

PROLOGUE

The comet's tail spread across the dawn, a red slash that bled above the crags of Dragonstone like a wound in the pink and purple sky.

The maester stood on the windswept balcony outside his chambers. It was here the ravens came, after long flight. Their droppings speckled the gargoyles that rose twelve feet tall on either side of him, a hellhound and a wyvern, two of the thousand that brooded over the walls of the ancient fortress. When first he came to Dragonstone, the army of stone grotesques had made him uneasy, but as the years passed he had grown used to them. Now he thought of them as old friends. The three of them watched the sky together with foreboding.

The maester did not believe in omens. And yet... old as he was, Cressen had never seen a comet half so bright, nor yet that color, that terrible color, the color of blood and flame and sunsets. He wondered if his gargoyles had ever seen its like. They had been here so much longer than he had, and would still be here long after he was gone. If stone tongues could speak...

Such folly. He leaned against the battlement, the sea crashing beneath him, the black stone rough beneath his fingers. *Talking gargoyles and prophecies in the sky. I am an old done man, grown giddy as a child again.* Had a lifetime's hard-won wisdom fled him along with his health and strength? He was a maester, trained and chained in the great Citadel of Oldtown. What had he come to, when superstition filled his head as if he were an ignorant fieldhand?

And yet... and yet... the comet burned even by day now, while pale grey steam rose from the hot vents of Dragonmont behind the castle, and yestermorn a white raven had brought word from the Citadel itself, word long-expected but no less fearful for all that, word of summer's end. Omens, all. Too many to deny. *What does it all mean?* he wanted to cry.

“Maester Cressen, we have visitors.” Pylos spoke softly, as if loath to disturb Cressen’s solemn meditations. Had he known what drivel filled his head, he would have shouted. “The princess would see the white raven.” Ever correct, Pylos called her *princess* now, as her lord father was a king. King of a smoking rock in the great salt sea, yet a king nonetheless. “Her fool is with her.”

The old man turned away from the dawn, keeping a hand on his wyvern to steady himself. “Help me to my chair and show them in.”

Taking his arm, Pylos led him inside. In his youth, Cressen had walked briskly, but he was not far from his eightieth name day now, and his legs were frail and unsteady. Two years past, he had fallen and shattered a hip, and it had never mended properly. Last year when he took ill, the Citadel had sent Pylos out from Oldtown, mere days before Lord Stannis had closed the isle... to help him in his labors, it was said, but Cressen knew the truth. Pylos had come to replace him when he died. He did not mind. Someone must take his place, and sooner than he would like...

He let the younger man settle him behind his books and papers. “Go bring her. It is ill to keep a lady waiting.” He waved a hand, a feeble gesture of haste from a man no longer capable of hastening. His flesh was wrinkled and spotted, the skin so papery thin that he could see the web of veins and the shape of bones beneath. And how they trembled, these hands of his that had once been so sure and deft...

When Pylos returned the girl came with him, shy as ever. Behind her, shuffling and hopping in that queer sideways walk of his, came her fool. On his head was a mock helm fashioned from an old tin bucket, with a rack of deer antlers strapped to the crown and hung with cowbells. With his every lurching step, the bells rang, each with a different voice, *clang-a-dang bong-dong ring-a-ling clong clong clong*.

“Who comes to see us so early, Pylos?” Cressen said.

“It’s me and Patches, Maester.” Guileless blue eyes blinked at him. Hers was not a pretty face, alas. The child had her lord father’s square jut of jaw and her mother’s unfortunate ears, along with a disfigurement all her own, the legacy of the bout of greyscale that had almost claimed her in the

crib. Across half one cheek and well down her neck, her flesh was stiff and dead, the skin cracked and flaking, mottled black and grey and stony to the touch. "Pylos said we might see the white raven."

"Indeed you may," Cressen answered. As if he would ever deny her. She had been denied too often in her time. Her name was Shireen. She would be ten on her next name day, and she was the saddest child that Maester Cressen had ever known. *Her sadness is my shame*, the old man thought, *another mark of my failure*. "Maester Pylos, do me a kindness and bring the bird down from the rookery for the Lady Shireen."

