

## DAVOS

Ser Cortnay Penrose wore no armor. He sat a sorrel stallion, his standard-bearer a dapple grey. Above them flapped Baratheon's crowned stag and the crossed quills of Penrose, white on a russet field. Ser Cortnay's spade-shaped beard was russet as well, though he'd gone wholly bald on top. If the size and splendor of the king's party impressed him, it did not show on that weathered face.

They trotted up with much clinking of chain and rattle of plate. Even Davos wore mail, though he could not have said why; his shoulders and lower back ached from the unaccustomed weight. It made him feel cumbered and foolish, and he wondered once more why he was here. *It is not for me to question the king's commands, and yet...*

Every man of the party was of better birth and higher station than Davos Seaworth, and the great lords glittered in the morning sun. Silvered steel and gold inlay brightened their armor, and their warhelms were crested in a riot of silken plumes, feathers, and cunningly wrought heraldic beasts with gemstone eyes. Stannis himself looked out of place in this rich and royal company. Like Davos, the king was plainly garbed in wool and boiled leather, though the circlet of red gold about his temples lent him a certain grandeur. Sunlight flashed off its flame-shaped points whenever he moved his head.

This was the closest Davos had come to His Grace in the eight days since *Black Betha* had joined the rest of the fleet off Storm's End. He'd sought an audience within an hour of his arrival, only to be told that the king was occupied. The king was often occupied, Davos learned from his son Devan, one of the royal squires. Now that Stannis Baratheon had come into his power, the lordlings buzzed around him like flies round a corpse. *He looks half a corpse too, years older than when I left Dragonstone.* Devan said the king scarcely slept of late. "Since Lord Renly died, he has been troubled by terrible nightmares," the boy had confided to his father.

“Maester’s potions do not touch them. Only the Lady Melisandre can soothe him to sleep.”

*Is that why she shares his pavilion now? Davos wondered. To pray with him? Or does she have another way to soothe him to sleep?* it was an unworthy question, and one he dared not ask, even of his own son. Devan was a good boy, but he wore the flaming heart proudly on his doublet, and his father had seen him at the nightfires as dusk fell, beseeching the Lord of Light to bring the dawn. *He is the king’s squire*, he told himself, *it is only to be expected that he would take the king’s god.*

Davos had almost forgotten how high and thick the walls of Storm’s End loomed up close. King Stannis halted beneath them, a few feet from Ser Cortnay and his standard-bearer. “Ser,” he said with stiff courtesy. He made no move to dismount.

“My lord.” That was less courteous, but not unexpected.

“It is customary to grant a king the style *Your Grace*,” announced Lord Florent. A red gold fox poked its shining snout out from his breastplate through a circle of lapis lazuli flowers. Very tall, very courtly, and very rich, the Lord of Brightwater Keep had been the first of Renly’s bannermen to declare for Stannis, and the first to renounce his old gods and take up the Lord of Light. Stannis had left his queen on Dragonstone along with her uncle Axell, but the queen’s men were more numerous and powerful than ever, and Alester Florent was the foremost.

Ser Cortnay Penrose ignored him, preferring to address Stannis. “This is a notable company. The great lords Estermont, Errol, and Varner. Ser Jon of the green-apple Fossoways and Ser Bryan of the red. Lord Caron and Ser Guyard of King Renly’s Rainbow Guard... *and* the puissant Lord Alester Florent of Brightwater, to be sure. Is that your Onion Knight I spy to the rear? Well met, Ser Davos. I fear I do not know the lady.”

“I am named Melisandre, ser.” She alone came unarmored, but for her flowing red robes. At her throat the great ruby drank the daylight. “I serve your king, and the Lord of Light.”

“I wish you well of them, my lady,” Ser Cortnay answered, “but I bow to other gods, and a different king.”

“There is but one true king, and one true god,” announced Lord Florent.

“Are we here to dispute theology, my lord? Had I known, I would have brought a septon.”

“You know full well why we are here,” said Stannis. “You have had a fortnight to consider my offer. You sent your ravens. No help has come. Nor will it. Storm’s End stands alone, and I am out of patience. One last time, ser, I command you to open your gates, and deliver me that which is mine by rights.”

