went with him.

A hollow rumbling echoed off the roofs of Braavos, like the sound of distant thunder; the Titan, sounding nightfall from across the lagoon. The noise was loud enough to wake the babe, and his sudden wail woke Maester Aemon. As Gilly went to give the boy the breast, the old man’s eyes opened, and he stirred feebly in his narrow bed. “Egg? It’s dark. Why is it so dark?”

Because you're blind. Aemon's wits were wandering more and more since they arrived at Braavos. Some days he did not seem to know where he was. Some days he would lose his way when saying something and begin to ramble on about his father or his brother. *He is one hundred and two*, Sam reminded himself, but he had been just as old at Castle Black and his wits had never wandered there.

"It's me," he had to say. "Samwell Tarly. Your steward."

"Sam." Maester Aemon licked his lips, and blinked. "Yes. And this is Braavos. Forgive me, Sam. Is morning come?"

"No." Sam felt the old man's brow. His skin was damp with sweat, cool and clammy to the touch, his every breath a soft wheeze. "It's night, maester. You've been asleep."

"Too long. It's cold in here."

"We have no wood," Sam told him, "and the innkeep will not give us more unless we have the coin." It was the fourth or fifth time they'd had this same conversation. *I should have used our coin for wood*, Sam chided himself every time. *I should have had the sense to keep him warm.*

Instead he had squandered the last of their silver on a healer from the House of the Red Hands, a tall pale man in robes embroidered with swirling stripes of red and white. All that the silver bought him was half a flask of dreamwine. "This may help gentle his passing," the Braavosi had said, not unkindly. When Sam asked if there wasn't any more that he could do, he shook his head. "Ointments I have, potions and infusions, tinctures and venoms and poultices. I might bleed him, purge him, leech him... but why? No leech can make him young again. This is an old man, and death is in his lungs. Give him this and let him sleep."

And so he had, all night and all day, but now the old man was struggling to sit. "We must go down to the ships."

The ships again. "You're too weak to go out," he had to say. A chill had gotten inside Maester Aemon during the voyage and settled in his chest. By the time they got to Braavos, he had been so weak they'd had to carry him ashore. They'd still had a fat bag of silver then, so Dareon had asked for the

inn's biggest bed. The one they'd gotten was large enough to sleep eight, so the innkeep insisted on charging them for that many.

"On the morrow we can go to the docks," Sam promised. "You can ask about and find which ship is departing next for Oldtown." Even in autumn, Braavos was still a busy port. Once Aemon was strong enough to travel, they should have no trouble finding a suitable vessel to take them where they had to go. Paying for their passage would prove more difficult. A ship from the Seven Kingdoms would be their best hope. *A trader out of Oldtown, maybe, with kin in the Night's Watch. There must still be some who honor the men who walk the Wall.*

"Oldtown," Maester Aemon wheezed. "Yes. I dreamt of Oldtown, Sam. I was young again and my brother Egg was with me, with that big knight he served. We were drinking in the old inn where they make the fearsomely strong cider." He tried to rise again, but the effort proved too much for him. After a moment he settled back. "The ships," he said again. "We will find our answer there. About the dragons. I need to know."

No, thought Sam, it's food and warmth you need, a full belly and a hot fire crackling in the hearth. "Are you hungry, maester? We have some bread left, and a bit of cheese."

"Not just now, Sam. Later, when I'm feeling stronger."

"How will you get stronger unless you eat?" None of them had eaten much at sea, not after Skagos. The autumn gales had hounded them all across the narrow sea. Sometimes they came up from the south, roiling with thunder and lightning and black rains that fell for days. Sometimes they came down from the north, cold and grim, with savage winds that cut right through a man. Once it got so cold that Sam had woken to find the whole ship coated in ice, shining as white as pearl. The captain had taken down their mast and tied it to the deck, to finish the crossing on oars alone. No one had been eating by the time they saw the Titan.

Once safe ashore, though, Sam had found himself ravenously hungry. It was the same for Daeon and Gilly. Even the babe had begun to suck more lustily. Aemon, though...

“The bread’s gone stale, but I can beg some gravy from the kitchens to soak it in,” Sam told the old man. The innkeep was a hard man, cold-eyed and suspicious of these black-clad strangers beneath his roof, but his cook was kinder.

