

DAVOS

His lordship will hear you now, smuggler.”

The knight wore silver armor, his greaves and gauntlet inlaid with niello to suggest flowing fronds of seaweed. The helm beneath his arm was the head of the merling king, with a crown of mother-of-pearl and a jutting beard of jet and jade. His own beard was as grey as the winter sea.

Davos rose. “May I know your name, ser?”

“Ser Marlon Manderly.” He was a head taller than Davos and three stones heavier, with slate-grey eyes and a haughty way of speaking. “I have the honor to be Lord Wyman’s cousin and commander of his garrison. Follow me.”

Davos had come to White Harbor as an envoy, but they had made him a captive. His chambers were large, airy, and handsomely furnished, but there were guards outside his doors. From his window he could see the streets of White Harbor beyond the castle walls, but he was not allowed to walk them. He could see the harbor too, and had watched *Merry Midwife* make her way down the firth. Casso Mogat had waited four days instead of three before departing. Another fortnight had passed since then.

Lord Manderly’s household guard wore cloaks of blue-green wool and carried silver tridents in place of common spears. One went before him, one behind, and one to either side. They walked past the faded banners, broken shields, and rusted swords of a hundred ancient victories, and a score of wooden figures, cracked and worm-riddled, that could only have adorned the prows of ships.

Two marble mermen flanked his lordship’s court, Fishfoot’s smaller cousins. As the guards threw open the doors, a herald slammed the butt of his staff against an old plank floor. “*Ser Davos of House Seaworth*,” he called in a ringing voice.

As many times as he had visited White Harbor, Davos had never set foot inside the New Castle, much less the Merman's Court. Its walls and floor and ceiling were made of wooden planks notched cunningly together and decorated with all the creatures of the sea. As they approached the dais, Davos trod on painted crabs and clams and starfish, half-hidden amongst twisting black fronds of seaweed and the bones of drowned sailors. On the walls to either side, pale sharks prowled painted blue-green depths, whilst eels and octopods slithered amongst rocks and sunken ships. Shoals of herring and great codfish swam between the tall arched windows. Higher up, near where the old fishing nets drooped down from the rafters, the surface of the sea had been depicted. To his right a war galley stroked serene against the rising sun; to his left, a battered old cog raced before a storm, her sails in rags. Behind the dais a kraken and grey leviathan were locked in battle beneath the painted waves.

Davos had hoped to speak with Wyman Manderly alone, but he found a crowded court. Along the walls, the women outnumbered the men by five to one; what few males he did see had long grey beards or looked too young to shave. There were septons as well, and holy sisters in white robes and grey. Near the top of the hall stood a dozen men in the blue and silver-grey of House Frey. Their faces had a likeness a blind man could have seen; several wore the badge of the Twins, two towers connected by a bridge.

Davos had learned to read men's faces long before Maester Pylos had taught him to read words on paper. *These Freys would gladly see me dead*, he realized at a glance.

Nor did he find any welcome in the pale blue eyes of Wyman Manderly. His lordship's cushioned throne was wide enough to accommodate three men of common girth, yet Manderly threatened to overflow it. His lordship *sagged* into his seat, his shoulders slumped, his legs splayed, his hands resting on the arms of his throne as if the weight of them were too much to bear. *Gods be good*, thought Davos, when he saw Lord Wyman's face, *this man looks half a corpse*. His skin was pallid, with an undertone of grey.

Kings and corpses always draw attendants, the old saying went. So it was with Manderly. Left of the high seat stood a maester nigh as fat as the lord he served, a rosy-cheeked man with thick lips and a head of golden curls.

Ser Marlon claimed the place of honor at his lordship's right hand. On a cushioned stool at his feet perched a plump pink lady. Behind Lord Wyman stood two younger women, sisters by the look of them. The elder wore her brown hair bound in a long braid. The younger, no more than fifteen, had an even longer braid, dyed a garish green.

None chose to honor Davos with a name. The maester was the first to speak. "You stand before Wyman Manderly, Lord of White Harbor and Warden of the White Knife, Shield of the Faith, Defender of the Dispossessed, Lord Marshal of the Mander, a Knight of the Order of the Green Hand," he said. "In the Merman's Court, it is customary for vassals and petitioners to kneel."

The onion knight would have bent his knee, but a King's Hand could not; to do so would suggest that the king he served was less than this fat lord. "I have not come as a petitioner," Davos replied. "I have a string of titles too. Lord of the Rainwood, Admiral of the Narrow Sea, Hand of the King."