“And the terms?” asked Ser Cortnay.

“Remain as before,” said Stannis. “I will pardon you for your treason, as I have pardoned these lords you see behind me. The men of your garrison will be free to enter my service or to return unmolested to their homes. You may keep your weapons and as much property as a man can carry. I will require your horses and pack animals, however.”

“And what of Edric Storm?”

“My brother’s bastard must be surrendered to me.”

“Then my answer is still no, my lord.”

The king clenched his jaw. He said nothing.

Melisandre spoke instead. “May the Lord of Light protect you in your darkness, Ser Cortnay.”

“May the Others bugger your Lord of Light,” Penrose spat back, “and wipe his arse with that rag you bear.”

Lord Alester Florent cleared his throat. “Ser Cortnay, mind your tongue. His Grace means the boy no harm. The child is his own blood, and mine as well. My niece Delena was the mother, as all men know. If you will not trust to the king, trust to me. You know me for a man of honor—”

“I know you for a man of ambition,” Ser Cortnay broke in. “A man who changes kings and gods the way I change my boots. As do these other turncloaks I see before me.”

An angry clamor went up from the king's men. *He is not far wrong*, Davos thought. Only a short time before, the Fossoways, Guyard Morrigen, and the Lords Caron, Varner, Errol, and Estermont had all belonged to Renly. They had sat in his pavilion, helped him make his battle plans, plotted how Stannis might be brought low. And Lord Florent had been with them—he might be Queen Selyse's own uncle, but that had not kept the Lord of Brightwater from bending his knee to Renly when Renly's star was rising.

Bryce Caron walked his horse forward a few paces, his long rainbow-striped cloak twisting in the wind off the bay. "No man here is a turncloak, ser. My fealty belongs to Storm's End, and King Stannis is its rightful lord... *and* our true king. He is the last of House Baratheon, Robert's heir and Renly's."

"If that is so, why is the Knight of Flowers not among you? And where is Mathis Rowan? Randyll Tarly? Lady Oakheart? Why are they not here in your company, they who loved Renly best? *Where is Brienne of Tarth, I ask you?*"

"That one?" Ser Guyard Morrigen laughed harshly. "She ran. As well she might. Hers was the hand that slew the king."

"A lie," Ser Cortnay said. "I knew Brienne when she was no more than a girl playing at her father's feet in Evenfall Hall, and I knew her still better when the Evenstar sent her here to Storm's End. She loved Renly Baratheon from the first moment she laid eyes on him, a blind man could see it."

"To be sure," declared Lord Florent airily, "and she would scarcely be the first maid maddened to murder by a man who spurned her. Though for my own part, I believe it was Lady Stark who slew the king. She had journeyed all the way from Riverrun to plead for an alliance, and Renly had refused her. No doubt she saw him as a danger to her son, and so removed him."

"It was Brienne," insisted Lord Caron. "Ser Emmon Cuy swore as much before he died. You have my oath on that, Ser Cortnay."

Contempt thickened Ser Cortnay's voice. "And what is that worth? You wear your cloak of many colors, I see. The one Renly gave you when you

swore your *oath* to protect him. If he is dead, how is it you are not?" He turned his scorn on Guyard Morrigen. "I might ask the same of you, ser. Guyard the Green, yes? Of the Rainbow Guard? Sworn to give his own life for his king's? if I had such a cloak, I would be ashamed to wear it."

Morrigen bristled. "Be glad this is a parley, Penrose, or I would have your tongue for those words."

"And cast it in the same fire where you left your manhood?"

"*Enough!*" Stannis said. "The Lord of Light willed that my brother die for his treason. Who did the deed matters not."

"Not to *you*, perhaps," said Ser Cortnay. "I have heard your proposal, Lord Stannis. Now here is mine." He pulled off his glove and flung it full in the king's face. "Single combat. Sword, lance, or any weapon you care to name. Or if you fear to hazard your magic sword and royal skin against an old man, name you a champion, and I shall do the same." He gave Guyard Morrigen and Bryce Caron a scathing look. "Either of these pups would do nicely, I should think."