"It would be my pleasure." Pylos was a polite youth, no more than five-and-twenty, yet solemn as a man of sixty. If only he had more humor, more *life* in him; that was what was needed here. Grim places needed lightening, not solemnity, and Dragonstone was grim beyond a doubt, a lonely citadel in the wet waste surrounded by storm and salt, with the smoking shadow of the mountain at its back. A maester must go where he is sent, so Cressen had come here with his lord some twelve years past, and he had served, and served well. Yet he had never loved Dragonstone, nor ever felt truly at home here. Of late, when he woke from restless dreams in which the red woman figured disturbingly, he often did not know where he was.

The fool turned his patched and piebald head to watch Pylos climb the steep iron steps to the rookery. His bells rang with the motion. "Under the sea, the birds have scales for feathers," he said, *clang-a-langing*. "I know, I know, oh, oh, oh."

Even for a fool, Patchface was a sorry thing. Perhaps once he could evoke gales of laughter with a quip, but the sea had taken that power from him, along with half his wits and all his memory. He was soft and obese, subject to twitches and trembles, incoherent as often as not. The girl was the only one who laughed at him now, the only one who cared if he lived or died.

An ugly little girl and a sad fool, and maester makes three... now there is a tale to make men weep. "Sit with me, child." Cressen beckoned her closer. "This is early to come calling, scarce past dawn. You should be snug in your bed."

“I had bad dreams,” Shireen told him. “About the dragons. They were coming to eat me.”

The child had been plagued by nightmares as far back as Maester Cressen could recall. “We have talked of this before,” he said gently. “The dragons cannot come to life. They are carved of stone, child. In olden days, our island was the westernmost outpost of the great Freehold of Valyria. It was the Valyrians who raised this citadel, and they had ways of shaping stone since lost to us. A castle must have towers wherever two walls meet at an angle, for defense. The Valyrians fashioned these towers in the shape of dragons to make their fortress seem more fearsome, just as they crowned their walls with a thousand gargoyles instead of simple crenellations.” He took her small pink hand in his own frail spotted one and gave it a gentle squeeze. “So you see, there is nothing to fear. “

Shireen was unconvinced. “What about the thing in the sky? Dalla and Matrice were talking by the well, and Dalla said she heard the red woman tell Mother that it was dragonsbreath. If the dragons are breathing, doesn’t that mean they are coming to life?”

The red woman, Maester Cressen thought sourly. *Ill enough that she’s filled the head of the mother with her madness, must she poison the daughter’s dreams as well?* He would have a stern word with Dalla, warn her not to spread such tales. “The thing in the sky is a comet, sweet child. A star with a tail, lost in the heavens. It will be gone soon enough, never to be seen again in our lifetimes. Watch and see.”

Shireen gave a brave little nod. “Mother said the white raven means it’s not summer anymore.”

“That is so, my lady. The white ravens fly only from the Citadel.” Cressen’s fingers went to the chain about his neck, each link forged from a different metal, each symbolizing his mastery of another branch of learning; the maester’s collar, mark of his order. In the pride of his youth, he had worn it easily, but now it seemed heavy to him, the metal cold against his skin. “They are larger than other ravens, and more clever, bred to carry only the most important messages. This one came to tell us that the Conclave has met, considered the reports and measurements made by maesters all over

the realm, and declared this great summer done at last. Ten years, two turns, and sixteen days it lasted, the longest summer in living memory.”

“Will it get cold now?” Shireen was a summer child, and had never known true cold.

“In time,” Cressen replied. “If the gods are good, they will grant us a warm autumn and bountiful harvests, so we might prepare for the winter to come.” The smallfolk said that a long summer meant an even longer winter, but the maester saw no reason to frighten the child with such tales.

Patchface rang his bells. “It is *always* summer under the sea,” he intoned. “The merwives wear nennymoans in their hair and weave gowns of silver seaweed. I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.”

Shireen giggled. “I should like a gown of silver seaweed.”

“Under the sea, it snows up,” said the fool, “and the rain is dry as bone. I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.”

“Will it truly snow?” the child asked.

“It will,” Cressen said. *But not for years yet, I pray, and then not for long.* “Ah, here is Pylos with the bird.”

Shireen gave a cry of delight. Even Cressen had to admit the bird made an impressive sight, white as snow and larger than any hawk, with the bright black eyes that meant it was no mere albino, but a truebred white raven of the Citadel. “Here,” he called. The raven spread its wings, leapt into the air, and flapped noisily across the room to land on the table beside him.

“I’ll see to your breakfast now,” Pylos announced. Cressen nodded. “This is the Lady Shireen,” he told the raven. The bird bobbed its pale head up and down, as if it were bowing. “*Lady*,” it croaked. “*Lady*.”