“No. Perhaps a sip of wine, though?”

They had no wine. Dareon had promised to buy some with the coin from his singing. “We’ll have wine later,” Sam had to say. “There’s water, but it’s not the good water.” The good water came over the arches of the great brick aqueduct the Braavosi called the sweetwater river. Rich men had it piped into their homes; the poor filled their pails and buckets at public fountains. Sam had sent Gilly out to get some, forgetting that the wildling girl had lived her whole life in sight of Craster’s Keep and never seen so much as a market town. The stony maze of islands and canals that was Braavos, devoid of grass and trees and teeming with strangers who spoke to her in words she could not understand, frightened her so badly that she lost the map and soon herself. Sam found her weeping at the stony feet of some long-dead sealord. “All we have is canal water,” he told Maester Aemon, “but the cook gave it a boil. There’s dreamwine too, if you need more of that.”

“I have dreamt enough for now. Canal water will suffice. Help me, if you would.”

Sam eased the old man up and held the cup to his dry, cracked lips. Even so, half the water dribbled down the maester’s chest. “Enough,” Aemon coughed, after a few sips. “You’ll drown me.” He shivered in Sam’s arms. “Why is the room so cold?”

“There’s no more wood.” Dareon had paid the innkeep double for a room with a hearth, but none of them had realized that wood would be so costly here. Trees did not grow on Braavos, save in the courts and gardens of the mighty. Nor would the Braavosi cut the pines that covered the outlying islands around their great lagoon and acted as windbreaks to shield them from storms. Instead, firewood was brought in by barge, up the rivers and across the lagoon. Even dung was dear here; the Braavosi used boats in place of horses. None of that would have mattered if they had departed as

planned for Oldtown, but that had proved impossible with Maester Aemon so weak. Another voyage on the open sea would kill him.

Aemon's hand crept across the blankets, groping for Sam's arm. "We must go to the docks, Sam."

"When you are stronger." The old man was in no state to brave the salt spray and wet winds along the waterfront, and Braavos was all waterfront. To the north was the Purple Harbor, where Braavosi traders tied up beneath the domes and towers of the Sealord's Palace. To the west lay the Ragman's Harbor, crowded with ships from the other Free Cities, from Westeros and Ibben and the fabled, far-off lands of the east. And everywhere else were little piers and ferry berths and old grey wharves where shrimpers and crabbers and fisherfolk moored after working the mudflats and river mouths. "It would be too great a strain on you."

"Then go in my stead," Aemon urged, "and bring me someone who has seen these dragons."

"Me?" Sam was dismayed by the suggestion. "Maester, it was only a story. A sailor's story." Dareon was to blame for this as well. The singer had been bringing back all manner of queer tales from the alehouses and brothels. Unfortunately, he had been in his cups when he heard the one about the dragons and could not recall the details. "Dareon may have made up the whole story. Singers do that. They make things up."

"They do," said Maester Aemon, "but even the most fanciful song may hold a kernel of truth. Find that truth for me, Sam."

"I wouldn't know who to ask, or how to ask him. I only have a little High Valyrian, and when they speak to me in Braavosi I cannot understand half of what they're saying. You speak more tongues than I do, once you are stronger you can..."

"When will I be stronger, Sam? Tell me that."

"Soon. If you rest and eat. When we reach Oldtown..."

"I shall not see Oldtown again. I know that now." The old man tightened his grip on Sam's arm. "I will be with my brothers soon. Some were bound to me by vows and some by blood, but they were all my

brothers. And my father... he never thought the throne would pass to him, and yet it did. He used to say that was his punishment for the blow that slew his brother. I pray he found the peace in death that he never knew in life. The septons sing of sweet surcease, of laying down our burdens and voyaging to a far sweet land where we may laugh and love and feast until the end of days... but what if there is no land of light and honey, only cold and dark and pain beyond the wall called death?"

He is afraid, Sam realized. "You are not dying. You're ill, that's all. It will pass."

"Not this time, Sam. I dreamed... in the black of night a man asks all the questions he dare not ask by daylight. For me, these past years, only one question has remained. Why would the gods take my eyes and my strength, yet condemn me to linger on so long, frozen and forgotten? What use could they have for an old done man like me?" Aemon's fingers trembled, twigs sheathed in spotted skin. "I remember, Sam. I still remember."