Ser Guyard Morrigen grew dark with fury. "I will take up the gage, if it please the king."

"As would I." Bryce Caron looked to Stannis.

The king ground his teeth. "No."

Ser Cortnay did not seem surprised. "Is it the justice of your cause you doubt, my lord, or the strength of your arm? Are you afraid I'll piss on your burning sword and put it out?"

"Do you take me for an utter fool, ser?" asked Stannis. "I have twenty thousand men. You are besieged by land and sea. Why would I choose single combat when my eventual victory is certain?" The king pointed a finger at him. "I give you fair warning. If you force me to take my castle by storm, you may expect no mercy. I will hang you for traitors, every one of you."

"As the gods will it. Bring on your storm, my lord—and recall, if you do, the *name* of this castle." Ser Cortnay gave a pull on his reins and rode back toward the gate.

Stannis said no word, but turned his horse around and started back toward his camp. The others followed. “If we storm these walls thousands will die,” fretted ancient Lord Estermont, who was the king’s grandfather on his mother’s side. “Better to hazard but a single life, surely? Our cause is righteous, so the gods must surely bless our champion’s arms with victory.”

*God, old man, thought Davos. You forget, we have only one now, Melisandre’s Lord of Light.*

Ser Jon Fossoway said, “I would gladly take this challenge myself, though I’m not half the swordsman Lord Caron is, or Ser Guyard. Renly left no notable knights at Storm’s End. Garrison duty is for old men and green boys.”

Lord Caron agreed. “An easy victory, to be sure. And what glory, to win Storm’s End with a single stroke!”

Stannis raked them all with a look. “You chatter like magpies, and with less sense. I will have quiet.” The king’s eyes fell on Davos. “Ser. Ride with me.” He spurred his horse away from his followers. Only Melisandre kept pace, bearing the great standard of the fiery heart with the crowned stag within. *As if it had been swallowed whole.*

Davos saw the looks that passed between the lordlings as he rode past them to join the king. These were no onion knights, but proud men from houses whose names were old in honor. Somehow he knew that Renly had never chided them in such a fashion. The youngest of the Baratheons had been born with a gift for easy courtesy that his brother sadly lacked.

He eased back to a slow trot when his horse came up beside the king’s. “Your Grace.” Seen at close hand, Stannis looked worse than Davos had realized from afar. His face had grown haggard, and he had dark circles under his eyes.

“A smuggler must be a fair judge of men,” the king said. “What do you make of this Ser Cortnay Penrose?”

“A stubborn man,” said Davos carefully.

“Hungry for death, I call it. He throws my pardon in my face. Aye, and throws his life away in the bargain, and the lives of every man inside those

walls. *Single combat?*” The king snorted in derision. “No doubt he mistook me for Robert.”

“More like he was desperate. What other hope does he have?”

“None. The castle will fall. But how to do it quickly?” Stannis brooded on that for a moment. Under the steady *clop-clop* of hooves, Davos could hear the faint sound of the king grinding his teeth. “Lord Alester urges me to bring old Lord Penrose here. Ser Cortnay’s father. You know the man, I believe?”

“When I came as your envoy, Lord Penrose received me more courteously than most,” Davos said. “He is an old done man, sire. Sickly and failing.”

“Florent would have him fail more visibly. In his son’s sight, with a noose about his neck.”

It was dangerous to oppose the queen’s men, but Davos had vowed always to tell his king the truth. “I think that would be ill done, my liege. Ser Cortnay will watch his father die before he would ever betray his trust. It would gain us nothing, and bring dishonor to our cause.”

“What dishonor?” Stannis bristled. “Would you have me spare the lives of traitors?”

“You have spared the lives of those behind us.”

“Do you scold me for that, smuggler?”

“It is not my place.” Davos feared he had said too much.

The king was relentless. “You esteem this Penrose more than you do my lords bannermen. Why?”

“He keeps faith.”

“A misplaced faith in a dead usurper.”

“Yes,” Davos admitted, “but still, he keeps faith.”

“As those behind us do not?”

Davos had come too far with Stannis to play coy now. “Last year they were Robert’s men. A moon ago they were Renly’s. This morning they are yours. Whose will they be on the morrow?”

