



SAMWELL

Whitetree, Sam thought. *Please, let this be Whitetree*. He remembered Whitetree. Whitetree was on the maps he'd drawn, on their way north. If this village was Whitetree, he knew where they were. *Please, it has to be*. He wanted that so badly that he forgot his feet for a little bit, he forgot the ache in his calves and his lower back and the stiff frozen fingers he could scarcely feel. He even forgot about Lord Mormont and Craster and the wights and the Others. *Whitetree*, Sam prayed, to any god that might be listening.

All wildling villages looked much alike, though. A huge weirwood grew in the center of this one . . . but a white tree did not mean Whitetree, necessarily. Hadn't the weirwood at Whitetree been bigger than this one? Maybe he was remembering it wrong. The face carved into the bone pale trunk was long and sad; red tears of dried sap leaked from its eyes. *Was that how it looked when we came north?* Sam couldn't recall.

Around the tree stood a handful of one-room hovels with sod roofs, a longhall built of logs and grown over with moss, a stone well, a sheepfold . . . but no sheep, nor any people. The wildlings had gone to join Mance Rayder in the Frostfangs, taking all they owned except their houses. Sam was thankful for that. Night was coming on, and it would be good to sleep beneath a roof for once. He was so tired. It seemed as though he had been walking half his life. His boots were falling to pieces, and all the blisters on

his feet had burst and turned to callus, but now he had new blisters *under* the callus, and his toes were getting frostbitten.

But it was either walk or die, Sam knew. Gilly was still weak from childbirth and carrying the babe besides; she needed the horse more than he did. The second horse had died on them three days out from Craster's Keep. It was a wonder she lasted that long, poor half-starved thing. Sam's weight had probably done for her. They might have tried riding double, but he was afraid the same thing would happen again. *It's better that I walk.*

Sam left Gilly in the longhall to make a fire while he poked his head into the hovels. She was better at making fires; he could never seem to get the kindling to catch, and the last time he'd tried to strike a spark off flint and steel he managed to cut himself on his knife. Gilly bound up the gash for him, but his hand was stiff and sore, even clumsier than it had been before. He knew he should wash the wound and change the binding, but he was afraid to look at it. Besides, it was so cold that he hated taking off his gloves.

Sam did not know what he hoped to find in the empty houses. Maybe the wildlings had left some food behind. He had to take a look. Jon had searched the huts at Whitetree, on their way north. Inside one hovel Sam heard a rustling of rats from a dark corner, but otherwise there was nothing in any of them but old straw, old smells, and some ashes beneath the smoke hole.

He turned back to the weirwood and studied the carved face a moment. *It is not the face we saw*, he admitted to himself. *The tree's not half as big as the one at Whitetree.* The red eyes wept blood, and he didn't remember that either. Clumsily, Sam sank to his knees. "Old gods, hear my prayer. The Seven were my father's gods but I said my words to you when I joined the Watch. Help us now. I fear we might be lost. We're hungry too, and so cold. I don't know what gods I believe in now, but . . . please, if you're there, help us. Gilly has a little son." That was all that he could think to say. The dusk was deepening, the leaves of the weirwood rustling softly, waving like a thousand blood-red hands. Whether Jon's gods had heard him or not he could not say.

By the time he returned to the longhall, Gilly had the fire going. She sat close to it with her furs opened, the babe at her breast. *He's as hungry as we are*, Sam thought. The old women had smuggled out food for them from Craster's, but they had eaten most of it by now. Sam had been a hopeless hunter even at Horn Hill, where game was plentiful and he had hounds and huntsmen to help him; here in this endless empty forest, the chances of him catching anything were remote. His efforts at fishing the lakes and half-frozen streams had been dismal failures as well.

"How much longer, Sam?" Gilly asked. "Is it far, still?"

"Not so far. Not so far as it was." Sam shrugged out of his pack, eased himself awkwardly to the floor, and tried to cross his legs. His back ached so abominably from the walking that he would have liked to lean up against one of the carved wooden pillars that supported the roof, but the fire was in the center of the hall beneath the smoke hole and he craved warmth even more than comfort. "Another few days should see us there."

