

SAMWELL

Sam was reading about the Others when he saw the mouse.

His eyes were red and raw. *I ought not rub them so much*, he always told himself as he rubbed them. The dust made them itch and water, and the dust was everywhere down here. Little puffs of it filled the air every time a page was turned, and it rose in grey clouds whenever he shifted a stack of books to see what might be hiding on the bottom.

Sam did not know how long it had been since last he'd slept, but scarce an inch remained of the fat tallow candle he'd lit when starting on the ragged bundle of loose pages that he'd found tied up in twine. He was beastly tired, but it was hard to stop. *One more book*, he had told himself, *then I'll stop. One more folio, just one more. One more page, then I'll go up and rest and get a bite to eat.* But there was always another page after that one, and another after that, and another book waiting underneath the pile. *I'll just take a quick peek to see what this one is about*, he'd think, and before he knew he would be halfway through it. He had not eaten since that bowl of bean-and-bacon soup with Pyp and Grenn. *Well, except for the bread and cheese, but that was only a nibble*, he thought. That was when he took a quick glance at the empty platter, and spied the mouse feasting on the bread crumbs.

The mouse was half as long as his pinky finger, with black eyes and soft grey fur. Sam knew he ought to kill it. Mice might prefer bread and cheese, but they ate paper too. He had found plenty of mouse droppings amongst the shelves and stacks, and some of the leather covers on the books showed signs of being gnawed.

It is such a little thing, though. And hungry. How could he begrudge it a few crumbs? It's eating books, though...

After hours in the chair Sam's back was stiff as a board, and his legs were half-asleep. He knew he was not quick enough to catch the mouse, but it might be he could squash it. By his elbow rested a massive leather-bound

copy of *Annals of the Black Centaur*, Septon Jorquen's exhaustively detailed account of the nine years that Orbert Caswell had served as Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. There was a page for each day of his term, every one of which seemed to begin, "Lord Orbert rose at dawn and moved his bowels," except for the last, which said, "Lord Orbert was found to have died during the night."

No mouse is a match for Septon Jorquen. Very slowly, Sam took hold of the book with his left hand. It was thick and heavy, and when he tried to lift it one-handed, it slipped from his plump fingers and thumped back down. The mouse was gone in half a heartbeat, skittery-quick. Sam was relieved. Squishing the poor little thing would have given him nightmares. "You shouldn't eat the books, though," he said aloud. Maybe he should bring more cheese the next time he came down here.

He was surprised at how low the candle had burned. Had the bean-and-bacon soup been today or yesterday? *Yesterday. It must have been yesterday.* The realization made him yawn. Jon would be wondering what had become of him, though Maester Aemon would no doubt understand. Before he had lost his sight, the maester had loved books as much as Samwell Tarly did. He understood the way that you could sometimes fall right into them, as if each page was a hole into another world.

Pushing himself to his feet, Sam grimaced at the pins and needles in his calves. The chair was very hard and cut into the back of his thighs when he bent over a book. *I need to remember to bring a cushion.* It would be even better if he could sleep down here, in the cell he'd found half-hidden behind four chests full of loose pages that had gotten separated from the books they belonged to, but he did not want to leave Maester Aemon alone for so long. He had not been strong of late and required help, especially with the ravens. Aemon had Clydas, to be sure, but Sam was younger, and better with the birds.

With a stack of books and scrolls under his left arm and the candle in his right hand, Sam made his way through the tunnels the brothers called the wormways. A pale shaft of light illuminated the steep stone steps that led up to the surface, so he knew that day had come up top. He left the

candle burning in a wall niche and began the climb. By the fifth step he was puffing. At the tenth he stopped to shift the books to his right arm.

He emerged beneath a sky the color of white lead. *A snow sky*, Sam thought, squinting up. The prospect made him uneasy. He remembered that night on the Fist of the First Men when the wights and the snows had come together. *Don't be so craven*, he thought. *You have your Sworn Brothers all around you, not to mention Stannis Baratheon and all his knights.* Castle Black's keeps and towers rose about him, dwarfed by the icy immensity of the Wall. A small army was crawling over the ice a quarter of the way up, where a new switchback stair was creeping upward to meet the remnants of the old one. The sounds of their saws and hammers echoed off the ice. Jon had the builders working night and day on the task. Sam had heard some of them complaining about it over supper, insisting that Lord Mormont never worked them half so hard. Without the great stair there was no way to reach the top of the Wall except by the chain winch, however. And as much as Samwell Tarly hated steps, he hated the winch cage more. He always closed his eyes when he was riding it, convinced that the chain was about to break. Every time the iron cage scraped against the ice his heart stopped beating for an instant.