And Stannis laughed. A sudden gust, rough and full of scorn. “I told you, Melisandre,” he said to the red woman, “my Onion Knight tells me the truth.”

“I see you know him well, Your Grace,” the red woman said.

“Davos, I have missed you sorely,” the king said. “Aye, I have a tail of traitors, your nose does not deceive you. My lords bannermen are inconstant even in their treasons. I need them, but you should know how it sickens me to pardon such as these when I have punished better men for lesser crimes. You have every right to reproach me, Ser Davos.”

“You reproach yourself more than I ever could, Your Grace. You must have these great lords to win your throne—”

“Fingers and all, it seems.” Stannis smiled grimly.

Unthinking, Davos raised his maimed hand to the pouch at his throat, and felt the fingerbones within. *Luck*.

The king saw the motion. “Are they still there, Onion Knight? You have not lost them?”

“No.”

“Why do you keep them? I have often wondered.”

“They remind me of what I was. Where I came from. They remind me of your justice, my liege.”

“It *was* justice,” Stannis said. “A good act does not wash out the bad, nor a bad act the good. Each should have its own reward. You were a hero *and* a smuggler.” He glanced behind at Lord Florent and the others, rainbow knights and turncloaks, who were following at a distance. “These pardoned lords would do well to reflect on that. Good men and true will fight for Joffrey, wrongly believing him the true king. A northman might even say the same of Robb Stark. But these lords who flocked to my brother’s banners *knew* him for a usurper. They turned their backs on their rightful king for no better reason than dreams of power and glory, and I have marked them for what they are. Pardoned them, yes. Forgiven. But not forgotten.” He fell silent for a moment, brooding on his plans for justice. And then, abruptly, he said, “What do the smallfolk say of Renly’s death?”



“They grieve. Your brother was well loved.”

“Fools love a fool,” grumbled Stannis, “but I grieve for him as well. For the boy he was, not the man he grew to be.” He was silent for a time, and then he said, “How did the commons take the news of Cersei’s incest?”

“While we were among them they shouted for King Stannis. I cannot speak for what they said once we had sailed.”

“So you do not think they believed?”

“When I was smuggling, I learned that some men believe everything and some nothing. We met both sorts. And there is another tale being spread as well—”

“Yes.” Stannis bit off the word. “Selyse has given me horns, and tied a fool’s bells to the end of each. My daughter fathered by a halfwit jester! A tale as vile as it is absurd. Renly threw it in my teeth when we met to parley. You would need to be as mad as Patchface to believe such a thing.”

“That may be so, my liege... but whether they believe the story or no, they delight to tell it.” In many places it had come before them, poisoning the well for their own true tale.

“Robert could piss in a cup and men would call it wine, but I offer them pure cold water and they squint in suspicion and mutter to each other about how queer it tastes.” Stannis ground his teeth. “If someone said I had magicked myself into a boar to kill Robert, likely they would believe that as well.”

“You cannot stop them talking, my liege,” Davos said, “but when you take your vengeance on your brothers’ true killers, the realm will know such tales for lies.”

Stannis only seemed to half hear him. “I have no doubt that Cersei had a hand in Robert’s death. I will have justice for him. Aye, and for Ned Stark and Jon Arryn as well.”

“And for Renly?” The words were out before Davos could stop to consider them.

For a long time the king did not speak. Then, very softly, he said, “I dream of it sometimes. Of Renly’s dying. A green tent, candles, a woman

screaming. And blood.” Stannis looked down at his hands. “I was still abed when he died. Your Devan will tell you. He tried to wake me. Dawn was nigh and my lords were waiting, fretting. I should have been ahorse, armored. I knew Renly would attack at break of day. Devan says I thrashed and cried out, but what does it matter? It was a dream. I was in my tent when Renly died, and when I woke my hands were clean.”

Ser Davos Seaworth could feel his phantom fingertips start to itch. *Something is wrong here*, the onetime smuggler thought. Yet he nodded and said, “I see.”

