



DAVOS

Lord Alester looked up sharply. “Voices,” he said. “Do you hear, Davos? Someone is coming for us.”

“Lamprey,” said Davos. “It’s time for our supper, or near enough.” Last night Lamprey had brought them half a beef-and-bacon pie, and a flagon of mead as well. Just the thought of it made his belly start to rumble.

“No, there’s more than one.”

He’s right. Davos heard two voices at least, and footsteps, growing louder. He got to his feet and moved to the bars.

Lord Alester brushed the straw from his clothes. “The king has sent for me. Or the queen, yes, Selyse would never let me rot here, her own blood.”

Outside the cell, Lamprey appeared with a ring of keys in hand. Ser Axell Florent and four guardsmen followed close behind him. They waited beneath the torch while Lamprey searched for the correct key.

“Axell,” Lord Alester said. “Gods be good. Is it the king who sends for me, or the queen?”

“No one has sent for you, traitor,” Ser Axell said.

Lord Alester recoiled as if he’d been slapped. “No, I swear to you, I committed no treason. Why won’t you listen? If His Grace would only let me explain—”

Lamprey thrust a great iron key into the lock, turned it, and pulled open the cell. The rusted hinges screamed in protest. “You,” he said to Davos. “Come.”

“Where?” Davos looked to Ser Axell. “Tell me true, ser, do you mean to burn me?”

“You are sent for. Can you walk?”

“I can walk.” Davos stepped from the cell. Lord Alester gave a cry of dismay as Lamprey slammed the door shut once more.

“Take the torch,” Ser Axell commanded the gaoler. “Leave the traitor to the darkness.”

“No,” his brother said. “Axell, please, don’t take the light . . . gods have mercy . . .”

“Gods? There is only R’hllor, and the Other.” Ser Axell gestured sharply, and one of his guardsmen pulled the torch from its sconce and led the way to the stair.

“Are you taking me to Melisandre?” Davos asked.

“She will be there,” Ser Axell said. “She is never far from the king. But it is His Grace himself who asked for you.”

Davos lifted his hand to his chest, where once his luck had hung in a leather bag on a thong. *Gone now*, he remembered, *and the ends of four fingers as well*. But his hands were still long enough to wrap about a woman’s throat, he thought, especially a slender throat like hers.

Up they went, climbing the turnpike stair in single file. The walls were rough dark stone, cool to the touch. The light of the torches went before them, and their shadows marched beside them on the walls. At the third turn they passed an iron gate that opened on blackness, and another at the fifth turn. Davos guessed that they were near the surface by then, perhaps even above it. The next door they came to was made of wood, but still they climbed. Now the walls were broken by arrow slits, but no shafts of sunlight pried their way through the thickness of the stone. It was night outside.

His legs were aching by the time Ser Axell thrust open a heavy door and gestured him through. Beyond, a high stone bridge arched over emptiness to

the massive central tower called the Stone Drum. A sea wind blew restlessly through the arches that supported the roof, and Davos could smell the salt water as they crossed. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the clean cold air. *Wind and water, give me strength*, he prayed. A huge nightfire burned in the yard below, to keep the terrors of the dark at bay, and the queen's men were gathered around it, singing praises to their new red god.

They were in the center of the bridge when Ser Axell stopped suddenly. He made a brusque gesture with his hand, and his men moved out of earshot. "Were it my choice, I would burn you with my brother Alester," he told Davos. "You are both traitors."

"Say what you will. I would never betray King Stannis."

"You would. You will. I see it in your face. And I have seen it in the flames as well. R'hllor has blessed me with that gift. Like Lady Melisandre, he shows me the future in the fire. Stannis Baratheon *will* sit the Iron Throne. I have seen it. And I know what must be done. His Grace must make me his Hand, in place of my traitor brother. And you will tell him so."

Will I? Davos said nothing.