The child’s mouth gaped open. “It *talks*!”

“A few words. As I said, they are clever, these birds.”

“Clever bird, clever man, clever clever fool,” said Patchface, jangling. “Oh, clever clever clever fool.” He began to sing. “*The shadows come to dance, my lord, dance my lord, dance my lord,*” he sang, hopping from one foot to the other and back again. “*The shadows come to stay, my lord, stay*

my lord, stay my lord.” He jerked his head with each word, the bells in his antlers sending up a clangor.

The white raven screamed and went flapping away to perch on the iron railing of the rookery stairs. Shireen seemed to grow smaller. “He sings that all the time. I told him to stop but he won’t. It makes me scared. Make him stop.”

And how do I do that? the old man wondered. *Once I might have silenced him forever, but now...*

Patchface had come to them as a boy. Lord Steffon of cherished memory had found him in Volantis, across the narrow sea. The king—the old king, Aerys II Targaryen, who had not been quite so mad in those days—had sent his lordship to seek a bride for Prince Rhaegar, who had no sisters to wed. “We have found the most splendid fool,” he wrote Cressen, a fortnight before he was to return home from his fruitless mission. “Only a boy, yet nimble as a monkey and witty as a dozen courtiers. He juggles and riddles and does magic, and he can sing prettily in four tongues. We have bought his freedom and hope to bring him home with us. Robert will be delighted with him, and perhaps in time he will even teach Stannis how to laugh.”

It saddened Cressen to remember that letter. No one had ever taught Stannis how to laugh, least of all the boy Patchface. The storm came up suddenly, howling, and Shipbreaker Bay proved the truth of its name. The lord’s two-masted galley *Windproud* broke up within sight of his castle. From its parapets his two eldest sons had watched as their father’s ship was smashed against the rocks and swallowed by the waters. A hundred oarsmen and sailors went down with Lord Steffon Baratheon and his lady wife, and for days thereafter every tide left a fresh crop of swollen corpses on the strand below Storm’s End.

The boy washed up on the third day. Maester Cressen had come down with the rest, to help put names to the dead. When they found the fool he was naked, his skin white and wrinkled and powdered with wet sand. Cressen had thought him another corpse, but when Jommy grabbed his ankles to drag him off to the burial wagon, the boy coughed water and sat

up. To his dying day, Jommy had sworn that Patchface's flesh was clammy cold.

No one ever explained those two days the fool had been lost in the sea. The fisherfolk liked to say a mermaid had taught him to breathe water in return for his seed. Patchface himself had said nothing. The witty, clever lad that Lord Steffon had written of never reached Storm's End; the boy they found was someone else, broken in body and mind, hardly capable of speech, much less of wit. Yet his fool's face left no doubt of who he was. It was the fashion in the Free City of Volantis to tattoo the faces of slaves and servants; from neck to scalp the boy's skin had been patterned in squares of red and green motley.

"The wretch is mad, and in pain, and no use to anyone, least of all himself," declared old Ser Harbert, the castellan of Storm's End in those years. "The kindest thing you could do for that one is fill his cup with the milk of the poppy. A painless sleep, and there's an end to it. He'd bless you if he had the wit for it." But Cressen had refused, and in the end he had won. Whether Patchface had gotten any joy of that victory he could not say, not even today, so many years later.

"The shadows come to dance, my lord, dance my lord, dance my lord," the fool sang on, swinging his head and making his bells clang and clatter. *Bong dong, ring-a-ling, bong dong.*

"Lord," the white raven shrieked. *"Lord, lord, lord."*

"A fool sings what he will," the maester told his anxious princess. "You must not take his words to heart. On the morrow he may remember another song, and this one will never be heard again." *He can sing prettily in four tongues*, Lord Steffon had written...

Pylos strode through the door. "Maester, pardons."

"You have forgotten the porridge," Cressen said, amused. That was most unlike Pylos.

"Maester, Ser Davos returned last night. They were talking of it in the kitchen. I thought you would want to know at once."

"Davos... last night, you say? Where is he?"

“With the king. They have been together most of the night.”

There was a time when Lord Stannis would have woken him, no matter the hour, to have him there to give his counsel. “I should have been told,” Cressen complained. “I should have been woken.” He disentangled his fingers from Shireen’s. “Pardons, my lady, but I must speak with your lord father. Pylos, give me your arm. There are too many steps in this castle, and it seems to me they add a few every night, just to vex me.”