There were dragons here two hundred years ago, Sam found himself thinking, as he watched the cage making a slow descent. *They would just have flown to the top of the Wall.* Queen Alysanne had visited Castle Black on her dragon, and Jaehaerys, her king, had come after her on his own. Could Silverwing have left an egg behind? Or had Stannis found one egg on Dragonstone? *Even if he has an egg, how can he hope to quicken it?* Baelor the Blessed had prayed over his eggs, and other Targaryens had sought to hatch theirs with sorcery. All they got for it was farce and tragedy.

"Samwell," said a glum voice, "I was coming to fetch you. I was told to bring you to the Lord Commander."

A snowflake landed on Sam's nose. "Jon wants to see me?"

"As to that, I could not say," said Dolorous Edd Tollett. "I never wanted to see half the things I've seen, and I've never seen half the things I wanted to. I don't think wanting comes into it. You'd best go all the same."

Lord Snow wishes to speak with you as soon as he is done with Craster's wife."

"Gilly."

"That's the one. If my wet nurse had looked like her, I'd still be on the teat. Mine had whiskers."

"Most goats do," called Pyp, as he and Grenn emerged from around the corner, with longbows in hand and quivers of arrows on their backs.

"Where have you been, Slayer? We missed you last night at supper. A whole roast ox went uneaten."

"Don't call me Slayer." Sam ignored the gibe about the ox. That was just Pyp. "I was reading. There was a mouse..."

"Don't mention mice to Grenn. He's terrified of mice."

"I am not," Grenn declared with indignation.

"You'd be too scared to eat one."

"I'd eat more mice than you would."

Dolorous Edd Tollett gave a sigh. "When I was a lad, we only ate mice on special feast days. I was the youngest, so I always got the tail. There's no meat on the tail."

"Where's your longbow, Sam?" asked Grenn. Ser Alliser used to call him *Aurochs*, and every day he seemed to grow into the name a little more. He had come to the Wall big but slow, thick of neck, thick of waist, red of face, and clumsy. Though his neck still reddened when Pyp twisted him around into some folly, hours of work with sword and shield had flattened his belly, hardened his arms, broadened his chest. He was *strong*, and shaggy as an aurochs too. "Ulmer was expecting you at the butts."

"Ulmer," Sam said, abashed. Almost the first thing Jon Snow had done as Lord Commander was institute daily archery drill for the entire garrison, even stewards and cooks. The Watch had been placing too much emphasis on the sword and too little on the bow, he had said, a relic of the days when one brother in every ten had been a knight, instead of one in every hundred. Sam saw the sense in the decree, but he hated longbow practice almost as much as he hated climbing steps. When he wore his gloves he could never

hit anything, but when he took them off he got blisters on his fingers. Those bows were *dangerous*. Satin had torn off half his thumbnail on a bowstring. “I forgot.”

“You broke the heart of the wildling princess, Slayer,” said Pyp. Of late, Val had taken to watching them from the window of her chamber in the King’s Tower. “She was looking for you.”

“She was not! Don’t say that!” Sam had only spoken to Val twice, when Maester Aemon called upon her to make sure the babes were healthy. The princess was so pretty that he oft found himself stammering and blushing in her presence.

“Why not?” asked Pyp. “She wants to have your children. Maybe we should call you Sam the Seducer.”

Sam reddened. King Stannis had plans for Val, he knew; she was the mortar with which he meant to seal the peace between the northmen and the free folk. “I don’t have time for archery today, I need to go see Jon.”

“Jon? Jon? Do we know anyone named Jon, Grenn?”

“He means the Lord Commander.”

“*Ohhh*. The Great Lord Snow. To be sure. Why do you want to see him? He can’t even wiggle his ears.” Pyp wiggled his, to show he could. They were large ears, and red from cold. “He’s *Lord* Snow for true now, too bloody highborn for the likes of us.”

“Jon has duties,” Sam said in his defense. “The Wall is his, and all that goes with it.”