"The queen has urged my appointment," Ser Axell went on. "Even your old friend from Lys, the pirate Saan, he says the same. We have made a plan together, him and me. Yet His Grace does not act. The defeat gnaws inside him, a black worm in his soul. It is up to us who love him to show him what to do. If you are as devoted to his cause as you claim, smuggler, you will join your voice to ours. Tell him that I am the only Hand he needs. Tell him, and when we sail I shall see that you have a new ship."

A ship. Davos studied the other man's face. Ser Axell had big Florent ears, much like the queen's. Coarse hair grew from them, as from his nostrils; more sprouted in tufts and patches beneath his double chin. His nose was broad, his brow beetled, his eyes close-set and hostile. *He would sooner give me a pyre than a ship, he said as much, but if I do him this favor . . .*

"If you think to betray me," Ser Axell said, "pray remember that I have been castellan of Dragonstone a good long time. The garrison is mine. Perhaps I cannot burn you without the king's consent, but who is to say you

might not suffer a fall.” He laid a meaty hand on the back of Davos’s neck and shoved him bodily against the waist-high side of the bridge, then shoved a little harder to force his face out over the yard. “Do you hear me?”

“I hear,” said Davos. *And you dare name me traitor?*

Ser Axell released him. “Good.” He smiled. “His Grace awaits. Best we do not keep him.”

At the very top of Stone Drum, within the great round room called the Chamber of the Painted Table, they found Stannis Baratheon standing behind the artifact that gave the hall its name, a massive slab of wood carved and painted in the shape of Westeros as it had been in the time of Aegon the Conqueror. An iron brazier stood beside the king, its coals glowing a ruddy orange. Four tall pointed windows looked out to north, south, east, and west. Beyond was the night and the starry sky. Davos could hear the wind moving, and fainter, the sounds of the sea.

“Your Grace,” Ser Axell said, “as it please you, I have brought the onion knight.”

“So I see.” Stannis wore a grey wool tunic, a dark red mantle, and a plain black leather belt from which his sword and dagger hung. A red-gold crown with flame-shaped points encircled his brows. The look of him was a shock. He seemed ten years older than the man that Davos had left at Storm’s End when he set sail for the Blackwater and the battle that would be their undoing. The king’s close-cropped beard was spiderwebbed with grey hairs, and he had dropped two stone or more of weight. He had never been a fleshy man, but now the bones moved beneath his skin like spears, fighting to cut free. Even his crown seemed too large for his head. His eyes were blue pits lost in deep hollows, and the shape of a skull could be seen beneath his face.

Yet when he saw Davos, a faint smile brushed his lips. “So the sea has returned me my knight of the fish and onions.”

“It did, Your Grace.” *Does he know that he had me in his dungeon?* Davos went to one knee.

“Rise, Ser Davos,” Stannis commanded. “I have missed you, ser. I have need of good counsel, and you never gave me less. So tell me true—what is the penalty for treason?”

The word hung in the air. *A frightful word*, thought Davos. Was he being asked to condemn his cellmate? Or himself, perchance? *Kings know the penalty for treason better than any man*. “Treason?” he finally managed, weakly.

“What else would you call it, to deny your king and seek to steal his rightful throne. I ask you again—what is the penalty for treason under the law?”

Davos had no choice but to answer. “Death,” he said. “The penalty is death, Your Grace.”

“It has always been so. I am *not* . . . I am not a cruel man, Ser Davos. You know me. Have known me long. This is not my decree. It has always been so, since Aegon’s day and before. Daemon Blackfyre, the brothers Toyne, the Vulture King, Grand Maester Hareth . . . traitors have always paid with their lives . . . even Rhaenyra Targaryen. She was daughter to one king and mother to two more, yet she died a traitor’s death for trying to usurp her brother’s crown. It is law. *Law*, Davos. Not cruelty.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” *He does not speak of me*. Davos felt a moment’s pity for his cellmate down in the dark. He knew he should keep silent, but he was tired and sick of heart, and he heard himself say, “Sire, Lord Florent meant no treason.”