Sam had his maps, but if this wasn't Whitetree then they weren't going to be much use. *We went too far east to get around that lake*, he fretted, *or maybe too far west when I tried to double back*. He was coming to hate lakes and rivers. Up here there was never a ferry or bridge, which meant walking all the way around the lakes and searching for places to ford the rivers. It was easier to follow a game trail than to struggle through the brush, easier to circle a ridge instead of climbing it. *If Bannen or Dywen were with us we'd be at Castle Black by now, warming our feet in the common room*. Bannen was dead, though, and Dywen gone with Grenn and Dolorous Edd and the others.

The Wall is three hundred miles long and seven hundred feet high, Sam reminded himself. If they kept going south, they *had* to find it, sooner or later. And he was certain that they had been going south. By day he took directions from the sun, and on clear nights they could follow the Ice Dragon's tail, though they hadn't traveled much by night since the second horse had died. Even when the moon was full it was too dark beneath the trees, and it would have been so easy for Sam or the last garron to break a leg. *We have to be well south by now, we have to be*.

What he wasn't so certain of was how far east or west they might have strayed. They would reach the Wall, yes . . . in a day or a fortnight, it couldn't be farther than that, surely, surely . . . but *where*? It was the gate at Castle Black they needed to find; the only way through the Wall for a hundred leagues.

"Is the Wall as big as Craster used to say?" Gilly asked.

"Bigger." Sam tried to sound cheerful. "So big you can't even see the castles hidden behind it. But they're there, you'll see. The Wall is all ice, but the castles are stone and wood. There are tall towers and deep vaults and a huge longhall with a great fire burning in the hearth, day and night. It's so hot in there, Gilly, you'll hardly believe it."

"Could I stand by the fire? Me and the boy? Not for a long time, just till we're good and warm?"

"You can stand by the fire as long as you like. You'll have food and drink, too. Hot mulled wine and a bowl of venison stewed with onions, and Hobb's bread right out of the oven, so hot it will burn your fingers." Sam peeled a glove off to wriggle his own fingers near the flames, and soon regretted it. They had been numb with cold, but as feeling returned they hurt so much he almost cried. "Sometimes one of the brothers will sing," he said, to take his mind off the pain. "Dareon sang best, but they sent him to Eastwatch. There's still Halder, though. And Toad. His real name is Todder, but he looks like a toad, so we call him that. He likes to sing, but he has an awful voice."

"Do you sing?" Gilly rearranged her furs, and she moved the babe from one breast to the other.

Sam blushed. "I . . . I know some songs. When I was little I liked to sing. I danced too, but my lord father never liked me to. He said if I wanted to prance around I should do it in the yard with a sword in my hand."

"Could you sing some southron song? For the babe?"

"If you like." Sam thought for a moment. "There's a song our septon used to sing to me and my sisters, when we were little and it was time for us to go to sleep. 'The Song of the Seven,' it's called." He cleared his throat and softly sang:

The Father's face is stern and strong,

*he sits and judges right from wrong.
He weighs our lives, the short and long,
and loves the little children.
The Mother gives the gift of life,
and watches over every wife.
Her gentle smile ends all strife,
and she loves her little children.
The Warrior stands before the foe,
protecting us where e'er we go.
With sword and shield and spear and bow,
he guards the little children.
The Crone is very wise and old,
and sees our fates as they unfold.
She lifts her lamp of shining gold,
to lead the little children.
The Smith, he labors day and night,
to put the world of men to right.
With hammer, plow, and fire bright,
he builds for little children.
The Maiden dances through the sky,
she lives in every lover's sigh,
Her smiles teach the birds to fly,
and give dreams to little children.
The Seven Gods who made us all,
are listening if we should call.
So close your eyes, you shall not fall,
they see you, little children,
Just close your eyes, you shall not fall,
they see you, little children.*

Sam remembered the last time he'd sung the song with his mother, to lull baby Dickon to sleep. His father had heard their voices and come barging in, angry. "I will have no more of that," Lord Randyll told his wife harshly. "You ruined one boy with those soft septon's songs, do you mean to do the same to this babe?" Then he looked at Sam and said, "Go sing to your sisters, if you must sing. I don't want you near my son."

