



## DAVOS

When he came up on deck, the long point of Driftmark was dwindling behind them while Dragonstone rose from the sea ahead. A pale grey wisp of smoke blew from the top of the mountain to mark where the island lay. *Dragonmont is restless this morning, Davos thought, or else Melisandre is burning someone else.*

Melisandre had been much in his thoughts as *Shayala's Dance* made her way across Blackwater Bay and through the Gullet, tacking against perverse contrary winds. The great fire that burned atop the Sharp Point watchtower at the end of Massey's Hook reminded him of the ruby she wore at her throat, and when the world turned red at dawn and sunset the drifting clouds turned the same color as the silks and satins of her rustling gowns.

She would be waiting on Dragonstone as well, waiting in all her beauty and all her power, with her god and her shadows and his king. The red priestess had always seemed loyal to Stannis, until now. *She has broken him, as a man breaks a horse. She would ride him to power if she could, and for that she gave my sons to the fire. I will cut the living heart from her breast and see how it burns.* He touched the hilt of the fine long Lysene dirk that the captain had given him.

The captain had been very kind to him. His name was Khorane Sathmantes, a Lyseni like Salladhor Saan, whose ship this was. He had the pale blue eyes you often saw on Lys, set in a bony weatherworn face, but he

had spent many years trading in the Seven Kingdoms. When he learned that the man he had plucked from the sea was the celebrated onion knight, he gave him the use of his own cabin and his own clothes, and a pair of new boots that almost fit. He insisted that Davos share his provisions as well, though that turned out badly. His stomach could not tolerate the snails and lampreys and other rich food Captain Khorane so relished, and after his first meal at the captain's table he spent the rest of the day with one end or the other dangling over the rail.

Dragonstone loomed larger with every stroke of the oars. Davos could see the shape of the mountain now, and on its side the great black citadel with its gargoyles and dragon towers. The bronze figurehead at the bow of *Shayala's Dance* sent up wings of salt spray as it cut the waves. He leaned his weight against the rail, grateful for its support. His ordeal had weakened him. If he stood too long his legs shook, and sometimes he fell prey to uncontrollable fits of coughing and brought up gobs of bloody phlegm. *It is nothing*, he told himself. *Surely the gods did not bring me safe through fire and sea only to kill me with a flux.*

As he listened to the pounding of the oarmaster's drum, the thrum of the sail, and the rhythmic swish and creak of the oars, he thought back to his younger days, when these same sounds woke dread in his heart on many a misty morn. They heralded the approach of old Ser Tristimun's sea watch, and the sea watch was death to smugglers when Aerys Targaryen sat the Iron Throne.

*But that was another lifetime*, he thought. *That was before the onion ship, before Storm's End, before Stannis shortened my fingers. That was before the war or the red comet, before I was a Seaworth or a knight. I was a different man in those days, before Lord Stannis raised me high.*

Captain Khorane had told him of the end of Stannis's hopes, on the night the river burned. The Lannisters had taken him from the flank, and his fickle bannermen had abandoned him by the hundreds in the hour of his greatest need. "King Renly's shade was seen as well," the captain said, "slaying right and left as he led the lion lord's van. It's said his green armor took a ghostly glow from the wildfire, and his antlers ran with golden flames."

*Renly's shade*. Davos wondered if his sons would return as shades as well. He had seen too many queer things on the sea to say that ghosts did not exist. "Did none keep faith?" he asked.

"Some few," the captain said. "The queen's kin, them in chief. We took off many who wore the fox-and-flowers, though many more were left ashore, with all manner of badges. Lord Florent is the King's Hand on Dragonstone now."

The mountain grew taller, crowned all in pale smoke. The sail sang, the drum beat, the oars pulled smoothly, and before very long the mouth of the harbor opened before them. *So empty*, Davos thought, remembering how it had been before, with the ships crowding every quay and rocking at anchor off the breakwater. He could see Salladhor Saan's flagship *Valyrian* moored at the quay where *Fury* and her sisters had once tied up. The ships on either side of her had striped Lysene hulls as well. In vain he looked for any sign of *Lady Marya* or *Wraith*.