“Do smugglers have another name for it? I made him Hand, and he would have sold my rights for a bowl of pease porridge. He would even have given them Shireen. Mine only child, he would have wed to a bastard born of incest.” The king’s voice was thick with anger. “My brother had a gift for inspiring loyalty. Even in his foes. At Summerhall he won three battles in a single day, and brought Lords Grandison and Cafferren back to Storm’s End as prisoners. He hung their banners in the hall as trophies. Cafferren’s white fawns were spotted with blood and Grandison’s sleeping lion was torn near in two. Yet they would sit beneath those banners of a night, drinking and feasting with Robert. He even took them hunting. ‘These men meant to deliver you to Aerys to be burned,’ I told him after I saw them throwing axes in the yard. ‘You should not be putting axes in their hands.’ Robert only laughed. I would have thrown Grandison and Cafferren into a dungeon, but he turned them into friends. Lord Cafferren died at

Ashford Castle, cut down by Randyll Tarly whilst fighting *for* Robert. Lord Grandison was wounded on the Trident and died of it a year after. My brother made them love him, but it would seem that I inspire only betrayal. Even in mine own blood and kin. Brother, grandfather, cousins, good uncle . . .”

“Your Grace,” said Ser Axell, “I beg you, give me the chance to prove to you that not all Florents are so feeble.”

“Ser Axell would have me resume the war,” King Stannis told Davos. “The Lannisters think I am done and beaten, and my sworn lords have forsaken me, near every one. Even Lord Estermont, my own mother’s father, has bent his knee to Joffrey. The few loyal men who remain to me are losing heart. They waste their days drinking and gambling, and lick their wounds like beaten curs.”

“Battle will set their hearts ablaze once more, Your Grace,” Ser Axell said. “Defeat is a disease, and victory is the cure.”

“Victory.” The king’s mouth twisted. “There are victories and victories, ser. But tell your plan to Ser Davos. I would hear his views on what you propose.”

Ser Axell turned to Davos, with a look on his face much like the look that proud Lord Belgrave must have worn, the day King Baelor the Blessed had commanded him to wash the beggar’s ulcerous feet. Nonetheless, he obeyed.

The plan Ser Axell had devised with Salladhor Saan was simple. A few hours’ sail from Dragonstone lay Claw Isle, ancient sea-girt seat of House Celtigar. Lord Ardrian Celtigar had fought beneath the fiery heart on the Blackwater, but once taken, he had wasted no time in going over to Joffrey. He remained in King’s Landing even now. “Too frightened of His Grace’s wrath to come near Dragonstone, no doubt,” Ser Axell declared. “And wisely so. The man has betrayed his rightful king.”

Ser Axell proposed to use Salladhor Saan’s fleet and the men who had escaped the Blackwater—Stannis still had some fifteen hundred on Dragonstone, more than half of them Florents—to exact retribution for Lord Celtigar’s defection. Claw Isle was but lightly garrisoned, its castle reputedly stuffed with Myrish carpets, Volantene glass, gold and silver

plate, jeweled cups, magnificent hawks, an axe of Valyrian steel, a horn that could summon monsters from the deep, chests of rubies, and more wines than a man could drink in a hundred years. Though Celtigar had shown the world a niggardly face, he had never stinted on his own comforts. “Put his castle to the torch and his people to the sword, I say,” Ser Axell concluded. “Leave Claw Isle a desolation of ash and bone, fit only for carrion crows, so the realm might see the fate of those who bed with Lannisters.”

Stannis listened to Ser Axell’s recitation in silence, grinding his jaw slowly from side to side. When it was done, he said, “It could be done, I believe. The risk is small. Joffrey has no strength at sea until Lord Redwyne sets sail from the Arbor. The plunder might serve to keep that Lysene pirate Salladhor Saan loyal for a time. By itself Claw Isle is worthless, but its fall would serve notice to Lord Tywin that my cause is not yet done.” The king turned back to Davos. “Speak truly, ser. What do you make of Ser Axell’s proposal?”