Gilly's babe had gone to sleep. He was such a tiny thing, and so quiet that Sam feared for him. He didn't even have a name. He had asked Gilly about

that, but she said it was bad luck to name a child before he was two. So many of them died.

She tucked her nipple back inside her furs. “That was pretty, Sam. You sing good.”

“You should hear Dareon. His voice is sweet as mead.”

“We drank the sweetest mead the day Craster made me a wife. It was summer then, and not so cold.” Gilly gave him a puzzled look. “Did you only sing of six gods? Craster always told us you southrons had seven.”

“Seven,” he agreed, “but no one sings of the Stranger.” The Stranger’s face was the face of death. Even talking of him made Sam uncomfortable. “We should eat something. A bite or two.”

Nothing was left but a few black sausages, as hard as wood. Sam sawed off a few thin slices for each of them. The effort made his wrist ache, but he was hungry enough to persist. If you chewed the slices long enough they softened up, and tasted good. Craster’s wives seasoned them with garlic.

After they had finished, Sam begged her pardon and went out to relieve himself and look after the horse. A biting wind was blowing from the north, and the leaves in the trees rattled at him as he passed. He had to break the thin scum of ice on top of the stream so the horse could get a drink. *I had better bring her inside.* He did not want to wake up at break of day to find that their horse had frozen to death during the night. *Gilly would keep going even if that happened.* The girl was very brave, not like him. He wished he knew what he was going to do with her back at Castle Black. She kept saying how she’d be his wife if he wanted, but black brothers didn’t keep wives; besides, he was a Tarly of Horn Hill, he could never wed a wildling. *I’ll have to think of something. So long as we reach the Wall alive, the rest doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter one little bit.*

Leading the horse to the longhall was simple enough. Getting her through the door was not, but Sam persisted. Gilly was already dozing by the time he got the garron inside. He hobbled the horse in a corner, fed some fresh wood to the fire, took off his heavy cloak, and wriggled down under the furs beside the wildling woman. His cloak was big enough to cover all three of them and keep in the warmth of their bodies.

Gilly smelled of milk and garlic and musty old fur, but he was used to that by now. They were good smells, so far as Sam was concerned. He liked sleeping next to her. It made him remember times long past, when he had shared a huge bed at Horn Hill with two of his sisters. That had ended when Lord Randyll decided it was making him soft as a girl. *Sleeping alone in my own cold cell never made me any harder or braver, though.* He wondered what his father would say if he could see him now. *I killed one of the Others, my lord,* he imagined saying. *I stabbed him with an obsidian dagger, and my Sworn Brothers call me Sam the Slayer now.* But even in his fancies, Lord Randyll only scowled, disbelieving.

His dreams were strange that night. He was back at Horn Hill, at the castle, but his father was not there. It was Sam's castle now. Jon Snow was with him. Lord Mormont too, the Old Bear, and Grenn and Dolorous Edd and Pyp and Toad and all his other brothers from the Watch, but they wore bright colors instead of black. Sam sat at the high table and feasted them all, cutting thick slices off a roast with his father's greatsword Heartsbane. There were sweet cakes to eat and honeyed wine to drink, there was singing and dancing, and everyone was warm. When the feast was done he went up to sleep; not to the lord's bedchamber where his mother and father lived but to the room he had once shared with his sisters. Only instead of his sisters it was Gilly waiting in the huge soft bed, wearing nothing but a big shaggy fur, milk leaking from her breasts.

He woke suddenly, in cold and dread.

The fire had burned down to smouldering red embers. The air itself seemed frozen, it was so cold. In the corner the garron was whinnying and kicking the logs with her hind legs. Gilly sat beside the fire, hugging her babe. Sam sat up groggy, his breath puffing pale from his open mouth. The longhall was dark with shadows, black and blacker. The hair on his arms was standing up.