They pulled down the sail as they entered the harbor, to dock on oars alone. The captain came to Davos as they were tying up. "My prince will wish to see you at once."

A fit of coughing seized Davos as he tried to answer. He clutched the rail for support and spat over the side. "The king," he wheezed. "I must go to the king." *For where the king is, I will find Melisandre*.

"No one goes to the king," Khorane Sathmantes replied firmly. "Salladhor Saan will tell you. Him first."

Davos was too weak to defy him. He could only nod.

Salladhor Saan was not aboard his *Valyrian*. They found him at another quay a quarter mile distant, down in the hold of a big-bellied Pentoshi cog named *Bountiful Harvest*, counting cargo with two eunuchs. One held a lantern, the other a wax tablet and stylus. "Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine," the old rogue was saying when Davos and the captain came down the hatch. Today he wore a wine-colored tunic and high boots of bleached white leather inlaid with silver scrollwork. Pulling the stopper from a jar, he sniffed, sneezed, and said, "A coarse grind, and of the second quality, my nose declares. The bill of lading is saying forty-three jars. Where have the others gotten to, I am wondering? These Pentoshi, do they think I am not

counting?” When he saw Davos he stopped suddenly. “Is it pepper stinging my eyes, or tears? Is this the knight of the onions who stands before me? No, how can it be, my dear friend Davos died on the burning river, all agree. Why has he come to haunt me?”

“I am no ghost, Salla.”

“What else? My onion knight was never so thin or so pale as you.” Salladhor Saan threaded his way between the jars of spice and bolts of cloth that filled the hold of the merchanter, wrapped Davos in a fierce embrace, then kissed him once on each cheek and a third time on his forehead. “You are still warm, ser, and I feel your heart thumpety-thumping. Can it be true? The sea that swallowed you has spit you up again.”

Davos was reminded of Patchface, Princess Shireen’s lackwit fool. He had gone into the sea as well, and when he came out he was mad. *Am I mad as well?* He coughed into a gloved hand and said, “I swam beneath the chain and washed ashore on a spear of the merling king. I would have died there, if *Shayala’s Dance* had not come upon me.”

Salladhor Saan threw an arm around the captain’s shoulders. “This was well done, Khorane. You will be having a fine reward, I am thinking. Meizo Mahr, be a good eunuch and take my friend Davos to the owner’s cabin. Fetch him some hot wine with cloves, I am misliking the sound of that cough. Squeeze some lime in it as well. And bring white cheese and a bowl of those cracked green olives we counted earlier! Davos, I will join you soon, once I have bespoken our good captain. You will be forgiving me, I know. Do not eat all the olives, or I must be cross with you!”

Davos let the elder of the two eunuchs escort him to a large and lavishly furnished cabin at the stern of the ship. The carpets were deep, the windows stained glass, and any of the great leather chairs would have seated three of Davos quite comfortably. The cheese and olives arrived shortly, and a cup of steaming hot red wine. He held it between his hands and sipped it gratefully. The warmth felt soothing as it spread through his chest.

Salladhor Saan appeared not long after. “You must be forgiving me for the wine, my friend. These Pentoshi would drink their own water if it were purple.”

“It will help my chest,” said Davos. “Hot wine is better than a compress, my mother used to say.”

“You shall be needing compresses as well, I am thinking. Sitting on a spear all this long time, oh my. How are you finding that excellent chair? He has fat cheeks, does he not?”

“Who?” asked Davos, between sips of hot wine.

“Illyrio Mopatis. A whale with whiskers, I am telling you truly. These chairs were built to his measure, though he is seldom bestirring himself from Pentos to sit in them. A fat man always sits comfortably, I am thinking, for he takes his pillow with him wherever he goes.”

“How is it you come by a Pentoshi ship?” asked Davos. “Have you gone pirate again, my lord?” He set his empty cup aside.