Shireen and Patchface followed them out, but the child soon grew restless with the old man’s creeping pace and dashed ahead, the fool lurching after her with his cowbells clanging madly.

Castles are not friendly places for the frail, Cressen was reminded as he descended the turnpike stairs of Sea Dragon Tower. Lord Stannis would be found in the Chamber of the Painted Table, atop the Stone Drum, Dragonstone’s central keep, so named for the way its ancient walls boomed and rumbled during storms. To reach him they must cross the gallery, pass through the middle and inner walls with their guardian gargoyles and black iron gates, and ascend more steps than Cressen cared to contemplate. Young men climbed steps two at a time; for old men with bad hips, every one was a torment. But Lord Stannis would not think to come to him, so the maester resigned himself to the ordeal. He had Pylos to help him, at the least, and for that he was grateful.

Shuffling along the gallery, they passed before a row of tall arched windows with commanding views of the outer bailey, the curtain wall, and the fishing village beyond. In the yard, archers were firing at practice butts to the call of “Notch, draw, loose.” Their arrows made a sound like a flock of birds taking wing. Guardsmen strode the wallwalks, peering between the gargoyles on the host camped without. The morning air was hazy with the smoke of cookfires, as three thousand men sat down to break their fasts beneath the banners of their lords. Past the sprawl of the camp, the anchorage was crowded with ships. No craft that had come within sight of Dragonstone this past half year had been allowed to leave again. Lord Stannis’s *Fury*, a triple-decked war galley of three hundred oars, looked

almost small beside some of the big-bellied carracks and cogs that surrounded her.

The guardsmen outside the Stone Drum knew the maesters by sight, and passed them through. “Wait here,” Cressen told Pylos, within. “It’s best I see him alone.”

“It is a long climb, Maester.”

Cressen smiled. “You think I have forgotten? I have climbed these steps so often I know each one by name.”

Halfway up, he regretted his decision. He had stopped to catch his breath and ease the pain in his hip when he heard the scuff of boots on stone, and came face-to-face with Ser Davos Seaworth, descending.

Davos was a slight man, his low birth written plain upon a common face. A well-worn green cloak, stained by salt and spray and faded from the sun, draped his thin shoulders, over brown doublet and breeches that matched brown eyes and hair. About his neck a pouch of worn leather hung from a thong. His small beard was well peppered with grey, and he wore a leather glove on his maimed left hand. When he saw Cressen, he checked his descent.

“Ser Davos,” the maester said. “When did you return?”

“In the black of morning. My favorite time.” It was said that no one had ever handled a ship by night half so well as Davos Shorthand. Before Lord Stannis had knighted him, he had been the most notorious and elusive smuggler in all the Seven Kingdoms.

“And?”

The man shook his head. “It is as you warned him. They will not rise, Maester. Not for him. They do not love him.”

No, Cressen thought. Nor will they ever. He is strong, able, just... aye, just past the point of wisdom... yet it is not enough. It has never been enough. “You spoke to them all?”

“All? No. Only those that would see me. They do not love me either, these highborns. To them I’ll always be the Onion Knight.” His left hand closed, stubby fingers locking into a fist; Stannis had hacked the ends off at

the last joint, all but the thumb. “I broke bread with Gulian Swann and old Penrose, and the Tarths consented to a midnight meeting in a grove. The others—well, Beric Dondarrion is gone missing, some say dead, and Lord Caron is with Renly. Bryce the Orange, of the Rainbow Guard.”

“The Rainbow Guard?”

“Renly’s made his own Kingsguard,” the onetime smuggler explained, “but these seven don’t wear white. Each one has his own color. Loras Tyrell’s their Lord Commander.”

It was just the sort of notion that would appeal to Renly Baratheon; a splendid new order of knighthood, with gorgeous new raiment to proclaim it. Even as a boy, Renly had loved bright colors and rich fabrics, and he had loved his games as well. “Look at me!” he would shout as he ran laughing through the halls of Storm’s End. “Look at me, I’m a dragon,” or “Look at me, I’m a wizard,” or “Look at me, look at me, I’m the rain god.”

The bold little boy with wild black hair and laughing eyes was a man grown now, one-and-twenty, and still he played his games. *Look at me, I’m a king*, Cressen thought sadly. *Oh, Renly, Renly, dear sweet child, do you know what you are doing? And would you care if you did? Is there anyone who cares for him but me?* “What reasons did the lords give for their refusals?” he asked Ser Davos.