It's nothing, he told himself. *I'm cold, that's all.*

Then, by the door, one of the shadows moved. A big one.

This is still a dream, Sam prayed. *Oh, make it that I'm still asleep, make it a nightmare. He's dead, he's dead, I saw him die.* "He's come for the

babe,” Gilly wept. “He smells him. A babe fresh-born stinks o’ life. He’s come for the life.”

The huge dark shape stooped under the lintel, into the hall, and shambled toward them. In the dim light of the fire, the shadow became Small Paul.

“Go away,” Sam croaked. “We don’t want you here.”

Paul’s hands were coal, his face was milk, his eyes shone a bitter blue. Hoarfrost whitened his beard, and on one shoulder hunched a raven, pecking at his cheek, eating the dead white flesh. Sam’s bladder let go, and he felt the warmth running down his legs. “Gilly, calm the horse and lead her out. You do that.”

“You—” she started.

“I have the knife. The dragonglass dagger.” He fumbled it out as he got to his feet. He’d given the first knife to Grenn, but thankfully he’d remembered to take Lord Mormont’s dagger before fleeing Craster’s Keep. He clutched it tight, moving away from the fire, away from Gilly and the babe. “Paul?” He meant to sound brave, but it came out in a squeak. “Small Paul. Do you know me? I’m Sam, fat Sam, Sam the Scared, you saved me in the woods. You carried me when I couldn’t walk another step. No one else could have done that, but you did.” Sam backed away, knife in hand, sniveling. *I am such a coward.* “Don’t hurt us, Paul. Please. Why would you want to hurt us?”

Gilly scrabbled backward across the hard dirt floor. The wight turned his head to look at her, but Sam shouted “*NO!*” and he turned back. The raven on his shoulder ripped a strip of flesh from his pale ruined cheek. Sam held the dagger before him, breathing like a blacksmith’s bellows. Across the longhall, Gilly reached the garron. *Gods give me courage*, Sam prayed. *For once, give me a little courage. Just long enough for her to get away.*

Small Paul moved toward him. Sam backed off until he came up against a rough log wall. He clutched the dagger with both hands to hold it steady. The wight did not seem to fear the dragonglass. Perhaps he did not know what it was. He moved slowly, but Small Paul had never been quick even when he’d been alive. Behind him, Gilly murmured to calm the garron and tried to urge it toward the door. But the horse must have caught a whiff of the wight’s queer cold scent. Suddenly she balked, rearing, her hooves

lashing at the frosty air. Paul swung toward the sound, and seemed to lose all interest in Sam.

There was no time to think or pray or be afraid. Samwell Tarly threw himself forward and plunged the dagger down into Small Paul's back. Half-turned, the wight never saw him coming. The raven gave a shriek and took to the air. "You're dead!" Sam screamed as he stabbed. "You're dead, you're dead." He stabbed and screamed, again and again, tearing huge rents in Paul's heavy black cloak. Shards of dragonglass flew everywhere as the blade shattered on the iron mail beneath the wool.

Sam's wail made a white mist in the black air. He dropped the useless hilt and took a hasty step backwards as Small Paul twisted around. Before he could get out his other knife, the steel knife that every brother carried, the wight's black hands locked beneath his chins. Paul's fingers were so cold they seemed to burn. They burrowed deep into the soft flesh of Sam's throat. *Run, Gilly, run*, he wanted to scream, but when he opened his mouth only a choking sound emerged.

His fumbling fingers finally found the dagger, but when he slammed it up into the wight's belly the point skidded off the iron links, and the blade went spinning from Sam's hand. Small Paul's fingers tightened inexorably, and began to twist. *He's going to rip my head off*, Sam thought in despair. His throat felt frozen, his lungs on fire. He punched and pulled at the wight's wrists, to no avail. He kicked Paul between the legs, uselessly. The world shrank to two blue stars, a terrible crushing pain, and a cold so fierce that his tears froze over his eyes. Sam squirmed and pulled, desperate . . . and then he lurched forward.