“A man has duties to his friends as well. If not for us, Janos Slynt might be our lord commander. Lord Janos would have sent Snow ranging naked on a mule. ‘Scamper on up to Craster’s Keep,’ he would have said, ‘and fetch me back the Old Bear’s cloak and boots.’ We saved him from that, but now he has too many *duties* to drink a cup of mulled wine by the fire?”

Grenn agreed. “His duties don’t keep him from the yard. More days than not, he’s out there fighting someone.”

That was true, Sam had to admit. Once, when Jon came to consult with Maester Aemon, Sam had asked him why he spent so much time at swordplay. “The Old Bear never trained much when he was Lord Commander,” he had pointed out. In answer, Jon had pressed Longclaw into Sam’s hand. He let him feel the lightness, the balance, had him turn the blade so that ripples gleamed in the smoke-dark metal. “Valyrian steel,” he said, “spell-forged and razor-sharp, nigh on indestructible. A swordsman should be as good as his sword, Sam. Longclaw is Valyrian steel, but I’m not. The Halfhand could have killed me as easy as you swat a bug.”

Sam handed back the sword. “When I try to swat a bug, it always flies away. All I do is slap my arm. It stings.”

That made Jon laugh. “As you will. Qhorin could have killed me as easy as you eat a bowl of porridge.” Sam was fond of porridge, especially when it was sweetened with honey.

“I don’t have time for this.” Sam left his friends and made his way toward the armory, clutching his books to his chest. *I am the shield that guards the realms of men*, he remembered. He wondered what those men would say if they realized their realms were being guarded by the likes of Grenn, Pyp, and Dolorous Edd.

The Lord Commander’s Tower had been gutted by fire, and Stannis Baratheon had claimed the King’s Tower for his own residence, so Jon Snow had established himself in Donal Noye’s modest quarters behind the armory. Gilly was leaving as Sam arrived, wrapped up in the old cloak he’d given her when they were fleeing Craster’s Keep. She almost rushed right past him, but Sam caught her arm, spilling two books as he did. “Gilly.”

“Sam.” Her voice sounded raw. Gilly was dark-haired and slim, with the big brown eyes of a doe. She was swallowed by the folds of Sam’s old cloak, her face half-hidden by its hood, but shivering all the same. Her face looked wan and frightened.

“What’s wrong?” Sam asked her. “How are the babes?”

Gilly pulled loose from him. “They’re good, Sam. Good.”

“Between the two of them it’s a wonder you can sleep,” Sam said pleasantly. “Which one was it that I heard crying last night? I thought he’d never stop.”

“Dalla’s boy. He cries when he wants the teat. Mine... mine hardly ever cries. Sometimes he gurgles, but...” Her eyes filled with tears. “I have to go. It’s past time that I fed them. I’ll be leaking all over myself if I don’t go.” She rushed across the yard, leaving Sam perplexed behind her.

He had to get down on his knees to gather up the books he’d dropped. *I should not have brought so many*, he told himself as he brushed the dirt off Colloquo Votar’s *Jade Compendium*, a thick volume of tales and legends from the east that Maester Aemon had commanded him to find. The book appeared undamaged. Maester Thomax’s *Dragonkin, Being a History of House Targaryen from Exile to Apotheosis, with a Consideration of the Life and Death of Dragons* had not been so fortunate. It had come open as it fell, and a few pages had gotten muddy, including one with a rather nice picture of Balerion the Black Dread done in colored inks. Sam cursed himself for a clumsy oaf as he smoothed the pages down and brushed them off. Gilly’s presence always flustered him and gave rise to... well, *risings*. A Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch should not be feeling the sorts of things that Gilly made him feel, especially when she would talk about her breasts and...

“Lord Snow is waiting.” Two guards in black cloaks and iron halfhelms stood by the doors of the armory, leaning on their spears. Hairy Hal was the one who’d spoken. Mully helped Sam back to his feet. He blurted out thanks and hurried past them, clutching desperately at the stack of books as he made his way past the forge with its anvil and bellows. A shirt of ringmail rested on his workbench, half-completed. Ghost was stretched out beneath the anvil, gnawing on the bone of an ox to get at the marrow. The big white direwolf looked up when Sam went by, but made no sound.