“Renly offered me a peach. At our parley. Mocked me, defied me, threatened me, and offered me a peach. I thought he was drawing a blade and went for mine own. Was that his purpose, to make me show fear? Or was it one of his pointless jests? When he spoke of how sweet the peach was, did his words have some hidden meaning?” The king gave a shake of his head, like a dog shaking a rabbit to snap its neck. “Only Renly could vex me so with a piece of fruit. He brought his doom on himself with his treason, but I did love him, Davos. I know that now. I swear, I will go to my grave thinking of my brother’s peach.”

By then they were in amongst the camp, riding past the ordered rows of tents, the blowing banners, and the stacks of shields and spears. The stink of horse dung was heavy in the air, mingled with the woodsmoke and the smell of cooking meat. Stannis reined up long enough to bark a brusque dismissal to Lord Florent and the others, commanding them to attend him in his pavilion one hour hence for a council of war. They bowed their heads and dispersed, while Davos and Melisandre rode to the king’s pavilion.

The tent had to be large, since it was there his lords bannermen came to council. Yet there was nothing grand about it. It was a soldier’s tent of heavy canvas, dyed the dark yellow that sometimes passed for gold. Only the royal banner that streamed atop the center pole marked it as a king’s. That, and the guards without; queen’s men leaning on tall spears, with the badge of the fiery heart sewn over their own.

Grooms came up to help them dismount. One of the guards relieved Melisandre of her cumbersome standard, driving the staff deep into the soft

ground. Devan stood to one side of the door, waiting to lift the flap for the king. An older squire waited beside him. Stannis took off his crown and handed it to Devan. “Cold water, cups for two. Davos, attend me. My lady, I shall send for you when I require you.”

“As the king commands.” Melisandre bowed.

After the brightness of the morning, the interior of the pavilion seemed cool and dim. Stannis seated himself on a plain wooden camp stool and waved Davos to another. “One day I may make you a lord, smuggler. If only to irk Celtigar and Florent. You will not thank me, though. It will mean you must suffer through these councils, and feign interest in the braying of mules.”

“Why do you have them, if they serve no purpose?”

“The mules love the sound of their own braying, why else? And I need them to haul my cart. Oh, to be sure, once in a great while some useful notion is put forth. But not today, I think—ah, here’s your son with our water.”

Devan set the tray on the table and filled two clay cups. The king sprinkled a pinch of salt in his cup before he drank; Davos took his water straight, wishing it were wine. “You were speaking of your council?”

“Let me tell you how it will go. Lord Velaryon will urge me to storm the castle walls at first light, grapnels and scaling ladders against arrows and boiling oil. The young mules will think this a splendid notion. Estermont will favor settling down to starve them out, as Tyrell and Redwyne once tried with me. That might take a year, but old mules are patient. And Lord Caron and the others who like to kick will want to take up Ser Cortnay’s gauntlet and hazard all upon a single combat. Each one imagining *he* will be my champion and win undying fame.” The king finished his water. “What would *you* have me do, smuggler?”

Davos considered a moment before he answered. “Strike for King’s Landing at once.”

The king snorted. “And leave Storm’s End untaken?”

“Ser Cortnay does not have the power to harm you. The Lannisters do. A siege would take too long, single combat is too chancy, and an assault would cost thousands of lives with no certainty of success. And there is no need. Once you dethrone Joffrey this castle must come to you with all the rest. It is said about the camp that Lord Tywin Lannister rushes west to rescue Lannisport from the vengeance of the northmen...”

“You have a passing clever father, Devan,” the king told the boy standing by his elbow. “He makes me wish I had more smugglers in my service. And fewer lords. Though you are wrong in one respect, Davos. There *is* a need. If I leave Storm’s End untaken in my rear, it will be said I was defeated here. And that I cannot permit. Men do not love me as they loved my brothers. They follow me because they fear me... and defeat is death to fear. The castle must fall.” His jaw ground side to side. “Aye, and *quickly*. Doran Martell has called his banners and fortified the mountain passes. His Dornishmen are poised to sweep down onto the Marches. And Highgarden is far from spent. My brother left the greater part of his power at Bitterbridge, near sixty thousand foot. I sent my wife’s brother Ser Errol with Ser Parmen Crane to take them under my command, but they have not returned. I fear that Ser Loras Tyrell reached Bitterbridge before my envoys, and took that host for his own.”