He was not making sense. "Remember what?"

"Dragons," Aemon whispered. "The grief and glory of my House, they were."

"The last dragon died before you were born," said Sam. "How could you remember them?"

"I see them in my dreams, Sam. I see a red star bleeding in the sky. I still remember red. I see their shadows on the snow, hear the crack of leathern wings, feel their hot breath. My brothers dreamed of dragons too, and the dreams killed them, every one. Sam, we tremble on the cusp of half-remembered prophecies, of wonders and terrors that no man now living could hope to comprehend... or..."

"Or?" said Sam.

"...or not." Aemon chuckled softly. "Or I am an old man, feverish and dying." He closed his white eyes wearily, then forced them open once again. "I should not have left the Wall. Lord Snow could not have known, but *I* should have seen it. Fire consumes, but cold preserves. The Wall... but it is too late to go running back. The Stranger waits outside my door and

will not be denied. Steward, you have served me faithfully. Do this one last brave thing for me. Go down to the ships, Sam. Learn all you can about these dragons.”

Sam eased his arm out of the old man’s grasp. “I will. If you want. I only...” He did not know what else to say. *I cannot refuse him.* He could look for Dareon as well, along the docks and wharves of the Ragman’s Harbor. *I will find Dareon first, and we’ll go to the ships together. And when we come back, we’ll bring food and wine and wood. We’ll have a fire and a good hot meal.* He rose. “Well. I should go, then. If I am going. Gilly will be here. Gilly, bar the door when I am gone.” *The Stranger waits outside the door.*

Gilly nodded, cradling the babe against her breast, her eyes welling full of tears. *She is going to weep again,* Sam realized. It was more than he could take. His swordbelt hung from a peg on the wall, beside the old cracked horn that Jon had given him. He ripped it down and buckled it about him, then swept his black wool cloak about his rounded shoulders, slumped through the door, and clattered down a wooden stair whose steps creaked beneath his weight. The inn had two front doors, one opening on a street and one on a canal. Sam went out through the former, to avoid the common room where the innkeep was sure to give him the sour eye that he reserved for guests who had overstayed their welcome.

There was a chill in the air, but the night was not half so foggy as some. Sam was grateful for that much. Sometimes the mists covered the ground so thick that a man could not see his own feet. Once he had come within a step of walking into a canal.

As a boy Sam had read a history of Braavos and dreamed of one day coming here. He wanted to behold the Titan rising stern and fearsome from the sea, glide down the canals in a serpent boat past all the palaces and temples, and watch the bravos do their water dance, blades flashing in the starlight. But now that he was here, all he wanted was to leave and go to Oldtown.

With his hood up and his cloak flapping, he made his way along the cobblestones toward the Ragman’s Harbor. His swordbelt kept threatening

to fall down about his ankles, so he had to keep tugging it back up as he went. He stayed to the smaller, darker streets, where he was less likely to encounter anyone, yet every passing cat still made his heart thump... and Braavos crawled with cats. *I need to find Dareon*, he thought. *He is a man of the Night's Watch, my Sworn Brother; he and I will puzzle out what to do.* Maester Aemon's strength was gone, and Gilly would have been lost here even if she had not been grief-stricken, but Dareon... *I should not think ill of him. He could be hurt, perhaps that is why he did not come back. He could be dead, lying in some alley in a pool of blood, or floating facedown in one of the canals.* At night the bravos swaggered through the city in their parti-colored finery, spoiling to prove their skill with those slender swords they wore. Some would fight for any cause, some for none at all, and Dareon had a loose tongue and quick temper, especially when he'd been drinking. *Just because a man can sing about battles doesn't mean he's fit to fight one.*

The best alehouses, inns, and brothels were near the Purple Harbor or the Moon Pool, but Dareon preferred the Ragman's Harbor, where the patrons were more apt to speak the Common Tongue. Sam began his search at the Inn of the Green Eel, the Black Bargeman, and Moroggo's, places where Dareon had played before. He was not to be found at any of them. Outside the Foghouse several serpent boats were tied up awaiting patrons, and Sam tried to ask the polemen if they had seen a singer all in black, but none of the polemen understood his High Valyrian. *That, or they do not chose to understand.* Sam peered into the dingy winesink beneath the second arch of Nabbo's Bridge, barely large enough to accommodate ten people. Dareon was not one of them. He tried the Outcast Inn, the House of Seven Lamps, and the brothel called the Cattery, where he got strange looks but no help.