Speak truly, ser. Davos remembered the dark cell he had shared with Lord Alester, remembered Lamprey and Porridge. He thought of the promises that Ser Axell had made on the bridge above the yard. *A ship or a shove, what shall it be?* But this was Stannis asking. “Your Grace,” he said slowly, “I make it folly . . . aye, and cowardice.”

“*Cowardice?*” Ser Axell all but shouted. “No man calls me craven before my king!”

“Silence,” Stannis commanded. “Ser Davos, speak on, I would hear your reasons.”

Davos turned to face Ser Axell. “You say we ought show the realm we are not done. Strike a blow. Make war, aye . . . but on what enemy? You will find no Lannisters on Claw Isle.”

“We will find *traitors*,” said Ser Axell, “though it may be I could find some closer to home. Even in this very room.”

Davos ignored the jibe. “I don’t doubt Lord Celtigar bent the knee to the boy Joffrey. He is an old done man, who wants no more than to end his days in his castle, drinking his fine wine out of his jeweled cups.” He turned back to Stannis. “Yet he came when you called, sire. Came, with his ships and swords. He stood by you at Storm’s End when Lord Renly came down

on us, and his ships sailed up the Blackwater. His men fought for you, killed for you, *burned* for you. Claw Isle is weakly held, yes. Held by women and children and old men. And why is that? Because their husbands and sons and fathers died on the Blackwater, that's why. Died at their oars, or with swords in their hands, fighting beneath our banners. Yet Ser Axell proposes we swoop down on the homes they left behind, to rape their windows and put their children to the sword. These smallfolk are no traitors . . .”

“They *are*,” insisted Ser Axell. “Not all of Celtigar’s men were slain on the Blackwater. Hundreds were taken with their lord, and bent the knee when he did.”

“*When he did*,” Davos repeated. “They were his men. His sworn men. What choice were they given?”

“Every man has choices. They might have refused to kneel. Some did, and died for it. Yet they died true men, and loyal.”

“Some men are stronger than others.” It was a feeble answer, and Davos knew it. Stannis Baratheon was a man of iron will who neither understood nor forgave weakness in others. *I am losing*, he thought, despairing.

“It is every man’s duty to remain loyal to his rightful king, even if the lord he serves proves false,” Stannis declared in a tone that brooked no argument.

A desperate folly took hold of Davos, a recklessness akin to madness. “As you remained loyal to King Aerys when your brother raised his banners?” he blurted.

Shocked silence followed, until Ser Axell cried, “*Treason!*” and snatched his dagger from its sheath. “Your Grace, he speaks his infamy to your face!”

Davos could hear Stannis grinding his teeth. A vein bulged, blue and swollen, in the king’s brow. Their eyes met. “Put up your knife, Ser Axell. And leave us.”

“As it please Your Grace—”

“It would please me for you to leave,” said Stannis. “Take yourself from my presence, and send me Melisandre.”

“As you command.” Ser Axell slid the knife away, bowed, and hurried toward the door. His boots rang against the floor, angry.

“You have always presumed on my forbearance,” Stannis warned Davos when they were alone. “I can shorten your tongue as easy as I did your fingers, smuggler.”

“I am your man, Your Grace. So it is your tongue, to do with as you please.”

“It is,” he said, calmer. “And I would have it speak the truth. Though the truth is a bitter draught at times. *Aerys*? If you only knew . . . that was a hard choosing. My blood or my liege. My brother or my king.” He grimaced. “Have you ever seen the Iron Throne? The barbs along the back, the ribbons of twisted steel, the jagged ends of swords and knives all tangled up and melted? It is not a *comfortable* seat, ser. Aerys cut himself so often men took to calling him King Scab, and Maegor the Cruel was murdered in that chair. *By* that chair, to hear some tell it. It is not a seat where a man can rest at ease. Ofttimes I wonder why my brothers wanted it so desperately.”

“Why would *you* want it, then?” Davos asked him.