“All the more reason to take King’s Landing as soon as we may. Salladhor Saan told me—”

“Salladhor Saan thinks only of gold!” Stannis exploded. “His head is full of dreams of the treasure he fancies lies under the Red Keep, so let us hear no more of Salladhor Saan. The day I need military counsel from a Lysene brigand is the day I put off my crown and take the black.” The king made a fist. “Are you here to serve me, smuggler? Or to vex me with arguments?”

“I am yours,” Davos said.

“Then hear me. Ser Cortnay’s lieutenant is cousin to the Fossoways. Lord Meadows, a green boy of twenty. Should some ill chance strike down Penrose, command of Storm’s End would pass to this stripling, and his cousins believe he would accept my terms and yield up the castle.”

“I remember another stripling who was given command of Storm’s End. He could not have been much more than twenty.”

“Lord Meadows is not as stonehead stubborn as I was.”

“Stubborn or craven, what does it matter? Ser Cortnay Penrose seemed hale and hearty to me.”

“So did my brother, the day before his death. The night is dark and full of terrors, Davos.”

Davos Seaworth felt the small hairs rising on the back of his neck. “My lord, I do not understand you.”

“I do not require your understanding. Only your service. Ser Cortnay will be dead within the day. Melisandre has seen it in the flames of the future. His death and the manner of it. He will not die in knightly combat, needless to say.” Stannis held out his cup, and Devan filled it again from the flagon. “Her flames do not lie. She saw Renly’s doom as well. On Dragonstone she saw it, and told Selyse. Lord Velaryon and your friend Salladhor Saan would have had me sail against Joffrey, but Melisandre told me that if I went to Storm’s End, I would win the best part of my brother’s power, and she was right.”

“B-but,” Davos stammered, “Lord Renly only came here because you had laid siege to the castle. He was marching toward King’s Landing before, against the Lannisters, he would have—”

Stannis shifted in his seat, frowning. “*Was, would have*, what is that? He did what he did. He came here with his banners and his peaches, to his doom... and it was well for me he did. Melisandre saw another day in her flames as well. A morrow where Renly rode out of the south in his green armor to smash my host beneath the walls of King’s Landing. Had I met my brother there, it might have been me who died in place of him.”

“Or you might have joined your strength to his to bring down the Lannisters,” Davos protested. “Why not that? If she saw two futures, well... *both* cannot be true.”

King Stannis pointed a finger. “There you err, Onion Knight. Some lights cast more than one shadow. Stand before the nightfire and you’ll see

for yourself. The flames shift and dance, never still. The shadows grow tall and short, and every man casts a dozen. Some are fainter than others, that's all. Well, men cast their shadows across the future as well. One shadow or many. Melisandre sees them all.

"You do not love the woman. I know that, Davos, I am not blind. My lords dislike her too. Estermont thinks the flaming heart ill-chosen and begs to fight beneath the crowned stag as of old. Ser Guyard says a woman should not be my standard-bearer. Others whisper that she has no place in my war councils, that I ought to send her back to Asshai, that it is sinful to keep her in my tent of a night. Aye, they whisper... while she serves."

"Serves how?" Davos asked, dreading the answer.

"As needed." The king looked at him. "And you?"

"I..." Davos licked his lips. "I am yours to command. What would you have me do?"

"Nothing you have not done before. Only land a boat beneath the castle, unseen, in the black of night. Can you do that?"

"Yes. Tonight?"

The king gave a curt nod. "You will need a small boat. Not *Black Bessa*. No one must know what you do."

Davos wanted to protest. He was a knight now, no longer a smuggler, and he had never been an assassin. Yet when he opened his mouth, the words would not come. This was *Stannis*, his just lord, to whom he owed all he was. And he had his sons to consider as well. *Gods be good, what has she done to him?*

"You are quiet," Stannis observed.

*And should remain so*, Davos told himself, yet instead he said, "My liege, you must have the castle, I see that now, but surely there are other ways. *Cleaner* ways. Let Ser Cortnay keep the bastard boy and he may well yield."