Leaving, he almost bumped into two young men beneath the Cattery's red lantern. One was dark and one was fair. The dark-haired one said something in Braavosi. "I am sorry," Sam had to say. "I do not understand." He edged away from them, afraid. In the Seven Kingdoms nobles draped themselves in velvets, silks, and samites of a hundred hues whilst peasants and smallfolk wore raw wool and dull brown roughspun. In Braavos it was otherwise. The bravos swaggered about like peacocks, fingering their

swords, whilst the mighty dressed in charcoal grey and purple, blues that were almost black and blacks as dark as a moonless night.

“My friend Terro says you are so fat you make him sick,” said the fair-haired bravo, whose jacket was green velvet on one side and cloth-of-silver on the other. “My friend Terro says that the rattle of your sword makes his head ache.” He was speaking in the Common Tongue. The other one, the dark-haired bravo in the burgundy brocade and yellow cloak whose name would appear to have been Terro, made some comment in Braavosi, and his fair-haired friend laughed, and said, “My friend Terro says you dress above your station. Are you some great lord, to wear the black?”

Sam wanted to run, but if he did was like to trip over his own swordbelt. *Do not touch your sword*, he told himself. Even a finger on the hilt might be enough for one or the other of the bravos to take as a challenge. He tried to think of words that might appease them. “I’m not—” was all he managed.

“He is not a lord,” a child’s voice put in. “He’s in the Night’s Watch, stupid. From *Westeros*.” A girl edged into the light, pushing a barrow full of seaweed; a scruffy, skinny creature in big boots, with ragged unwashed hair. “There’s another one down at the Happy Port, singing songs to the Sailor’s Wife,” she informed the two bravos. To Sam she said, “If they ask who is the most beautiful woman in the world, say the Nightingale or else they’ll challenge you. Do you want to buy some clams? I sold all my oysters.”

“I have no coin,” Sam said.

“He has no coin,” mocked the fair-haired bravo. His dark-haired friend grinned and said something in Braavosi. “My friend Terro is chilly. Be our good fat friend and give him your cloak.”

“Don’t do that either,” said the barrow girl, “or else they’ll ask for your boots next, and before long you’ll be naked.”

“Little cats who howl too loud get drowned in the canals,” warned the fair-haired bravo.

“Not if they have claws.” And suddenly there was a knife in the girl’s left hand, a blade as skinny as she was. The one called Terro said something

to his fair-haired friend and the two of them moved off, chuckling at one another.

“Thank you,” Sam told the girl when they were gone.

Her knife vanished. “If you wear a sword at night it means you can be challenged. Did you *want* to fight them?”

“No.” It came out in a squeak that made Sam wince.

“Are you truly in the Night’s Watch? I never saw a black brother like you before.” The girl gestured at the barrow. “You can have the last clams if you want. It’s dark, no one will buy them now. Are you sailing to the Wall?”

“To Oldtown.” Sam took one of the baked clams and wolfed it down. “We’re between ships.” The clam was good. He ate another.

“The bravos never bother anyone without a sword. Not even stupid camel cunts like Terro and Orbelo.”

“Who are you?”

“No one.” She stank of fish. “I used to be someone, but now I’m not. You can call me Cat, if you like. Who are you?”

“Samwell, of House Tarly. You speak the Common Tongue.”

“My father was the oarmaster on *Nymeria*. A bravo killed him for saying that my mother was more beautiful than the Nightingale. Not one of those camel cunts you met, a real bravo. Someday I’ll slit his throat. The captain said *Nymeria* had no need of little girls, so he put me off. Brusco took me in and gave me a barrow.” She looked up at him. “What ship will you be sailing on?”

“We bought passage on the *Lady Ushanora*.”

The girl squinted at him suspiciously. “She’s gone. Don’t you know? She left days and days ago.”