“Vile calumny. Who has suffered more from pirates than Salladhor Saan? I ask only what is due me. Much gold is owed, oh yes, but I am not without reason, so in place of coin I have taken a handsome parchment, very crisp. It bears the name and seal of Lord Alester Florent, the Hand of the King. I am made Lord of Blackwater Bay, and no vessel may be crossing my lordly waters without my lordly leave, no. And when these outlaws are trying to steal past me in the night to avoid my lawful duties and customs, why, they are no better than smugglers, so I am well within my rights to seize them.” The old pirate laughed. “I cut off no man’s fingers, though. What good are bits of fingers? The ships I am taking, the cargoes, a few ransoms, nothing unreasonable.” He gave Davos a sharp look. “You are unwell, my friend. That cough . . . and so thin, I am seeing your bones through your skin. And yet I am not seeing your little bag of fingerbones . . .”

Old habit made Davos reach for the leather pouch that was no longer there. “I lost it in the river.” *My luck.*

“The river was terrible,” Salladhor Saan said solemnly. “Even from the bay, I was seeing, and shuddering.”

Davos coughed, spat, and coughed again. “I saw *Black Betha* burning, and *Fury* as well,” he finally managed, hoarsely. “Did none of our ships escape the fire?” Part of him still hoped.

“*Lord Steffon, Ragged Jenna, Swift Sword, Laughing Lord*, and some others were upstream of the pyromancers’ pissing, yes. They did not burn, but with the chain raised, neither could they be flying. Some few were surrendering. Most rowed far up the Blackwater, away from the battling, and then were sunk by their crews so they would not be falling into Lannister hands. *Ragged Jenna* and *Laughing Lord* are still playing pirate on the river, I have heard, but who can say if it is so?”

“*Lady Marya?*” Davos asked. “*Wraith?*”

Salladhor Saan put a hand on Davos’s forearm and gave a squeeze. “No. Of them, no. I am sorry, my friend. They were good men, your Dale and Allard. But this comfort I can give you—your young Devan was among those we took off at the end. The brave boy never once left the king’s side, or so they say.”

For a moment he felt almost dizzy, his relief was so palpable. He had been afraid to ask about Devan. “The Mother is merciful. I must go to him, Salla. I must see him.”

“Yes,” said Salladhor Saan. “And you will be wanting to sail to Cape Wrath, I know, to see your wife and your two little ones. You must be having a new ship, I am thinking.”

“His Grace will give me a ship,” said Davos.

The Lyseni shook his head. “Of ships, His Grace has none, and Salladhor Saan has many. The king’s ships burned up on the river, but not mine. You shall have one, old friend. You will sail for me, yes? You will dance into Braavos and Myr and Volantis in the black of night, all unseen, and dance out again with silks and spices. We will be having fat purses, yes.”

“You are kind, Salla, but my duty’s to my king, not your purse. The war will go on. Stannis is still the rightful heir by all the laws of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“All the laws are not helping when all the ships burn up, I am thinking. And your king, well, you will be finding him changed, I am fearing. Since the battle, he sees no one, but broods in his Stone Drum. Queen Selyse keeps court for him with her uncle the Lord Alester, who is naming himself the Hand. The king’s seal she has given to this uncle, to fix to the letters he writes, even to my pretty parchment. But it is a little kingdom they are

ruling, poor and rocky, yes. There is no gold, not even a little bit to pay faithful Salladhor Saan what is owed him, and only those knights that we took off at the end, and no ships but my little brave few.”

A sudden racking cough bent Davos over. Salladhor Saan moved to help him, but he waved him off, and after a moment he recovered. “No one?” he wheezed. “What do you mean, he sees no one?” His voice sounded wet and thick, even in his own ears, and for a moment the cabin swam dizzily around him.

“No one but *her*,” said Salladhor Saan, and Davos did not have to ask who he meant. “My friend, you tire yourself. It is a bed you are needing, not Salladhor Saan. A bed and many blankets, with a hot compress for your chest and more wine and cloves.”