The plump woman on the stool rolled her eyes. "An admiral without ships, a hand without fingers, in service to a king without a throne. Is this a knight who comes before us, or the answer to a child's riddle?"

"He is a messenger, good-daughter," Lord Wyman said, "an onion of ill omen. Stannis did not like the answer his ravens brought him, so he has sent this ... this *smuggler*." He squinted at Davos through eyes half-buried in rolls of fat. "You have visited our city before, I think, taking coin from our pockets and food off our table. How much did you steal from me, I wonder?"

Not enough that you ever missed a meal. "I paid for my smuggling at Storm's End, my lord." Davos pulled off his glove and held up his left hand, with its four shortened fingers.

"Four fingertips, for a lifetime's worth of theft?" said the woman on the stool. Her hair was yellow, her face round and pink and fleshy. "You got off cheaply, Onion Knight."

Davos did not deny it. “If it please my lord, I would request a privy audience.”

It did not please the lord. “I keep no secrets from my kin, nor from my leal lords and knights, good friends all.”

“My lord,” said Davos, “I would not want my words to be heard by His Grace’s enemies ... or by your lordship’s.”

“Stannis may have enemies in this hall. I do not.”

“Not even the men who slew your son?” Davos pointed. “These Freys were amongst his hosts at the Red Wedding.”

One of the Freys stepped forward, a knight long and lean of limb, clean-shaved but for a grey mustache as thin as a Myrish stiletto. “The Red Wedding was the Young Wolf’s work. He changed into a beast before our eyes and tore out the throat of my cousin Jinglebell, a harmless simpleton. He would have slain my lord father too, if Ser Wendel had not put himself in the way.”

Lord Wyman blinked back tears. “Wendel was always a brave boy. I was not surprised to learn he died a hero.”

The enormity of the lie made Davos gasp. “Is it your claim that *Robb Stark* killed Wendel Manderly?” he asked the Frey.

“And many more. Mine own son Tytos was amongst them, and my daughter’s husband. When Stark changed into a wolf, his northmen did the same. The mark of the beast was on them all. Wargs birth other wargs with a bite, it is well-known. It was all my brothers and I could do to put them down before they slew us all.”

The man was *smirking* as he told the tale. Davos wanted to peel his lips off with a knife. “Ser, may I have your name?”

“Ser Jared, of House Frey.”

“Jared of House Frey, I name you liar.”

Ser Jared seemed amused. "Some men cry when slicing onions, but I have never had that weakness." Steel whispered against leather as he drew his sword. "If you are indeed a knight, ser, defend that slander with your body."

Lord Wyman's eyes fluttered open. "I'll have no bloodshed in the Merman's Court. Put up your steel, Ser Jared, else I must ask you to leave my presence."

Ser Jared sheathed his sword. "Beneath your lordship's roof, your lordship's word is law ... but I shall want a reckoning with this onion lord before he leaves this city."

"*Blood!*" howled the woman on the stool. "That's what this ill onion wants of us, my lord. See how he stirs up trouble? Send him away, I beg you. He wants the blood of your people, the blood of your brave sons. Send him *away*. Should the queen hear that you gave audience to this traitor, she may question our own loyalty. She might ... she could ... she ..."

"It will not come to that, good-daughter," Lord Wyman said. "The Iron Throne shall have no cause to doubt us."

Davos disliked the sound of that, but he had not come all this way to hold his tongue. "The boy on the Iron Throne is a usurper," he said, "and I am no traitor, but the Hand of Stannis Baratheon, the First of His Name, the trueborn King of Westeros."

The fat maester cleared his throat. "Stannis Baratheon was brother to our late King Robert, may the Father judge him justly. Tommen is the issue of Robert's body. The laws of succession are clear in such a case. A son must come before a brother."

"Maester Theomore speaks truly," said Lord Wyman. "He is wise in all such matters, and has always given me good counsel."

"A *trueborn* son comes before a brother," Davos agreed, "but Tommen-called-Baratheon is bastard-born, as his brother Joffrey was before him. They were sired by the Kingslayer, in defiance of all the laws of gods and men."

Another of the Freys spoke up. “He speaks treason with his own lips, my lord. Stannis took his thieving fingers. You should take his lying tongue.”