“Well, as to that, some gave me soft words and some blunt, some made excuses, some promises, some only lied.” He shrugged. “In the end words are just wind.”

“You could bring him no hope?”

“Only the false sort, and I’d not do that,” Davos said. “He had the truth from me.”

Maester Cressen remembered the day Davos had been knighted, after the siege of Storm’s End. Lord Stannis and a small garrison had held the castle for close to a year, against the great host of the Lords Tyrell and Redwyne. Even the sea was closed against them, watched day and night by Redwyne galleys flying the burgundy banners of the Arbor. Within Storm’s End, the horses had long since been eaten, the dogs and cats were gone, and

the garrison was down to roots and rats. Then came a night when the moon was new and black clouds hid the stars. Cloaked in that darkness, Davos the smuggler had dared the Redwyne cordon and the rocks of Shipbreaker Bay alike. His little ship had a black hull, black sails, black oars, and a hold crammed with onions and salt fish. Little enough, yet it had kept the garrison alive long enough for Eddard Stark to reach Storm's End and break the siege.

Lord Stannis had rewarded Davos with choice lands on Cape Wrath, a small keep, and a knight's honors... but he had also decreed that he lose a joint of each finger on his left hand, to pay for all his years of smuggling. Davos had submitted, on the condition that Stannis wield the knife himself; he would accept no punishment from lesser hands. The lord had used a butcher's cleaver, the better to cut clean and true. Afterward, Davos had chosen the name Seaworth for his new-made house, and he took for his banner a black ship on a pale grey field—with an onion on its sails. The onetime smuggler was fond of saying that Lord Stannis had done him a boon, by giving him four less fingernails to clean and trim.

No, Cressen thought, a man like that would give no false hope, nor soften a hard truth. "Ser Davos, truth can be a bitter draught, even for a man like Lord Stannis. He thinks only of returning to King's Landing in the fullness of his power, to tear down his enemies and claim what is rightfully his. Yet now..."

"If he takes this meager host to King's Landing, it will be only to die. He does not have the numbers. I told him as much, but you know his pride." Davos held up his gloved hand. "My fingers will grow back before that man bends to sense."

The old man sighed. "You have done all you could. Now I must add my voice to yours." Warily, he resumed his climb.

Lord Stannis Baratheon's refuge was a great round room with walls of bare black stone and four tall narrow windows that looked out to the four points of the compass. In the center of the chamber was the great table from which it took its name, a massive slab of carved wood fashioned at the command of Aegon Targaryen in the days before the Conquest. The Painted

Table was more than fifty feet long, perhaps half that wide at its widest point, but less than four feet across at its narrowest. Aegon's carpenters had shaped it after the land of Westeros, sawing out each bay and peninsula until the table nowhere ran straight. On its surface, darkened by near three hundred years of varnish, were painted the Seven Kingdoms as they had been in Aegon's day; rivers and mountains, castles and cities, lakes and forests.

There was a single chair in the room, carefully positioned in the precise place that Dragonstone occupied off the coast of Westeros, and raised up to give a good view of the tabletop. Seated in the chair was a man in a tight-laced leather jerkin and breeches of roughspun brown wool. When Maester Cressen entered, he glanced up. "I knew *you* would come, old man, whether I summoned you or no." There was no hint of warmth in his voice; there seldom was.

Stannis Baratheon, Lord of Dragonstone and by the grace of the gods rightful heir to the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, was broad of shoulder and sinewy of limb, with a tightness to his face and flesh that spoke of leather cured in the sun until it was as tough as steel. *Hard* was the word men used when they spoke of Stannis, and hard he was. Though he was not yet five-and-thirty, only a fringe of thin black hair remained on his head, circling behind his ears like the shadow of a crown. His brother, the late King Robert, had grown a beard in his final years. Maester Cressen had never seen it, but they said it was a wild thing, thick and fierce. As if in answer, Stannis kept his own whiskers cropped tight and short. They lay like a blue-black shadow across his square jaw and the bony hollows of his cheeks. His eyes were open wounds beneath his heavy brows, a blue as dark as the sea by night. His mouth would have given despair to even the drollest of fools; it was a mouth made for frowns and scowls and sharply worded commands, all thin pale lips and clenched muscles, a mouth that had forgotten how to smile and had never known how to laugh. Sometimes when the world grew very still and silent of a night, Maester Cressen fancied he could hear Lord Stannis grinding his teeth half a castle away.