Jon’s solar was back beyond the racks of spears and shields. He was reading a parchment when Sam entered. Lord Commander Mormont’s raven was on his shoulder, peering down as if it were reading too, but when the bird spied Sam it spread its wings and flapped toward him crying, “*Corn, corn!*”

Shifting the books, Sam thrust his arm into the sack beside the door and came out with a handful of kernels. The raven landed on his wrist and took one from his palm, pecking so hard that Sam yelped and snatched his hand back. The raven took to the air again, and yellow and red kernels went everywhere.

“Close the door, Sam.” Faint scars still marked Jon’s cheek, where an eagle had once tried to rip his eye out. “Did that wretch break the skin?”

Sam eased the books down and peeled off his glove. “He did.” He felt faint. “I’m *bleeding*.”

“We all shed our blood for the Watch. Wear thicker gloves.” Jon shoved a chair toward him with a foot. “Sit, and have a look at this.” He handed him the parchment.

“What is it?” asked Sam. The raven began to hunt out corn kernels amongst the rushes.

“A paper shield.”

Sam sucked at the blood on his palm as he read. He knew Maester Aemon’s hand on sight. His writing was small and precise, but the old man could not see where the ink had blotted, and sometimes he left unsightly smears. “A letter to King Tommen?”

“At Winterfell Tommen fought my brother Bran with wooden swords. He wore so much padding he looked like a stuffed goose. Bran knocked him to the ground.” Jon went to the window. “Yet Bran’s dead, and pudgy pink-faced Tommen is sitting on the Iron Throne, with a crown nestled amongst his golden curls.”

Bran’s not dead, Sam wanted to say. *He’s gone beyond the Wall with Coldhands*. The words caught in his throat. *I swore I would not tell*. “You haven’t signed the letter.”

“The Old Bear begged the Iron Throne for help a hundred times. They sent him Janos Slynt. No letter will make the Lannisters love us better. Not once they hear that we’ve been helping Stannis.”

“Only to defend the Wall, not in his rebellion.” Sam read the letter quickly once again. “That’s what it *says* here.”

“The distinction may escape Lord Tywin.” Jon took the letter back. “Why would he help us now? He never did before.”

“Well,” said Sam, “he will not want it said that Stannis rode to the defense of the realm whilst King Tommen was playing with his toys. That would bring scorn down upon House Lannister.”

“It’s death and destruction I want to bring down upon House Lannister, not scorn.” Jon lifted up the letter. “The Night’s Watch takes no part in the wars of the Seven Kingdoms,” he read. “Our oaths are sworn to the realm, and the realm now stands in dire peril. Stannis Baratheon aids us against our foes from beyond the Wall, though we are not his men...”

“Well,” said Sam, squirming, “we’re *not*. Are we?”

“I gave Stannis food, shelter, and the Nightfort, plus leave to settle some free folk in the Gift. That’s all.”

“Lord Tywin will say it was too much.”

“Stannis says it’s not enough. The more you give a king the more he wants. We are walking on a bridge of ice with an abyss on either side. Pleasing one king is difficult enough. Pleasing two is hardly possible.”

“Yes, but... if the Lannisters should prevail and Lord Tywin decides that we betrayed the king by aiding Stannis, it could mean the end of the Night’s Watch. He has the Tyrells behind him, with all the strength of Highgarden. And he did defeat Lord Stannis on the Blackwater.” The sight of blood might make Sam faint, but he knew how wars were won. His own father had seen to that.

“The Blackwater was one battle. Robb won all his battles and still lost his head. If Stannis can raise the north...”

He’s trying to convince himself, Sam realized, *but he can’t*. The ravens had gone forth from Castle Black in a storm of black wings, summoning the lords of the north to declare for Stannis Baratheon and join their strength to his. Sam had sent out most of them himself. Thusfar only one bird had returned, the one they’d sent to Karhold. Elsewise the silence had been thunderous.

Even if he should somehow win the northmen to his side, Sam did not see how Stannis could hope to match the combined powers of Casterly Rock, Highgarden, and the Twins. Yet without the north, his cause was surely doomed. *As doomed as the Night's Watch, if Lord Tywin marks us down as traitors.* "The Lannisters have northmen of their own. Lord Bolton and his bastard."

"Stannis has the Karstarks. If he can win White Harbor..."

"If," Sam stressed. "If not... my lord, even a paper shield is better than none."