Davos shook his head. “I will be fine. Tell me, Salla, I must know. No one but Melisandre?”

The Lyseni gave him a long doubtful look, and continued reluctantly. “The guards keep all others away, even his queen and his little daughter. Servants bring meals that no one eats.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Queer talking I have heard, of hungry fires within the mountain, and how Stannis and the red woman go down together to watch the flames. There are shafts, they say, and secret stairs down into the mountain’s heart, into hot places where only *she* may walk unburned. It is enough and more to give an old man such terrors that sometimes he can scarcely find the strength to eat.”

*Melisandre*. Davos shivered. “The red woman did this to him,” he said. “She sent the fire to consume us, to punish Stannis for setting her aside, to teach him that he could not hope to win without her sorceries.”

The Lyseni chose a plump olive from the bowl between them. “You are not the first to be saying this, my friend. But if I am you, I am not saying it so loudly. Dragonstone crawls with these queen’s men, oh yes, and they have sharp ears and sharper knives.” He popped the olive into his mouth.

“I have a knife myself. Captain Khorane made me a gift of it.” He pulled out the dirk and laid it on the table between them. “A knife to cut out Melisandre’s heart. If she has one.”

Salladhor Saan spit out an olive pit. “Davos, good Davos, you must not be saying such things, even in jest.”

“No jest. I mean to kill her.” *If she can be killed by mortal weapons.* Davos was not certain that she could. He had seen old Maester Cressen slip poison into her wine, with his own eyes he had seen it, but when they both drank from the poisoned cup it was the maester who died, not the red priestess. *A knife in the heart, though . . . even demons can be killed by cold iron, the singers say.*

“These are dangerous talkings, my friend,” Salladhor Saan warned him. “I am thinking you are still sick from the sea. The fever has cooked your wits, yes. Best you are taking to your bed for a long resting, until you are stronger.”

*Until my resolve weakens, you mean.* Davos got to his feet. He did feel feverish and a little dizzy, but it did not matter. “You are a treacherous old rogue, Salladhor Saan, but a good friend all the same.”

The Lyseni stroked his pointed silver beard. “So with this great friend you will be staying, yes?”

“No, I will be going.” He coughed.

“Go? Look at you! You cough, you tremble, you are thin and weak. Where will you be going?”

“To the castle. My bed is there, and my son.”

“And the red woman,” Salladhor Saan said suspiciously. “She is in the castle also.”

“Her too.” Davos slid the dirk back into its sheath.

“You are an onion smuggler, what do you know of skulkings and stabbings? And you are ill, you cannot even hold the dirk. Do you know what will be happening to you, if you are caught? While we were burning on the river, the queen was burning traitors. *Servants of the dark*, she named them, poor men, and the red woman sang as the fires were lit.”

Davos was unsurprised. *I knew*, he thought, *I knew before he told me.* “She took Lord Sunglass from the dungeons,” he guessed, “and Hubbard Rambton’s sons.”



“Just so, and burned them, as she will burn you. If you kill the red woman, they will burn you for revenge, and if you fail to kill her, they will burn you for the trying. She will sing and you will scream, and then you will die. And you have only just come back to life!”

“And this is why,” said Davos. “To do this thing. To make an end of Melisandre of Asshai and all her works. Why else would the sea have spit me out? You know Blackwater Bay as well as I do, Salla. No sensible captain would ever take his ship through the spears of the merling king and risk ripping out his bottom. *Shayala’s Dance* should never have come near me.”

“A wind,” insisted Salladhor Saan loudly, “an ill wind, is all. A wind drove her too far to the south.”

“And who sent the wind? Salla, the Mother spoke to me.”

The old Lyseni blinked at him. “Your mother is dead . . .”

“*The Mother*. She blessed me with seven sons, and yet I let them burn her. She spoke to me. We *called* the fire, she said. We called the shadows too. I rowed Melisandre into the bowels of Storm’s End and watched her birth a horror.” He saw it still in his nightmares, the gaunt black hands pushing against her thighs as it wriggled free of her swollen womb. “She killed Cressen and Lord Renly and a brave man named Cortnay Penrose, and she killed my sons as well. Now it is time someone killed her.”