“It is not a question of wanting. The throne is mine, as Robert’s heir. That is law. After me, it must pass to my daughter, unless Selyse should finally give me a son.” He ran three fingers lightly down the table, over the layers of smooth hard varnish, dark with age. “I *am* king. Wants do not enter into it. I have a duty to my daughter. To the realm. Even to Robert. He loved me but little, I know, yet he was my brother. The Lannister woman gave him horns and made a motley fool of him. She may have murdered him as well, as she murdered Jon Arryn and Ned Stark. For such crimes there must be justice. Starting with Cersei and her abominations. But only starting. I mean to scour that court clean. As Robert should have done, after the Trident. Ser Barristan once told me that the rot in King Aerys’s reign began with Varys. The eunuch should never have been pardoned. No more than the Kingslayer. At the least, Robert should have stripped the white cloak from Jaime and sent him to the Wall, as Lord Stark urged. He listened to Jon Arryn instead. I was still at Storm’s End, under siege and unconsulted.” He turned abruptly, to give Davos a hard shrewd look. “The truth, now. Why did you wish to murder Lady Melisandre?”

So he does know. Davos could not lie to him. “Four of my sons burned on the Blackwater. She gave them to the flames.”

“You wrong her. Those fires were no work of hers. Curse the Imp, curse the pyromancers, curse that fool of Florent who sailed my fleet into the jaws of a trap. Or curse me for my stubborn pride, for sending her away when I needed her most. But not Melisandre. She remains my faithful servant.”

“Maester Cressen was your faithful servant. She slew him, as she killed Ser Cortnay Penrose and your brother Renly.”

“Now you sound a fool,” the king complained. “She *saw* Renly’s end in the flames, yes, but she had no more part in it than I did. The priestess was with me. Your Devan would tell you so. Ask him, if you doubt me. She would have spared Renly if she could. It was Melisandre who urged me to meet with him, and give him one last chance to amend his treason. And it was Melisandre who told me to send for you when Ser Axell wished to give you to R’hllor.” He smiled thinly. “Does that surprise you?”

“Yes. She knows I am no friend to her or her red god.”

“But you are a friend to me. She knows that as well.” He beckoned Davos closer. “The boy is sick. Maester Pylos has been leeching him.”

“The boy?” His thoughts went to his Devan, the king’s squire. “My son, sire?”

“Devan? A good boy. He has much of you in him. It is Robert’s bastard who is sick, the boy we took at Storm’s End.”

Edric Storm. “I spoke with him in Aegon’s Garden.”

“As she wished. As she saw.” Stannis sighed. “Did the boy charm you?” He has that gift. He got it from his father, with the blood. He knows he is a king’s son, but chooses to forget that he is bastard-born. And he worships Robert, as Renly did when he was young. My royal brother played the fond father on his visits to Storm’s End, and there were gifts . . . swords and ponies and fur-trimmed cloaks. The eunuch’s work, every one. The boy would write the Red Keep full of thanks, and Robert would laugh and ask Varys what he’d sent this year. Renly was no better. He left the boy’s upbringing to castellans and maesters, and every one fell victim to his

charm. Penrose chose to die rather than give him up.” The king ground his teeth together. “It still angers me. How could he think I would hurt the boy? I chose Robert, did I not? When that hard day came. I chose blood over honor.”

He does not use the boy’s name. That made Davos very uneasy. “I hope young Edric will recover soon.”

Stannis waved a hand, dismissing his concern. “It is a chill, no more. He coughs, he shivers, he has a fever. Maester Pylos will soon set him right. By himself the boy is nought, you understand, but in his veins flows my brother’s blood. There is power in a king’s blood, she says.”

Davos did not have to ask who *she* was.

Stannis touched the Painted Table. “Look at it, onion knight. My realm, by rights. My Westeros.” He swept a hand across it. “This talk of Seven Kingdoms is a folly. Aegon saw that three hundred years ago when he stood where we are standing. They painted this table at his command. Rivers and bays they painted, hills and mountains, castles and cities and market towns, lakes and swamps and forests . . . but no borders. *It is all one.* One realm, for one king to rule alone.”