Jon rattled the letter. "I suppose so." He sighed, then took up a quill and scrawled a signature across the bottom of the letter. "Get the sealing wax." Sam heated a stick of black wax over a candle and dribbled some onto the parchment, then watched as Jon pressed the Lord Commander's seal down firmly on the puddle. "Take this to Maester Aemon when you leave," he commanded, "and tell him to dispatch a bird to King's Landing."

"I will." Sam hesitated. "My lord, if I might ask... I saw Gilly leaving. She was almost crying."

"Val sent her to plead for Mance again."

"Oh." Val was the sister of the woman the King-beyond-the-Wall had taken for his queen. *The wildling princess* was what Stannis and his men were calling her. Her sister Dalla had died during the battle, though no blade had ever touched her; she had perished giving birth to Mance Rayder's son. Rayder himself would soon follow her to the grave, if the whispers Sam had heard had any truth to them. "What did you tell her?"

"That I would speak to Stannis, though I doubt my words will sway him. A king's first duty is to defend the realm, and Mance attacked it. His Grace is not like to forget that. My father used to say that Stannis Baratheon was a just man. No one has ever said he was forgiving." Jon paused, frowning. "I would sooner take off Mance's head myself. He was a man of the Night's Watch, once. By rights, his life belongs to us."

"Pyp says that Lady Melisandre means to give him to the flames, to work some sorcery."

“Pyp should learn to hold his tongue. I have heard the same from others. King’s blood, to wake a dragon. Where Melisandre thinks to find a sleeping dragon, no one is quite sure. It’s nonsense. Mance’s blood is no more royal than mine own. He has never worn a crown nor sat a throne. He’s a brigand, nothing more. There’s no power in brigand’s blood.”

The raven looked up from the floor. “*Blood,*” it screamed.

Jon paid no mind. “I am sending Gilly away.”

“Oh.” Sam bobbed his head. “Well, that’s... that’s good, my lord.” It would be the best thing for her, to go somewhere warm and safe, well away from the Wall and the fighting.

“Her and the boy. We will need to find another wet nurse for his milk brother.”

“Goat’s milk might serve, until you do. It’s better for a babe than cow’s milk.” Sam had read that somewhere. He shifted in his seat. “My lord, when I was looking through the annals I came on another boy commander. Four hundred years before the Conquest. Osric Stark was ten when he was chosen, but he served for sixty years. That’s four, my lord. You’re not even close to being the youngest ever chosen. You’re fifth youngest, so far.”

“The younger four all being sons, brothers, or bastards of the King in the North. Tell me something useful. Tell me of our enemy.”

“The Others.” Sam licked his lips. “They are mentioned in the annals, though not as often as I would have thought. The annals I’ve found and looked at, that is. There’s more I haven’t found, I know. Some of the older books are falling to pieces. The pages crumble when I try and turn them. And the *really* old books... either they have crumbled all away or they are buried somewhere that I haven’t looked yet or... well, it could be that there are no such books, and never were. The oldest histories we have were written after the Andals came to Westeros. The First Men only left us runes on rocks, so everything we think we know about the Age of Heroes and the Dawn Age and the Long Night comes from accounts set down by septon thousands of years later. There are archmaesters at the Citadel who question all of it. Those old histories are full of kings who reigned for hundreds of years, and knights riding around a thousand years before there *were* knights.

You know the tales, Brandon the Builder, Symeon Star-Eyes, Night's King... we say that you're the nine hundred and ninety-eighth Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, but the oldest list I've found shows six hundred seventy-four commanders, which suggests that it was written during..."

"Long ago," Jon broke in. "What about the Others?"

"I found mention of dragonglass. The children of the forest used to give the Night's Watch a hundred obsidian daggers every year, during the Age of Heroes. The Others come when it is cold, most of the tales agree. Or else it gets cold when they come. Sometimes they appear during snowstorms and melt away when the skies clear. They hide from the light of the sun and emerge by night... or else night falls when they emerge. Some stories speak of them riding the corpses of dead animals. Bears, direwolves, mammoths, horses, it makes no matter, so long as the beast is dead. The one that killed Small Paul was riding a dead horse, so that part's plainly true. Some accounts speak of giant ice spiders too. I don't know what those are. Men who fall in battle against the Others must be burned, or else the dead will rise again as their thralls."

"We knew all this. The question is, how do we fight them?"