“Once you would have woken me,” the old man said.

“Once you were young. Now you are old and sick, and need your sleep.” Stannis had never learned to soften his speech, to dissemble or flatter; he said what he thought, and those that did not like it could be damned. “I knew you’d learn what Davos had to say soon enough. You always do, don’t you?”

“I would be of no help to you if I did not,” Cressen said. “I met Davos on the stair.”

“And he told all, I suppose? I should have had the man’s tongue shortened along with his fingers.”

“He would have made you a poor envoy then.”

“He made me a poor envoy in any case. The storm lords will not rise for me. It seems they do not like me, and the justice of my cause means nothing to them. The cravenly ones will sit behind their walls waiting to see how the wind rises and who is likely to triumph. The bold ones have already declared for Renly. For *Renly*!” He spat out the name like poison on his tongue.

“Your brother has been the Lord of Storm’s End these past thirteen years. These lords are his sworn bannermen—”

“*His*,” Stannis broke in, “when by rights they should be mine. I never asked for Dragonstone. I never wanted it. I took it because Robert’s enemies were here and he commanded me to root them out. I built his fleet and did his work, dutiful as a younger brother should be to an elder, as Renly should be to me. And what was Robert’s thanks? He names me Lord of Dragonstone, and gives Storm’s End and its incomes to *Renly*. Storm’s End belonged to House Baratheon for three hundred years; by rights it should have passed to me when Robert took the Iron Throne.”

It was an old grievance, deeply felt, and never more so than now. Here was the heart of his lord’s weakness; for Dragonstone, old and strong though it was, commanded the allegiance of only a handful of lesser lords, whose stony island holdings were too thinly peopled to yield up the men that Stannis needed. Even with the sellswords he had brought across the

narrow sea from the Free Cities of Myr and Lys, the host camped outside his walls was far too small to bring down the power of House Lannister.

“Robert did you an injustice,” Maester Cressen replied carefully, “yet he had sound reasons. Dragonstone had long been the seat of House Targaryen. He needed a man’s strength to rule here, and Renly was but a child.”

“He is a child still,” Stannis declared, his anger ringing loud in the empty hall, “a thieving child who thinks to snatch the crown off my brow. What has Renly ever done to earn a throne? He sits in council and jests with Littlefinger, and at tourneys he dons his splendid suit of armor and allows himself to be knocked off his horse by a better man. That is the sum of my brother Renly, who thinks he ought to be a king. I ask you, why did the gods inflict me with *brothers*?”

“I cannot answer for the gods.”

“You seldom answer at all these days, it seems to me. Who maesters for Renly? Perchance I should send for him, I might like his counsel better. What do you think this maester said when my brother decided to steal my crown? What counsel did your colleague offer to this traitor blood of mine?”

“It would surprise me if Lord Renly sought counsel, Your Grace.” The youngest of Lord Steffon’s three sons had grown into a man bold but heedless, who acted from impulse rather than calculation. In that, as in so much else, Renly was like his brother Robert, and utterly unlike Stannis.

“*Your Grace*,” Stannis repeated bitterly. “You mock me with a king’s style, yet what am I king of? Dragonstone and a few rocks in the narrow sea, there is my kingdom.” He descended the steps of his chair to stand before the table, his shadow falling across the mouth of the Blackwater Rush and the painted forest where King’s Landing now stood. There he stood, brooding over the realm he sought to claim, so near at hand and yet so far away. “Tonight I am to sup with my lords bannermen, such as they are. Celtigar, Velaryon, Bar Emmon, the whole paltry lot of them. A poor crop, if truth be told, but they are what my brothers have left me. That Lysene pirate Salladhor Saan will be there with the latest tally of what I

owe him, and Morosh the Myrman will caution me with talk of tides and autumn gales, while Lord Sunglass mutters piously of the will of the Seven. Celtigar will want to know which storm lords are joining us. Velaryon will threaten to take his levies home unless we strike at once. What am I to tell them? What must I do now?"

"Your true enemies are the Lannisters, my lord," Maester Cressen answered. "If you and your brother were to make common cause against them—"

"I will not treat with Renly," Stannis answered in a tone that brooked no argument. "Not while he calls himself a king."

"Not Renly, then," the maester yielded. His lord was stubborn and proud; when he had set his mind, there was no changing it. "Others might serve your needs as well. Eddard Stark's son has been proclaimed King in the North, with all the power of Winterfell and Riverrun behind him."