“One king,” agreed Davos. “One king means peace.”

“I shall bring justice to Westeros. A thing Ser Axell understands as little as he does war. Claw Isle would gain me naught . . . and it was evil, just as you said. Celtigar must pay the traitor’s price himself, in his own person. And when I come into my kingdom, he shall. Every man shall reap what he has sown, from the highest lord to the lowest gutter rat. And some will lose more than the tips off their fingers, I promise you. They have made my kingdom bleed, and I do not forget that.” King Stannis turned from the table. “On your knees, Onion Knight.”

“Your Grace?”

“For your onions and fish, I made you a knight once. For this, I am of a mind to raise you to lord.”

This? Davos was lost. “I am content to be your knight, Your Grace. I would not know how to begin being lordly.”

“Good. To be lordly is to be false. I have learned that lesson hard. Now, *kneel*. Your king commands.”

Davos knelt, and Stannis drew his longsword. *Lightbringer*, Melisandre had named it; the red sword of heroes, drawn from the fires where the seven gods were consumed. The room seemed to grow brighter as the blade slid from its scabbard. The steel had a glow to it; now orange, now yellow, now red. The air shimmered around it, and no jewel had ever sparkled so brilliantly. But when Stannis touched it to Davos’s shoulder, it felt no different than any other longsword. “Ser Davos of House Seaworth,” the king said, “are you my true and honest liege man, now and forever?”

“I am, Your Grace.”

“And do you swear to serve me loyally all your days, to give me honest counsel and swift obedience, to defend my rights and my realm against all foes in battles great and small, to protect my people and punish my enemies?”

“I do, Your Grace.”

“Then rise again, Davos Seaworth, and rise as Lord of the Rainwood, Admiral of the Narrow Sea, and Hand of the King.”

For a moment Davos was too stunned to move. *I woke this morning in his dungeon*. “Your Grace, you cannot . . . I am no fit man to be a King’s Hand.”

“There is no man fitter.” Stannis sheathed *Lightbringer*, gave Davos his hand, and pulled him to his feet.

“I am lowborn,” Davos reminded him. “An upjumped smuggler. Your lords will never obey me.”

“Then we will make new lords.”

“But . . . I cannot read . . . nor write . . .”

“Maester Pylos can read for you. As to writing, my last Hand wrote the head off his shoulders. All I ask of you are the things you’ve always given me. Honesty. Loyalty. Service.”

“Surely there is someone better . . . some great lord . . .”

Stannis snorted. “Bar Emmon, that boy? My faithless grandfather? Celtigar has abandoned me, the new Velaryon is six years old, and the new Sunglass sailed for Volantis after I burned his brother.” He made an angry gesture. “A few good men remain, it’s true. Ser Gilbert Farring holds Storm’s End for me still, with two hundred loyal men. Lord Morrigen, the Bastard of Nightsong, young Chyttering, my cousin Andrew . . . but I trust none of them as I trust you, my lord of Rainwood. You will be my Hand. It is you I want beside me for the battle.”

Another battle will be the end of all of us, thought Davos. *Lord Alester saw that much true enough*. “Your Grace asked for honest counsel. In honesty then . . . we lack the strength for another battle against the Lannisters.”

“It is the great battle His Grace is speaking of,” said a woman’s voice, rich with the accents of the east. Melisandre stood at the door in her red silks and shimmering satins, holding a covered silver dish in her hands. “These little wars are no more than a scuffle of children before what is to come. The one whose name may not be spoken is marshaling his power, Davos Seaworth, a power fell and evil and strong beyond measure. Soon comes the cold, and the night that never ends.” She placed the silver dish on the Painted Table. “Unless true men find the courage to fight it. Men whose hearts are fire.”

Stannis stared at the silver dish. “She has shown it to me, Lord Davos. In the flames.”

“*You* saw it, sire?” It was not like Stannis Baratheon to lie about such a thing.