"The armor of the Others is proof against most ordinary blades, if the tales can be believed," said Sam, "and their own swords are so cold they shatter steel. Fire will dismay them, though, and they are vulnerable to obsidian." He remembered the one he had faced in the haunted forest, and how it had seemed to melt away when he stabbed it with the dragonglass dagger Jon had made for him. "I found one account of the Long Night that spoke of the last hero slaying Others with a blade of dragonsteel. Supposedly they could not stand against it."

"Dragonsteel?" Jon frowned. "*Valyrian* steel?"

"That was my first thought as well."

"So if I can just convince the lords of the Seven Kingdoms to give us their Valyrian blades, all is saved? That won't be hard." His laugh had no mirth in it. "Did you find who the Others are, where they come from, what they want?"

“Not yet, my lord, but it may be that I’ve just been reading the wrong books. There are hundreds I have not looked at yet. Give me more time and I will find whatever there is to be found.”

“There is no more time.” Jon sounded sad. “You need to get your things together, Sam. You’re going with Gilly.”

“Going?” For a moment Sam did not understand. “I’m going? To Eastwatch, my lord? Or... where am I...”

“Oldtown.”

“*Oldtown?*” It came out in a squeak. Horn Hill was close to Oldtown. *Home*. The notion made him light-headed. *My father*.

“Aemon as well.”

“Aemon? *Maester* Aemon? But... he’s one hundred and two years old, my lord, he can’t... you’re sending him *and* me? Who will tend the ravens? If they’re sick or wounded, who...”

“Clydas. He’s been with Aemon for years.”

“Clydas is only a steward, and his eyes are going bad. You need a *maester*. Maester Aemon is so frail, a sea voyage...” He thought of the Arbor and the *Arbor Queen*, and almost choked on his tongue. “It might... he’s old, and...”

“His life will be at risk. I am aware of that, Sam, but the risk is greater here. Stannis knows who Aemon is. If the red woman requires king’s blood for her spells...”

“Oh.” Sam paled.

“Dareon will join you at Eastwatch. My hope is that his songs will win some men for us in the south. The *Blackbird* will deliver you to Braavos. From there you’ll arrange your own passage to Oldtown. If you still mean to claim Gilly’s babe as your bastard, send her and the child on to Horn Hill. Elsewise, Aemon will find a servant’s place for her at the Citadel.”

“My b-b-bastard.” He had said that, yes, but... *All that water. I could drown. Ships sink all the time, and autumn is a stormy season.* Gilly would be with him, though, and the babe would grow up safe. “Yes, I... my mother and my sisters will help Gilly with the child.” *I can send a letter, I won’t*

need to go to Horn Hill myself. “Dareon could see her to Oldtown just as well as me. I’m... I’ve been working at my archery every afternoon with Ulmer, as you commanded... well, except when I’m in the vaults, but you told me to find out about the Others. The longbow makes my shoulders ache and raises blisters on my fingers.” He showed Jon where one had burst. “I still do it, though. I can hit the target more often than not now, but I’m still the worst archer who ever bent a bow. I like Ulmer’s stories, though. Someone needs to write them down and put them in a book.”

“You do it. They have parchment and ink at the Citadel, as well as longbows. I will expect you to continue with your practice. Sam, the Night’s Watch has hundreds of men who can loose an arrow, but only a handful who can read or write. I need you to become my new maester.”

The word made him flinch. No, Father, please, I won’t speak of it again, I swear it by the Seven. Let me out, please let me out. “My lord, I... my work is here, the books...”

“...will be here when you return to us.”

Sam put a hand to his throat. He could almost feel the chain there, choking him. “My lord, the Citadel... they make you cut up corpses there.” *They make you wear a chain about your neck. If it is chains you want, come with me.* For three days and three nights Sam had sobbed himself to sleep, manacled hand and foot to a wall. The chain around his throat was so tight it broke the skin, and whenever he rolled the wrong way in his sleep it would cut off his breath. “I cannot wear a chain.”

“You can. You will. Maester Aemon is old and blind. His strength is leaving him. Who will take his place when he dies? Maester Mullin at the Shadow Tower is more fighter than scholar, and Maester Harmune of Eastwatch is drunk more than he’s sober.”

“If you ask the Citadel for more maesters...”