"I must have the boy, Davos. *Must*. Melisandre has seen that in the flames as well."

Davos groped for some other answer. “Storm’s End holds no knight who can match Ser Guyard or Lord Caron, or any of a hundred others sworn to your service. This single combat... could it be that Ser Cortnay seeks for a way to yield with honor? Even if it means his own life?”

A troubled look crossed the king’s face like a passing cloud. “More like he plans some treachery. There will be no combat of champions. Ser Cortnay was dead before he ever threw that glove. The flames do not lie, Davos.”

*Yet they require me to make them true*, he thought. It had been a long time since Davos Seaworth felt so sad.

And so it was that he found himself once more crossing Shipbreaker Bay in the dark of night, steering a tiny boat with a black sail. The sky was the same, and the sea. The same salt smell was in the air, and the water chuckling against the hull was just as he remembered it. A thousand flickering campfires burned around the castle, as the fires of the Tyrells and Redwynes had sixteen years before. But all the rest was different.

*The last time it was life I brought to Storm’s End, shaped to look like onions. This time it is death, in the shape of Melisandre of Asshai.* Sixteen years ago, the sails had cracked and snapped with every shift of wind, until he’d pulled them down and gone on with muffled oars. Even so, his heart had been in his gullet. The men on the Redwyne galleys had grown lax after so long, however, and they had slipped through the cordon smooth as black satin. This time, the only ships in sight belonged to Stannis, and the only danger would come from watchers on the castle walls. Even so, Davos was taut as a bowstring.

Melisandre huddled upon a thwart, lost in the folds of a dark red cloak that covered her from head to heels, her face a paleness beneath the cowl. Davos loved the water. He slept best when he had a deck rocking beneath him, and the sighing of the wind in his rigging was a sweeter sound to him than any a singer could make with his harp strings. Even the sea brought him no comfort tonight, though. “I can smell the fear on you, ser knight,” the red woman said softly.

“Someone once told me the night is dark and full of terrors. And tonight I am no knight. Tonight I am Davos the smuggler again. Would that you were an onion.”

She laughed. “Is it me you fear? Or what we do?”

“What *you* do. I’ll have no part of it.”

“Your hand raised the sail. Your hand holds the tiller.”

Silent, Davos tended to his course. The shore was a snarl of rocks, so he was taking them well out across the bay. He would wait for the tide to turn before coming about. Storm’s End dwindled behind them, but the red woman seemed unconcerned. “Are you a good man, Davos Seaworth?” she asked.

*Would a good man be doing this?* “I am a man,” he said. “I am kind to my wife, but I have known other women. I have tried to be a father to my sons, to help make them a place in this world. Aye, I’ve broken laws, but I never felt evil until tonight. I would say my parts are mixed, m’lady. Good *and* bad.”

“A grey man,” she said. “Neither white nor black, but partaking of both. Is that what you are, Ser Davos?”

“What if I am? It seems to me that most men are grey.”

“If half of an onion is black with rot, it is a rotten onion. A man is good, or he is evil.”

The fires behind them had melted into one vague glow against the black sky, and the land was almost out of sight. It was time to come about. “Watch your head, my lady.” He pushed on the tiller, and the small boat threw up a curl of black water as she turned. Melisandre leaned under the swinging yard, one hand on the gunwale, calm as ever. Wood creaked, canvas cracked, and water splashed, so loudly a man might swear the castle was sure to hear. Davos knew better. The endless crash of wave on rock was the only sound that ever penetrated the massive seaward walls of Storm’s End, and that but faintly.

A rippling wake spread out behind as they swung back toward the shore. “You speak of men and onions,” Davos said to Melisandre. “What of



women? Is it not the same for them? Are you good or evil, my lady?"

That made her chuckle. "Oh, good. I am a knight of sorts myself, sweet ser. A champion of light and life."

"Yet you mean to kill a man tonight," he said. "As you killed Maester Cressen."

"Your maester poisoned himself. He meant to poison me, but I was protected by a greater power and he was not."

"And Renly Baratheon? Who was it who killed him?"

Her head turned. Beneath the shadow of the cowl, her eyes burned like pale red candle flames. "Not I."