“Take his head, rather,” suggested Ser Jared. “Or let him meet me on the field of honor.”

“What would a Frey know of honor?” Davos threw back.

Four of the Freys started forward until Lord Wyman halted them with an upraised hand. “Step back, my friends. I will hear him out before I ... before I deal with him.”

“Can you offer any proof of this incest, ser?” Maester Theomore asked, folding his soft hands atop his belly.

Edric Storm, thought Davos, but I sent him far away across the narrow sea, to keep him safe from Melisandre’s fires. “You have the word of Stannis Baratheon that all I’ve said is true.”

“Words are wind,” said the young woman behind Lord Wyman’s high seat, the handsome one with the long brown braid. “And men will lie to get their way, as any maid could tell you.”

“Proof requires more than some lord’s unsupported word,” declared Maester Theomore. “Stannis Baratheon would not be the first man who ever lied to win a throne.”

The pink woman pointed a plump finger down at Davos. “We want no part of any treason, you. We are good people in White Harbor, lawful, loyal people. Pour no more poison in our ears, or my good-father will send you to the Wolf’s Den.”

How have I offended this one? “Might I have the honor of my lady’s name?”

The pink woman gave an angry sniff and let the maester answer. “The Lady Leona is wife to Lord Wyman’s son Ser Wylis, presently a captive of the Lannisters.”

She speaks from fear. If White Harbor should declare for Stannis, her husband would answer with his life. *How can I ask Lord Wyman to condemn his son to death? What would I do in his place if Devan were a hostage?* “My lord,” said Davos, “I pray no harm will come to your son, or to any man of White Harbor.”

“Another lie,” said Lady Leona from her stool.

Davos thought it best to ignore her. “When Robb Stark took up arms against the bastard Joffrey-called-Baratheon, White Harbor marched with him. Lord Stark has fallen, but his war goes on.”

“Robb Stark was my liege lord,” said Lord Wyman. “Who is this man Stannis? Why does he trouble us? He never felt the need to journey north before, as best I can recall. Yet he turns up now, a beaten cur with his helm in his hand, begging for alms.”

“He came to save the realm, my lord,” Davos insisted. “To defend your lands against the ironborn and the wildlings.”

Next to the high seat, Ser Marlon Manderly gave a snort of disdain. “It has been centuries since White Harbor has seen any wildlings, and the ironmen have never troubled this coast. Does Lord Stannis propose to defend us from snarks and dragons too?”

Laughter swept the Merman’s Court, but at Lord Wyman’s feet, Lady Leona began to sob. “Ironmen from the isles, wildlings from beyond the Wall ... and now this traitor lord with his outlaws, rebels, and sorcerers.” She pointed a finger at Davos. “We have heard of your red witch, oh yes. She would turn us against the Seven to bow before a fire demon!”

Davos had no love for the red priestess, but he dare not let Lady Leona go unanswered. “Lady Melisandre is a priestess of the red god. Queen Selyse has adopted her faith, along with many others, but more of His Grace’s followers still worship the Seven. Myself among them.” He prayed no one would ask him to explain about the sept at Dragonstone or the godswood at Storm’s End. *If they ask, I must needs tell them. Stannis would not have me lie.*

“The Seven defend White Harbor,” Lady Leona declared. “We do not fear your red queen or her god. Let her send what spells she will. The prayers of godly men will shield us against evil.”

“Indeed.” Lord Wyman gave Lady Leona a pat on the shoulder. “Lord Davos, if you *are* a lord, I know what your so-called king would have of me. Steel and silver and a bended knee.” He shifted his weight to lean upon an elbow. “Before he was slain, Lord Tywin offered White Harbor full pardon for our support of the Young Wolf. He promised that my son would be returned to me once I paid a ransom of three thousand dragons and proved my loyalty beyond a doubt. Roose Bolton, who is named our Warden of the North, requires that I give up my claim to Lord Horn-wood’s lands and castles but swears my other holdings shall remain untouched. Walder Frey, his good-father, offers one of his daughters to be my wife, and husbands for my son’s daughters here behind me. These terms seem generous to me, a good basis for a fair and lasting peace. You would have me spurn them. So I ask you, Onion Knight—what does Lord Stannis offer me in return for my allegiance?”

War and woe and the screams of burning men, Davos might have said. “The chance to do your duty,” he replied instead. That was the answer Stannis would have given Wyman Manderly. *The Hand should speak with the king’s voice.*

Lord Wyman sagged back in his chair. “Duty. I see.”