I know, Sam might have said. He and Dareon had stood on the dock watching the rise and fall of her oars as she beat for the Titan and the open sea. “Well,” the singer said, “that’s done.” If Sam had been a braver man, he would have shoved him into the water. When it came to talking girls out of

their clothes Dareon had a honeyed tongue, yet in the captain's cabin somehow Sam had done all the talking, trying to persuade the Braavosi to wait for them. "Three days I have waited for this old man," the captain had said. "My holds are full, and my men have fucked their wives farewell. With you or without, my *Lady* leaves on the tide."

"Please," Sam had pleaded. "Just a few more days, that's all I ask. So Maester Aemon can recover his strength."

"He has no strength." The captain had visited the inn the night before to see Maester Aemon for himself. "He is old and ill and I will not have him dying on my *Lady*. Stay with him or leave him, it matters not to me. I sail." Even worse, he had refused to return the passage money they had paid him, the silver that was meant to see them safe to Oldtown. "You bought my finest cabin. It is there, awaiting you. If you do not choose to occupy it, that is no fault of mine. Why should I bear the loss?"

By now we might be at Duskendale, Sam thought mournfully. We might even have reached Pentos, if the winds were kind.

But none of that would matter to the barrow girl. "You said you saw a singer..."

"At the Happy Port. He's going to wed the Sailor's Wife."

"Wed?"

"She only beds the ones who marry her."

"Where is this Happy Port?"

"Across from the Mummer's Ship. I can show you the way."

"I know the way." Sam had seen the Mummer's Ship. *Dareon cannot wed! He said the words!* "I have to go."

He ran. It was a long way over slick cobbles. Before long he was puffing, his big black cloak flapping noisily behind him. He had to keep one hand on his swordbelt as he ran. What few people he encountered gave him curious looks, and once a cat reared up and hissed at him. By the time he reached the ship he was staggering. The Happy Port was just across the alley.

No sooner had he entered, flushed and out of breath, than a one-eyed woman threw her arms around his neck. “Don’t,” Sam told her, “I’m not here for that.” She answered in Braavosi. “I do not speak that tongue,” Sam said in High Valyrian. There were candles burning and a fire crackling in the hearth. Someone was sawing on a fiddle, and he saw two girls dancing around a red priest, holding hands. The one-eyed woman pressed her breasts against his chest. “Don’t do that! I’m not here for that!”

“*Sam!*” Dareon’s familiar voice rang out. “Yna, let him go, that’s Sam the Slayer. My Sworn Brother!”

The one-eyed woman peeled away, though she kept one hand on his arm. One of the dancers called out, “He can slay me if he likes,” and the other said, “Do you think he’d let me touch his sword?” Behind them a purple galleas had been painted on the wall, crewed by women clad in thigh-high boots and nothing else. A Tyroshi sailor was passed out in a corner, snoring into his huge scarlet beard. Elsewhere an older woman with huge breasts was turning tiles with a massive Summer Islander in black-and-scarlet feathers. In the center of it all sat Dareon, nuzzling at the neck of the woman in his lap. She was wearing his black cloak.

“Slayer,” the singer called out drunkenly, “come meet my lady wife.” His hair was sand and honey, his smile warm. “I sang her love songs. Women melt like butter when I sing. How could I resist this face?” He kissed her nose. “Wife, give Slayer a kiss, he’s my brother.” When the girl got to her feet, Sam saw that she was naked underneath the cloak. “Don’t go fondling my wife now, Slayer,” said Dareon, laughing. “But if you want one of her sisters, you feel free. I still have coin enough, I think.”

Coin that might have bought us food, Sam thought, coin that might have bought wood, so Maester Aemon could keep warm. “What have you done? You can’t *marry*. You said the words, the same as me. They could have your head for this.”

“We’re only wed for this one night, Slayer. Even in Westeros no one takes your head for that. Haven’t you ever gone to Mole’s Town to dig for buried treasure?”

“No.” Sam reddened. “I would never...”

“What about your wildling wench? You must have fucked her a time or three. All those nights in the woods, huddled together under your cloak, don’t you tell me that you never stuck it in her.” He waved a hand toward a chair. “Sit down, Slayer. Have a cup of wine. Have a whore. Have both.”

Sam did not want a cup of wine. “You promised to come back before the gloaming. To bring back wine and food.”

“Is this how you killed that Other? Scolding him to death?” Dareon laughed. “*She’s* my wife, not you. If you will not drink to my marriage, go away.”