“With mine own eyes. After the battle, when I was lost to despair, the Lady Melisandre bid me gaze into the hearthfire. The chimney was drawing strongly, and bits of ash were rising from the fire. I stared at them, feeling half a fool, but she bid me look deeper, and . . . the ashes were white, rising in the updraft, yet all at once it seemed as if they were falling. *Snow*, I thought. Then the sparks in the air seemed to circle, to become a ring of torches, and I was looking *through* the fire down on some high hill in a forest. The cinders had become men in black behind the torches, and there were shapes moving through the snow. For all the heat of the fire, I felt a

cold so terrible I shivered, and when I did the sight was gone, the fire but a fire once again. But what I saw was real, I'd stake my kingdom on it."

"And have," said Melisandre.

The conviction in the king's voice frightened Davos to the core. "A hill in a forest . . . shapes in the snow . . . I don't . . ."

"It means that the battle is begun," said Melisandre. "The sand is running through the glass more quickly now, and man's hour on earth is almost done. We must act boldly, or all hope is lost. Westeros must unite beneath her one true king, the prince that was promised, Lord of Dragonstone and chosen of R'hllor."

"R'hllor chooses queerly, then." The king grimaced, as if he'd tasted something foul. "Why me, and not my brothers? Renly and his peach. In my dreams I see the juice running from his mouth, the blood from his throat. If he had done his duty by his brother, we would have smashed Lord Tywin. A victory even Robert could be proud of. Robert . . ." His teeth ground side to side. "He is in my dreams as well. Laughing. Drinking. Boasting. Those were the things he was best at. Those, and fighting. I never bested him at anything. The Lord of Light should have made Robert his champion. Why me?"

"Because you are a righteous man," said Melisandre.

"A righteous man." Stannis touched the covered silver platter with a finger. "With leeches."

"Yes," said Melisandre, "but I must tell you once more, this is not the way."

"You swore it would work." The king looked angry.

"It will . . . and it will not."

"Which?"

"Both."

"Speak sense to me, woman."

"When the fires speak more plainly, so shall I. There is truth in the flames, but it is not always easy to see." The great ruby at her throat drank fire from the glow of the brazier. "Give me the boy, Your Grace. It is the

surer way. The better way. Give me the boy and I shall wake the stone dragon.”

“I have told you, no.”

“He is only one baseborn boy, against all the boys of Westeros, and all the girls as well. Against all the children that might ever be born, in all the kingdoms of the world.”

“The boy is innocent.”

“The boy defiled your marriage bed, else you would surely have sons of your own. He shamed you.”

“*Robert* did that. Not the boy. My daughter has grown fond of him. And he is mine own blood.”

“Your brother’s blood,” Melisandre said. “A king’s blood. Only a king’s blood can wake the stone dragon.”

Stannis ground his teeth. “I’ll hear no more of this. The dragons are done. The Targaryens tried to bring them back half a dozen times. And made fools of themselves, or corpses. Patchface is the only fool we need on this godsforsaken rock. You have the leeches. Do your work.”

Melisandre bowed her head stiffly, and said, “As my king commands.” Reaching up her left sleeve with her right hand, she flung a handful of powder into the brazier. The coals roared. As pale flames writhed atop them, the red woman retrieved the silver dish and brought it to the king. Davos watched her lift the lid. Beneath were three large black leeches, fat with blood.

The boy’s blood, Davos knew. A king’s blood.

Stannis stretched forth a hand, and his fingers closed around one of the leeches.

“Say the name,” Melisandre commanded.

The leech was twisting in the king’s grip, trying to attach itself to one of his fingers. “The usurper,” he said. “Joffrey Baratheon.” When he tossed the leech into the fire, it curled up like an autumn leaf amidst the coals, and burned.

Stannis grasped the second. “The usurper,” he declared, louder this time. “Balon Greyjoy.” He flipped it lightly onto the brazier, and its flesh split and cracked. The blood burst from it, hissing and smoking.

The last was in the king’s hand. This one he studied a moment as it writhed between his fingers. “The usurper,” he said at last. “Robb Stark.” And he threw it on the flames.