Small Paul was big and powerful, but Sam still outweighed him, and the wights were clumsy, he had seen that on the Fist. The sudden shift sent Paul staggering back a step, and the living man and the dead one went crashing down together. The impact knocked one hand from Sam's throat, and he was able to suck in a quick breath of air before the icy black fingers returned. The taste of blood filled his mouth. He twisted his neck around, looking for his knife, and saw a dull orange glow. *The fire!* Only ember and ashes remained, but still . . . he could not breathe, or think . . . Sam wrenched himself sideways, pulling Paul with him . . . his arms flailed against the dirt floor, groping, reaching, scattering the ashes, until at last

they found something hot . . . a chunk of charred wood, smouldering red and orange within the black . . . his fingers closed around it, and he smashed it into Paul's mouth, so hard he felt teeth shatter.

Yet even so the wight's grip did not loosen. Sam's last thoughts were for the mother who had loved him and the father he had failed. The longhall was spinning around him when he saw the wisp of smoke rising from between Paul's broken teeth. Then the dead man's face burst into flame, and the hands were gone.

Sam sucked in air, and rolled feebly away. The wight was burning, hoarfrost dripping from his beard as the flesh beneath blackened. Sam heard the raven shriek, but Paul himself made no sound. When his mouth opened, only flames came out. And his eyes . . . *It's gone, the blue glow is gone.*

He crept to the door. The air was so cold that it hurt to breathe, but such a fine sweet hurt. He ducked from the longhall. "Gilly?" he called. "Gilly, I killed it. Gil—"

She stood with her back against the weirwood, the boy in her arms. The wights were all around her. There were a dozen of them, a score, more . . . some had been wildlings once, and still wore skins and hides . . . but more had been his brothers. Sam saw Lark the Sisterman, Softfoot, Ryles. The wen on Chett's neck was black, his boils covered with a thin film of ice. And that one looked like Hake, though it was hard to know for certain with half his head missing. They had torn the poor garron apart, and were pulling out her entrails with dripping red hands. Pale steam rose from her belly.

Sam made a whimpery sound. "It's not fair . . ."

"*Fair.*" The raven landed on his shoulder. "*Fair, far, fear.*" It flapped its wings, and screamed along with Gilly. The wights were almost on her. He heard the dark red leaves of the weirwood rustling, whispering to one another in a tongue he did not know. The starlight itself seemed to stir, and all around them the trees groaned and creaked. Sam Tarly turned the color of curdled milk, and his eyes went wide as plates. *Ravens!* They were in the weirwood, hundreds of them, thousands, perched on the bone-white branches, peering between the leaves. He saw their beaks open as they screamed, saw them spread their black wings. Shrieking, flapping, they descended on the wights in angry clouds. They swarmed round Chett's face

and pecked at his blue eyes, they covered the Sisterman like flies, they plucked gobbets from inside Hake's shattered head. There were so many that when Sam looked up, he could not see the moon.

"Go," said the bird on his shoulder. "Go, go, go."

Sam ran, puffs of frost exploding from his mouth. All around him the wights flailed at the black wings and sharp beaks that assailed them, falling in an eerie silence with never a grunt nor cry. But the ravens ignored Sam. He took Gilly by the hand and pulled her away from the weirwood. "We have to go."

"But where?" Gilly hurried after him, holding her baby. "They killed our horse, how will we . . ."

"*Brother!*" The shout cut through the night, through the shrieks of a thousand ravens. Beneath the trees, a man muffled head to heels in mottled blacks and greys sat astride an elk. "*Here,*" the rider called. A hood shadowed his face.

He's wearing blacks. Sam urged Gilly toward him. The elk was huge, a great elk, ten feet tall at the shoulder, with a rack of antlers near as wide. The creature sank to his knees to let them mount. "Here," the rider said, reaching down with a gloved hand to pull Gilly up behind him. Then it was Sam's turn. "My thanks," he puffed. Only when he grasped the offered hand did he realize that the rider wore no glove. His hand was black and cold, with fingers hard as stone.