“I mean to. We’ll have need of every one. Aemon Targaryen is not so easily replaced, however.” Jon seemed puzzled. “I was certain this would please you. There are so many books at the Citadel that no man can hope to read them all. You would do well there, Sam. I know you would.”

“No. I could read the books, but... a m-maester must be a healer and b-b-blood makes me faint.” He held out a shaky hand for Jon to see. “I’m Sam the Scared, not Sam the Slayer.”

“Scared? Of what? The chidings of old men? Sam, you saw the wights come swarming up the Fist, a tide of living dead men with black hands and bright blue eyes. You slew an Other.”

“It was the d-d-d-dragonglass, not me.”

“Be quiet. You lied and schemed and plotted to make me Lord Commander. You *will* obey me. You’ll go to the Citadel and forge a chain, and if you have to cut up corpses, so be it. At least in Oldtown the corpses won’t object.”

He doesn’t understand. “My lord,” Sam said, “my f-f-f-father, Lord Randyll, he, he, he, he, he... the life of a maester is a life of *servitude*.” He was babbling, he knew. “No son of House Tarly will ever wear a chain. The men of Horn Hill do not bow and scrape to petty lords.” *If it is chains you want, come with me.* “Jon, I cannot disobey my *father*.”

Jon, he’d said, but Jon was gone. It was Lord Snow who faced him now, grey eyes as hard as ice. “You have no father,” said Lord Snow. “Only brothers. Only us. Your life belongs to the Night’s Watch, so go and stuff your smallclothes into a sack, along with anything else you care to take to Oldtown. You leave an hour before sunrise. And here’s another order. From this day forth, you will *not* call yourself a craven. You’ve faced more things this past year than most men face in a lifetime. You can face the Citadel, but you’ll face it as a Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch. I can’t command you to be brave, but I *can* command you to hide your fears. You said the words, Sam. Remember?”

I am the sword in the darkness. But he was wretched with a sword, and the darkness scared him. “I... I’ll try.”

“You won’t try. You will obey.”

“*Obey.*” Mormont’s raven flapped its great black wings.

“As my lord commands. Does... does Maester Aemon know?”

“It was as much his idea as mine.” Jon opened the door for him. “No farewells. The fewer folk who know of this, the better. An hour before first light, by the lichyard.”

Sam did not recall leaving the armory. The next thing he knew he was stumbling through mud and patches of old snow, toward Maester Aemon’s chambers. *I could hide*, he told himself. *I could hide in the vaults amongst the books. I could live down there with the mouse and sneak up at night to steal food.* Crazy thoughts, he knew, as futile as they were desperate. The vaults were the first place they would look for him. The *last* place they would look for him was beyond the Wall, but that was even madder. *The wildlings would catch me and kill me slowly. They might burn me alive, the way the red woman means to burn Mance Rayder.*

When he found Maester Aemon in the rookery, he gave him Jon’s letter and blurted out his fears in a great green gush of words. “He does not *understand*.” Sam felt as if he might throw up. “If I don a chain, my lord f-f-father... he, he, he...”

“My own father raised the same objections when I chose a life of service,” the old man said. “It was *his* father who sent me to the Citadel. King Daeron had sired four sons, and three had sons of their own. *Too many dragons are as dangerous as too few*, I heard His Grace tell my lord father, the day they sent me off.” Aemon raised a spotted hand to the chain of many metals that dangled loose about his thin neck. “The chain is heavy, Sam, but my grandsire had the right of it. So does your Lord Snow.”

“*Snow*,” a raven muttered. “*Snow*,” another echoed. All of them picked it up then. “*Snow, snow, snow, snow, snow.*” Sam had taught them that word. There was no help here, he saw. Maester Aemon was as trapped as he was. *He will die at sea*, he thought, despairing. *He is too old to survive such a voyage. Gilly’s little son may die as well, he’s not as large and strong as Dalla’s boy. Does Jon mean to kill us all?*

The next morning, Sam found himself saddling the mare he’d ridden from Horn Hill and leading her toward the lichyard beside the eastern road. Her saddlebags bulged with cheese and sausages and hard-cooked eggs, and half a salted ham that Three-Finger Hobb had given him on his name day.

“You’re a man who *appreciates* cooking, Slayer,” the cook had said. “We need more o’ your sort.” The ham would help, no doubt. Eastwatch was a long cold ride away, and there were no towns nor inns in the shadow of the Wall.