"A green boy," said Stannis, "and another false king. Am I to accept a broken realm?"

"Surely half a kingdom is better than none," Cressen said, "and if you help the boy avenge his father's murder—"

"Why should I avenge Eddard Stark? The man was nothing to me. Oh, *Robert* loved him, to be sure. Loved him as a brother, how often did I hear that? *I* was his brother, not Ned Stark, but you would never have known it by the way he treated me. I held Storm's End for him, watching good men starve while Mace Tyrell and Paxter Redwyne feasted within sight of my walls. Did Robert thank me? No. He thanked *Stark*, for lifting the siege when we were down to rats and radishes. I built a fleet at Robert's command, took Dragonstone in his name. Did he take my hand and say, *Well done, brother, whatever should I do without you?* No, he blamed me for letting Willem Darry steal away Viserys and the babe, as if I could have stopped it. I sat on his council for fifteen years, helping Jon Arryn rule his realm while Robert drank and whored, but when Jon died, did my brother name me his Hand? No, he went galloping off to his dear friend Ned Stark, and offered him the honor. And small good it did either of them. "

“Be that as it may, my lord,” Maester Cressen said gently. “Great wrongs have been done you, but the past is dust. The future may yet be won if you join with the Starks. There are others you might sound out as well. What of Lady Arryn? If the queen murdered her husband, surely she will want justice for him. She has a young son, Jon Arryn’s heir. If you were to betroth Shireen to him—”

“The boy is weak and sickly,” Lord Stannis objected. “Even his father saw how it was, when he asked me to foster him on Dragonstone. Service as a page might have done him good, but that damnable Lannister woman had Lord Arryn poisoned before it could be done, and now Lysa hides him in the Eyrie. She’ll never part with the boy, I promise you that.”

“Then you must send Shireen to the Eyrie,” the maester urged. “Dragonstone is a grim home for a child. Let her fool go with her, so she will have a familiar face about her.”

“Familiar and hideous.” Stannis furrowed his brow in thought. “Still... perhaps it is worth the trying...”

“Must the rightful Lord of the Seven Kingdoms beg for help from widow women and usurpers?” a woman’s voice asked sharply.

Maester Cressen turned and bowed his head. “My lady,” he said, chagrined that he had not heard her enter.

Lord Stannis scowled. “I do not beg. Of anyone. Mind you remember that, woman.”

“I am pleased to hear it, my lord.” Lady Selyse was as tall as her husband, thin of body and thin of face, with prominent ears, a sharp nose, and the faintest hint of a mustache on her upper lip. She plucked it daily and cursed it regularly, yet it never failed to return. Her eyes were pale, her mouth stern, her voice a whip. She cracked it now. “Lady Arryn owes you her allegiance, as do the Starks, your brother Renly, and all the rest. You are their one true king. It would not be fitting to plead and bargain with them for what is rightfully yours by the grace of god.”

God, she said, not *gods*. The red woman had won her, heart and soul, turning her from the gods of the Seven Kingdoms, both old and new, to

worship the one they called the Lord of Light.

“Your god can keep his grace,” said Lord Stannis, who did not share his wife’s fervent new faith. “It’s swords I need, not blessings. Do you have an army hidden somewhere that you’ve not told me of?” There was no affection in his tone. Stannis had always been uncomfortable around women, even his own wife. When he had gone to King’s Landing to sit on Robert’s council, he had left Selyse on Dragonstone with their daughter. His letters had been few, his visits fewer; he did his duty in the marriage bed once or twice a year, but took no joy in it, and the sons he had once hoped for had never come.

“My brothers and uncles and cousins have armies,” she told him. “House Florent will rally to your banner.”

“House Florent can field two thousand swords at best.” It was said that Stannis knew the strength of every house in the Seven Kingdoms. “And you have a deal more faith in your brothers and uncles than I do, my lady. The Florent lands lie too close to Highgarden for your lord uncle to risk Mace Tyrell’s wrath.”

“There is another way.” Lady Selyse moved closer. “Look out your windows, my lord. There is the sign you have waited for, blazoned on the sky. Red, it is, the red of flame, red for the fiery heart of the true god. it is *his* banner—and yours! See how it unfurls across the heavens like a dragon’s hot breath, and you the Lord of Dragonstone. It means your time has come, Your Grace. Nothing is more certain. You are meant to sail from this desolate rock as Aegon the Conqueror once sailed, to sweep all before you as he did. Only say the word, and embrace the power of the Lord of Light.”