“*Someone*,” said Salladhor Saan. “Yes, just so, someone. But not you. You are weak as a child, and no warrior. Stay, I beg you, we will talk more and you will eat, and perhaps we will sail to Braavos and hire a Faceless Man to do this thing, yes? But you, no, you must sit and eat.”

*He is making this much harder*, thought Davos wearily, *and it was perishingly hard to begin with*. “I have vengeance in my belly, Salla. It leaves no room for food. Let me go now. For our friendship, wish me luck and let me go.”

Salladhor Saan pushed himself to his feet. “You are no true friend, I am thinking. When you are dead, who will be bringing your ashes and bones back to your lady wife and telling her that she has lost a husband and four sons? Only sad old Salladhor Saan. But so be it, brave ser knight, go rushing to your grave. I will gather your bones in a sack and give them to

the sons you leave behind, to wear in little bags around their necks.” He waved an angry hand, with rings on every finger. “Go, go, go, go, go.”

Davos did not want to leave like this. “Salla—”

“GO. Or stay, better, but if you are going, go.”

He went.

His walk up from the *Bountiful Harvest* to the gates of Dragonstone was long and lonely. The dockside streets where soldiers and sailors and smallfolk had thronged were empty and deserted. Where once he had stepped around squealing pigs and naked children, rats scurried. His legs felt like pudding beneath him, and thrice the coughing racked him so badly that he had to stop and rest. No one came to help him, nor even peered through a window to see what was the matter. The windows were shuttered, the doors barred, and more than half the houses displayed some mark of mourning. *Thousands sailed up the Blackwater Rush, and hundreds came back*, Davos reflected. *My sons did not die alone. May the Mother have mercy on them all.*

When he reached the castle gates, he found them shut as well. Davos pounded on the iron-studded wood with his fist. When there was no answer, he kicked at it, again and again. Finally a crossbowman appeared atop the barbican, peering down between two towering gargoyles. “Who goes there?”

He craned his head back and cupped his hands around his mouth. “Ser Davos Seaworth, to see His Grace.”

“Are you drunk? Go away and stop that pounding.”

Salladhor Saan had warned him. Davos tried a different tack. “Send for my son, then. Devan, the king’s squire.”

The guard frowned. “Who did you say you were?”

“Davos,” he shouted. “The onion knight.”

The head vanished, to return a moment later. “Be off with you. The onion knight died on the river. His ship burned.”

“His ship burned,” Davos agreed, “but he lived, and here he stands. Is Jate still captain of the gate?”

“Who?”

“Jate Blackberry. He knows me well enough.”

“I never heard of him. Most like he’s dead.”

“Lord Chyttering, then.”

“That one I know. He burned on the Blackwater.”

“Hookface Will? Hal the Hog?”

“Dead and dead,” the crossbowman said, but his face betrayed a sudden doubt. “You wait there.” He vanished again.

Davos waited. *Gone, all gone*, he thought dully, remembering how fat Hal’s white belly always showed beneath his grease-stained doublet, the long scar the fish hook had left across Will’s face, the way Jate always doffed his cap at the women, be they five or fifty, highborn or low. *Drowned or burned, with my sons and a thousand others, gone to make a king in hell.*

Suddenly the crossbowman was back. “Go round to the sally port and they’ll admit you.”

Davos did as he was bid. The guards who ushered him inside were strangers to him. They carried spears, and on their breasts they wore the fox-and-flowers sigil of House Florent. They escorted him not to the Stone Drum, as he’d expected, but under the arch of the Dragon’s Tail and down to Aegon’s Garden. “Wait here,” their sergeant told him.

“Does His Grace know that I’ve returned?” asked Davos.

“Bugger all if I know. Wait, I said.” The man left, taking his spearmen with him.

Aegon’s Garden had a pleasant piney smell to it, and tall dark trees rose on every side. There were wild roses as well, and towering thorny hedges, and a boggy spot where cranberries grew.