“White Harbor is not strong enough to stand alone. You need His Grace as much as he needs you. Together you can defeat your common enemies.”

“My lord,” said Ser Marlon, in his ornate silver armor, “will you permit me to ask a few questions of Lord Davos?”

“As you wish, cousin.” Lord Wyman closed his eyes.

Ser Marlon turned to Davos. “How many northern lords have declared for Stannis? Tell us that.”

“Arnolf Karstark has vowed to join His Grace.”

“Arnolf is no true lord, only a castellan. What castles does Lord Stannis hold at present, pray?”

“His Grace has taken the Nightfort for his seat. In the south, he holds Storm’s End and Dragonstone.”

Maester Theomore cleared his throat. “Only for the nonce. Storm’s End and Dragonstone are lightly held and must soon fall. And the Nightfort is a haunted ruin, a drear and dreadful place.”

Ser Marlon went on. “How many men can Stannis put into the field, can you tell us that? How many knights ride with him? How many bowmen, how many freeriders, how many men-at-arms?”

Too few, Davos knew. Stannis had come north with no more than fifteen hundred men ... but if he told them that, his mission here was doomed. He fumbled for words and found none.

“Your silence is all the answer I require, ser. Your king brings us only enemies.” Ser Marlon turned to his lord cousin. “Your lordship asked the onion knight what Stannis offers us. Let me answer. He offers us defeat and death. He would have you mount a horse of air and give battle with a sword of wind.”

The fat lord opened his eyes slowly, as if the effort were almost too much for him. “My cousin cuts to the bone, as ever. Do you have any more to say to me, Onion Knight, or can we put an end to this mummer’s farce? I grow weary of your face.”

Davos felt a stab of despair. *His Grace should have sent another man, a lord or knight or maester, someone who could speak for him without tripping on his own tongue.* “Death,” he heard himself say, “there will be death, aye. Your lordship lost a son at the Red Wedding. I lost four upon the Blackwater. And why? Because the Lannisters stole the throne. Go to King’s Landing and look on Tommen with your own eyes, if you doubt me. A blind man could see it. What does Stannis offer you? Vengeance. Vengeance for my sons and yours, for your husbands and your fathers and

your brothers. Vengeance for your murdered lord, your murdered king, your butchered princes. *Vengeance!*”

“Yes,” piped a girl’s voice, thin and high.

It belonged to the half-grown child with the blond eyebrows and the long green braid. “They killed Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn and King Robb,” she said. “He was our *king*! He was brave and good, and the Freys *murdered* him. If Lord Stannis will avenge him, we should join Lord Stannis.”

Manderly pulled her close. “Wylla, every time you open your mouth you make me want to send you to the silent sisters.”

“I only said—”

“We heard what you said,” said the older girl, her sister. “A child’s foolishness. Speak no ill of our friends of Frey. One of them will be your lord and husband soon.”

“No,” the girl declared, shaking her head. “I won’t. I won’t *ever*. They killed *the king*.”

Lord Wyman flushed. “You will. When the appointed day arrives, you will speak your wedding vows, else you will join the silent sisters and never speak again.”

The poor girl looked stricken. “Grandfather, *please* ...” “Hush, child,” said Lady Leona. “You heard your lord grandfather. *Hush!* You know nothing.”

“I know about the promise,” insisted the girl. “Maester Theomore, tell them! A thousand years before the Conquest, a promise was made, and oaths were sworn in the Wolf’s Den before the old gods and the new. When we were sore beset and friendless, hounded from our homes and in peril of our lives, the wolves took us in and nourished us and protected us against our enemies. The city is built upon the land they gave us. In return we swore that we should always be their men. *Stark* men!”

The maester fingered the chain about his neck. “Solemn oaths were sworn to the Starks of Winterfell, aye. But Winterfell has fallen and House Stark has been extinguished.”

“That’s because they *killed them all!*”

Another Frey spoke up. “Lord Wyman, if I may?”

Wyman Manderly gave him a nod. “Rhaegar. We are always pleased to hear your noble counsel.”