“Come with me,” said Sam. “Maester Aemon’s woken up and wants to hear about these dragons. He’s talking about bleeding stars and white shadows and dreams and... if we could find out more about these dragons, it might help give him ease. Help me.”

“On the morrow. Not on my wedding night.” Dareon pushed himself to his feet, took his bride by the hand, and started toward the stairs, pulling her behind him.

Sam blocked his way. “You *promised*, Dareon. You said the words. You’re supposed to be my brother.”

“In Westeros. Does this look like Westeros to you?”

“Maester Aemon—”

“—is dying. That stripey healer you wasted all our silver on said as much.” Dareon’s mouth had turned hard. “Have a girl or go away, Sam. You’re ruining my wedding.”

“I’ll go,” said Sam, “but you’ll come with me.”

“No. I’m done with you. I’m done with *black*.” Dareon tore his cloak off his naked bride and tossed it in Sam’s face. “Here. Throw that rag on the old man, it may keep him a little warmer. I shan’t be needing it. I’ll be clad in velvet soon. Next year I’ll be wearing furs and eating—”

Sam hit him.

He did not think about it. His hand came up, curled into a fist, and crashed into the singer’s mouth. Dareon cursed and his naked wife gave a shriek and Sam threw himself onto the singer and knocked him backwards

over a low table. They were almost of a height, but Sam weighed twice as much, and for once he was too angry to be afraid. He punched the singer in the face and in the belly, then began to pummel him about the shoulders with both hands. When Dareon grabbed his wrists, Sam butted him with his head and broke his lip. The singer let go and he smashed him in the nose. Somewhere a man was laughing, a woman cursing. The fight seemed to slow, as if they were two black flies struggling in amber. Then someone dragged Sam off the singer's chest. He hit that person too, and something hard crashed into his head.

The next he knew he was outside, flying headfirst through the fog. For half a heartbeat he saw black water underneath him. Then the canal came up and smashed him in the face.

Sam sank like a stone, like a boulder, like a mountain. The water got into his eyes and up his nose, dark and cold and salty. When he tried to shout for help he swallowed more. Kicking and gasping, he rolled over, bubbles bursting from his nose. *Swim*, he told himself, *swim*. The brine stung his eyes when he opened them, blinding him. He popped to the surface for just an instant, sucked down air, and slapped desperately with one hand whilst the other scrabbled at the wall of the canal. But the stones were slick and slimy and he could not get a grasp. He sank again.

Sam could feel the cold against his skin as the water soaked through his clothes. His swordbelt slipped down his legs and tangled round his ankles. *I'm going to drown*, he thought, in a blind black panic. He thrashed, trying to claw his way back to the surface, but instead his face bumped the bottom of the canal. *I'm upside down*, he realized, *I'm drowning*. Something moved beneath one flailing hand, an eel or a fish, slithering through his fingers. *I can't drown, Maester Aemon will die without me, and Gilly will have no one. I have to swim, I have to...*

There was a huge splash, and something coiled around him, under his arms and around his chest. *The eel*, was his first thought, *the eel has got me, it's going to pull me down*. He opened his mouth to scream, and swallowed more water. *I'm drowned*, was his last thought. *Oh, gods be good, I'm drowned*.

When he opened his eyes he was on his back and a big black Summer Islander was pounding on his belly with fists the size of hams. *Stop that, you're hurting me*, Sam tried to scream. Instead of words he retched out water, and gasped. He was sodden and shivering, lying on the cobbles in a puddle of canal water. The Summer Islander punched him in the belly again, and more water came squirting out his nose. "Stop that," Sam gasped. "I haven't drowned. I haven't drowned."

"No." His rescuer leaned over him, huge and black and dripping. "You owe Xhondo many feathers. The water ruined Xhondo's fine cloak."

It had, Sam saw. The feathered cloak clung to the black man's huge shoulders, sodden and soiled. "I never meant..."

"...to be swimming? Xhondo saw. Too much splashing. Fat men should float." He grabbed Sam's doublet with a huge black fist and hauled him to his feet. "Xhondo mates on *Cinnamon Wind*. Many tongues he speaks, a little. Inside Xhondo laughs, to see you punch the singer. And Xhondo hears." A broad white smile spread across his face. "Xhondo knows these dragons."