"Liar." Davos was certain now.

Melisandre laughed again. "You are lost in darkness and confusion, Ser Davos."

"And a good thing." Davos gestured at the distant lights flickering along the walls of Storm's End. "Feel how cold the wind is? The guards will huddle close to those torches. A little warmth, a little light, they're a comfort on a night like this. Yet that will blind them, so they will not see us pass." *I hope*. "The god of darkness protects us now, my lady. Even you."

The flames of her eyes seemed to burn a little brighter at that. "Speak not that name, ser. Lest you draw his black eye upon us. He protects no man, I promise you. He is the enemy of all that lives. It is the torches that hide us, you have said so yourself. Fire. The bright gift of the Lord of Light."

"Have it your way."

"His way, rather."

The wind was shifting, Davos could feel it, see it in the way the black canvas rippled. He reached for the halyards. "Help me bring in the sail. I'll row us the rest of the way."

Together they tied off the sail as the boat rocked beneath them. As Davos unshipped the oars and slid them into the choppy black water, he said, "Who rowed you to Renly?"

“There was no need,” she said. “He was unprotected. But here... this Storm’s End is an old place. There are spells woven into the stones. Dark walls that no shadow can pass—ancient, forgotten, yet still in place.”

“Shadow?” Davos felt his flesh prickling. “A shadow is a thing of darkness.”

“You are more ignorant than a child, ser knight. There are no shadows in the dark. Shadows are the servants of light, the children of fire. The brightest flame casts the darkest shadows.”

Frowning, Davos hushed her then. They were coming close to shore once more, and voices carried across the water. He rowed, the faint sound of his oars lost in the rhythm of the waves. The seaward side of Storm’s End perched upon a pale white cliff, the chalky stone sloping up steeply to half again the height of the massive curtain wall. A mouth yawned in the cliff, and it was that Davos steered for, as he had sixteen years before. The tunnel opened on a cavern under the castle, where the storm lords of old had built their landing.

The passage was navigable only during high tide, and was never less than treacherous, but his smuggler’s skills had not deserted him. Davos threaded their way deftly between the jagged rocks until the cave mouth loomed up before them. He let the waves carry them inside. They crashed around him, slamming the boat this way and that and soaking them to the skin. A half-seen finger of rock came rushing up out of the gloom, snarling foam, and Davos barely kept them off it with an oar.

Then they were past, engulfed in darkness, and the waters smoothed.

The little boat slowed and swirled. The sound of their breathing echoed until it seemed to surround them. Davos had not expected the blackness. The last time, torches had burned all along the tunnel, and the eyes of starving men had peered down through the murder holes in the ceiling. The portcullis was somewhere ahead, he knew. Davos used the oars to slow them, and they drifted against it almost gently.

“This is as far as we go, unless you have a man inside to lift the gate for us.” His whispers scurried across the lapping water like a line of mice on soft pink feet.

“Have we passed within the walls?”

“Yes. Beneath. But we can go no farther. The portcullis goes all the way to the bottom. And the bars are too closely spaced for even a child to squeeze through.”

There was no answer but a soft rustling. And then a light bloomed amidst the darkness.

Davos raised a hand to shield his eyes, and his breath caught in his throat. Melisandre had thrown back her cowl and shrugged out of the smothering robe. Beneath, she was naked, and huge with child. Swollen breasts hung heavy against her chest, and her belly bulged as if near to bursting. “*Gods preserve us,*” he whispered, and heard her answering laugh, deep and throaty. Her eyes were hot coals, and the sweat that dappled her skin seemed to glow with a light of its own. Melisandre *shone*.

Panting, she squatted and spread her legs. Blood ran down her thighs, black as ink. Her cry might have been agony or ecstasy or both. And Davos saw the crown of the child’s head push its way out of her. Two arms wriggled free, grasping, black fingers coiling around Melisandre’s straining thighs, pushing, until the whole of the shadow slid out into the world and rose taller than Davos, tall as the tunnel, towering above the boat. He had only an instant to look at it before it was gone, twisting between the bars of the portcullis and racing across the surface of the water, but that instant was long enough.

He knew that shadow. As he knew the man who’d cast it.