Rhaegar Frey acknowledged the compliment with a bow. He was thirty, or nigh unto, round-shouldered and kettle-bellied, but richly dressed in a doublet of soft grey lambswool trimmed in cloth-of-silver. His cloak was cloth-of-silver too, lined with vair and clasped at the collar with a brooch in the shape of the twin towers. “Lady Wylla,” he said to the girl with the green braid, “loyalty is a virtue. I hope you will be as loyal to Little Walder when you are joined in wedlock. As to the Starks, that House is extinguished only in the male line. Lord Eddard’s sons are dead, but his daughters live, and the younger girl is coming north to wed brave Ramsay Bolton.”

“Ramsay *Snow*,” Wylla Manderly threw back. “Have it as you will. By any name, he shall soon be wed to Arya Stark. If you would keep faith with your promise, give *him* your allegiance, for he shall be your Lord of Winterfell.”

“He won’t ever be *my* lord! He made Lady Hornwood marry him, then shut her in a dungeon and made her eat her *fingers*.”

A murmur of assent swept the Merman’s Court. “The maid tells it true,” declared a stocky man in white and purple, whose cloak was fastened with a pair of crossed bronze keys. “Roose Bolton’s cold and cunning, aye, but a man can deal with Roose. We’ve all known worse. But this bastard son of his ... they say he’s mad and cruel, a monster.”

“*They* say?” Rhaegar Frey sported a silky beard and a sardonic smile. “His *enemies* say, aye ... but it was the Young Wolf who was the monster. More

beast than boy, that one, puffed up with pride and bloodlust. And he was faithless, as my lord grandfather learned to his sorrow.” He spread his hands. “I do not fault White Harbor for supporting him. My grandsire made the same grievous mistake. In all the Young Wolf’s battles, White Harbor and the Twins fought side by side beneath his banners. Robb Stark betrayed us all. He abandoned the north to the cruel mercies of the ironmen to carve out a fairer kingdom for himself along the Trident. Then he abandoned the riverlords who had risked much and more for him, breaking his marriage pact with my grandfather to wed the first western wench who caught his eye. The Young Wolf? He was a vile dog and died like one.”

The Merman’s Court had grown still. Davos could feel the chill in the air. Lord Wyman was looking down at Rhaegar as if he were a roach in need of a hard heel ... yet then, abruptly, he gave a ponderous nod that set his chins to wobbling. “A dog, aye. He brought us only grief and death. A vile dog indeed. Say on.”

Rhaegar Frey went on. “Grief and death, aye ... and this onion lord will bring you more with his talk of vengeance. Open your eyes, as my lord grandsire did. The War of the Five Kings is all but done. Tommen is our king, our *only* king. We must help him bind up the wounds of this sad war. As Robert’s trueborn son, the heir of stag and lion, the Iron Throne is his by rights.”

“Wise words, and true,” said Lord Wyman Manderly. “They *weren’t*.” Wylla Manderly stamped her foot. “Be quiet, wretched child,” scolded Lady Leona. “Young girls should be an ornament to the eye, not an ache in the ear.” She seized the girl by her braid and pulled her squealing from the hall. *There went my only friend in this hall*, thought Davos.

“Wylla has always been a willful child,” her sister said, by way of apology. “I fear that she will make a willful wife.”

Rhaegar shrugged. “Marriage will soften her, I have no doubt. A firm hand and a quiet word.”

“If not, there are the silent sisters.” Lord Wyman shifted in his seat. “As for you, Onion Knight, I have heard sufficient treason for one day. You would

have me risk my city for a false king and a false god. You would have me sacrifice my only living son so Stannis Baratheon can plant his puckered arse upon a throne to which he has no right. I will not do it. Not for you. Not for your lord. Not for any man.” The Lord of White Harbor pushed himself to his feet. The effort brought a red flush to his neck. “You *are* still a smuggler, ser, come to steal my gold and blood. You would take my son’s head. I think I shall take yours instead. *Guards!* Seize this man!”

Before Davos could even think to move, he was surrounded by silver tridents. “My lord,” he said, “I am an envoy.”

“Are you? You came sneaking into my city like a smuggler. I say you are no lord, no knight, no envoy, only a thief and a spy, a peddler of lies and treasons. I should tear your tongue out with hot pincers and deliver you to the Dreadfort to be flayed. But the Mother is merciful, and so am I.” He beckoned to Ser Marlon. “Cousin, take this creature to the Wolf’s Den and cut off his head and hands. I want them brought to me before I sup. I shall not be able to eat a bite until I see this smuggler’s head upon a spike, with an onion shoved between his lying teeth.”