The hour before dawn was dark and still. Castle Black seemed strangely hushed. At the lychyard, a pair of two-wheeled wayns awaited him, along with Black Jack Bulwer and a dozen seasoned rangers, tough as the garrons they rode. Kedge Whiteye cursed loudly when his one good eye spied Sam. “Don’t mind him, Slayer,” said Black Jack. “He lost a wager, said we’d need to drag you out squealing from beneath some bed.”

Maester Aemon was too frail to ride a horse, so a wayn had been made ready for him, its bed heaped high with furs, and a leather awning fastened overhead to keep off the rain and snow. Gilly and her child would ride with him. The second wayn would carry their clothing and possessions, along with a chest of rare old books that Aemon thought the Citadel might lack. Sam had spent half the night searching for them, though he’d found only one in four. *And a good thing, or we’d need another wayn.*

When the maester appeared, he was bundled up in a bearskin three times his size. As Clydas led him toward the wayn, a gust of wind came up, and the old man staggered. Sam hurried to his side and put an arm about him. *Another gust like that could blow him over the Wall.* “Keep hold of my arm, maester. It’s not far.”

The blind man nodded as the wind pushed back their hoods. “It is always warm in Oldtown. There is an inn on an island in the Honeywine where I used to go when I was a young novice. It will be pleasant to sit there once again, sipping cider.”

By the time they got the maester into the wayn, Gilly had appeared, the child bundled in her arms. Beneath her hood her eyes were red from crying. Jon turned up at the same time, with Dolorous Edd. “Lord Snow,” Maester Aemon called, “I left a book for you in my chambers. The *Jade Compendium*. It was written by the Volantene adventurer Colloquo Votar, who traveled to the east and visited all the lands of the Jade Sea. There is a passage you may find of interest. I’ve told Clydas to mark it for you.”

“I’ll be sure to read it,” Jon Snow replied.

A line of pale snot ran from Maester Aemon’s nose. He wiped it away with the back of his glove. “Knowledge is a weapon, Jon. Arm yourself well before you ride forth to battle.”

“I will.” A light snow had begun to fall, the big soft flakes drifting down lazily from the sky. Jon turned to Black Jack Bulwer. “Make as good a time as you can, but take no foolish risks. You have an old man and a suckling babe with you. See that you keep them warm and well fed.”

“You do the same, m’lord,” said Gilly. “You do the same for t’other. Find another wet nurse, like you said. You promised me you would. The boy... Dalla’s boy... the little prince, I mean... you find him some good woman, so he grows up big and strong.”

“You have my word,” Jon Snow said solemnly.

“Don’t you name him. Don’t you do that till he’s past two years. It’s ill luck to name them when they’re still on the breast. You crows may not know that, but it’s true.”

“As you command, my lady.”

A spasm of anger flashed across Gilly’s face. “Don’t you call me that. I’m a mother, not a lady. I’m Craster’s wife and Craster’s daughter, and a *mother*.”

Dolorous Edd took the babe as Gilly climbed into the wayn and covered her legs with some musty pelts. By then the eastern sky was more grey than black. Left Hand Lew was anxious to be off. Edd handed the infant up and Gilly put him to her breast. *This may be the last I ever see of Castle Black*, thought Sam as he hoisted himself atop his mare. As much as he had once hated Castle Black, it was tearing him apart to leave it.

“*Let’s do this*,” Bulwer commanded. A whip snapped, and the wayns began to rumble slowly down the rutted road as the snow came down around them. Sam lingered beside Clydas and Dolorous Edd and Jon Snow. “Well,” he said, “farewell.”

“And to you, Sam,” said Dolorous Edd. “Your boat’s not like to sink, I don’t think. Boats only sink when I’m aboard.”

Jon was watching the wayns. “The first time I saw Gilly,” he said, “she was pressed back against the wall of Craster’s Keep, this skinny dark-haired girl with her big belly, cringing away from Ghost. He had gotten in among her rabbits, and I think she was frightened that he would tear her open and devour the babe... but it was not the wolf she should have been afraid of, was it?”

No, Sam thought. Craster was the danger, her own father.

“She has more courage than she knows.”

“So do you, Sam. Have a swift, safe voyage, and take care of her and Aemon and the child.” Jon smiled a strange, sad smile. “And pull your hood up. The snowflakes are melting in your hair.”