*Why have they brought me here?* Davos wondered.

Then he heard a faint ringing of bells, and a child’s giggle, and suddenly the fool Patchface popped from the bushes, shambling along as fast as he could go with the Princess Shireen hot on his heels. “You come back now,” she was shouting after him. “Patches, you come back.”

When the fool saw Davos, he jerked to a sudden halt, the bells on his antlered tin helmet going *ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling*. Hopping from one foot to the other, he sang, “*Fool’s blood, king’s blood, blood on the maiden’s thigh, but chains for the guests and chains for the bridegroom, aye aye aye.*” Shireen almost caught him then, but at the last instant he hopped over a patch of bracken and vanished among the trees. The princess was right behind him. The sight of them made Davos smile.

He had turned to cough into his gloved hand when another small shape crashed out of the hedge and bowled right into him, knocking him off his feet.

The boy went down as well, but he was up again almost at once. “What are you doing here?” he demanded as he brushed himself off. Jet-black hair fell to his collar, and his eyes were a startling blue. “You shouldn’t get in my way when I’m running.”

“No,” Davos agreed. “I shouldn’t.” Another fit of coughing seized him as he struggled to his knees.

“Are you unwell?” The boy took him by the arm and pulled him to his feet. “Should I summon the maester?”

Davos shook his head. “A cough. It will pass.”

The boy took him at his word. “We were playing monsters and maidens,” he explained. “I was the monster. It’s a childish game but my cousin likes it. Do you have a name?”

“Ser Davos Seaworth.”

The boy looked him up and down dubiously. “Are you certain? You don’t look very knightly.”

“I am the knight of the onions, my lord.”

The blue eyes blinked. “The one with the black ship?”

“You know that tale?”

“You brought my uncle Stannis fish to eat before I was born, when Lord Tyrell had him under siege.” The boy drew himself up tall. “I am Edric Storm,” he announced. “King Robert’s son.”

“Of course you are.” Davos had known that almost at once. The lad had the prominent ears of a Florent, but the hair, the eyes, the jaw, the cheekbones, those were all Baratheon.

“Did you know my father?” Edric Storm demanded.

“I saw him many a time while calling on your uncle at court, but we never spoke.”

“My father taught me to fight,” the boy said proudly. “He came to see me almost every year, and sometimes we trained together. On my last name day he sent me a warhammer just like his, only smaller. They made me leave it at Storm’s End, though. Is it true my uncle Stannis cut off your fingers?”

“Only the last joint. I still have fingers, only shorter.”

“Show me.”

Davos peeled his glove off. The boy studied his hand carefully. “He did not shorten your thumb?”

“No.” Davos coughed. “No, he left me that.”

“He should not have chopped any of your fingers,” the lad decided. “That was ill done.”

“I was a smuggler.”

“Yes, but you smuggled him fish and onions.”

“Lord Stannis knighted me for the onions, and took my fingers for the smuggling.” He pulled his glove back on.

“My father would not have chopped your fingers.”

“As you say, my lord.” *Robert was a different man than Stannis, true enough. The boy is like him. Aye, and like Renly as well.* That thought made him anxious.

The boy was about to say something more when they heard steps. Davos turned. Ser Axell Florent was coming down the garden path with a dozen guards in quilted jerkins. On their breasts they wore the fiery heart of the Lord of Light. *Queen’s men*, Davos thought. A cough came on him suddenly.

Ser Axell was short and muscular, with a barrel chest, thick arms, bandy legs, and hair growing from his ears. The queen’s uncle, he had served as

castellan of Dragonstone for a decade, and had always treated Davos courteously, knowing he enjoyed the favor of Lord Stannis. But there was neither courtesy nor warmth in his tone as he said, “Ser Davos, and undrowned. How can that be?”

“Onions float, ser. Have you come to take me to the king?”

“I have come to take you to the dungeon.” Ser Axell waved his men forward. “Seize him, and take his dirk. He means to use it on our lady.”