“How many swords will the Lord of Light put into my hand?” Stannis demanded again.

“All you need,” his wife promised, “The swords of Storm’s End and Highgarden for a start, and all their lords bannermen.”

“Davos would tell you different,” Stannis said. “Those swords are sworn to Renly. They love my charming young brother, as they once loved Robert... and as they have never loved me.”

“Yes,” she answered, “but if Renly should die...”

Stannis looked at his lady with narrowed eyes, until Cressen could not hold his tongue. “It is not to be thought. Your Grace, whatever follies Renly has committed—”

“*Follies?* I call them treasons.” Stannis turned back to his wife. “My brother is young and strong, and he has a vast host around him, and these rainbow knights of his.”

“Melisandre has gazed into the flames, and seen him dead.”

Cressen was horrorstruck. “Fratricide... my lord, this is *evil*, unthinkable... please, listen to me.”

Lady Selyse gave him a measured look. “And what will you tell him, Maester? How he might win half a kingdom if he goes to the Starks on his knees and sells our daughter to Lysa Arryn?”

“I have heard your counsel, Cressen,” Lord Stannis said. “Now I will hear hers. You are dismissed.”

Maester Cressen bent a stiff knee. He could feel Lady Selyse’s eyes on his back as he shuffled slowly across the room. By the time he reached the bottom of the steps it was all he could do to stand erect. “Help me,” he said to Pylos.

When he was safe back in his own rooms, Cressen sent the younger man away and limped to his balcony once more, to stand between his gargoyles and stare out to sea. One of Salladhor Saan’s warships was sweeping past the castle, her gaily striped hull slicing through the grey-green waters as her oars rose and fell. He watched until she vanished behind a headland. *Would that my fears could vanish so easily.* Had he lived so long for this?

When a maester donned his collar, he put aside the hope of children, yet Cressen had oft felt a father nonetheless. Robert, Stannis, Renly... three sons he had raised after the angry sea claimed Lord Steffon. Had he done so ill that now he must watch one kill the other? He could not allow it, *would* not allow it.

The woman was the heart of it. Not the Lady Selyse, the *other* one. The red woman, the servants had named her, afraid to speak her name. “I will speak her name,” Cressen told his stone hellhound. “Melisandre. *Her*.” Melisandre of Asshai, sorceress, shadowbinder, and priestess to R’hllor, the Lord of Light, the Heart of Fire, the God of Flame and Shadow. Melisandre, whose madness must not be allowed to spread beyond Dragonstone.

His chambers seemed dim and gloomy after the brightness of the morning. With fumbling hands, the old man lit a candle and carried it to the workroom beneath the rookery stair, where his ointments, potions, and medicines stood neatly on their shelves. On the bottom shelf behind a row of salves in squat clay jars he found a vial of indigo glass, no larger than his little finger. It rattled when he shook it. Cressen blew away a layer of dust and carried it back to his table. Collapsing into his chair, he pulled the stopper and spilled out the vial’s contents. A dozen crystals, no larger than seeds, rattled across the parchment he’d been reading. They shone like jewels in the candlelight, so purple that the maester found himself thinking that he had never truly seen the color before.

The chain around his throat felt very heavy. He touched one of the crystals lightly with the tip of his little finger. *Such a small thing to hold the power of life and death.* It was made from a certain plant that grew only on the islands of the Jade Sea, half a world away. The leaves had to be aged, and soaked in a wash of limes and sugar water and certain rare spices from the Summer Isles. Afterward they could be discarded, but the potion must be thickened with ash and allowed to crystallize. The process was slow and difficult, the necessities costly and hard to acquire. The alchemists of Lys knew the way of it, though, and the Faceless Men of Braavos... and the maesters of his order as well, though it was not something talked about beyond the walls of the Citadel. All the world knew that a maester forged his silver link when he learned the art of healing—but the world preferred to forget that men who knew how to heal also knew how to kill.

Cressen no longer recalled the name the Asshai’i gave the leaf, or the Lysene poisoners the crystal. In the Citadel, it was simply called the strangler. Dissolved in wine, it would make the muscles of a man’s throat

clench tighter than any fist, shutting off his windpipe. They said a victim's face turned as purple as the little crystal seed from which his death was grown, but so too did a man choking on a morsel of food.

And this very night Lord Stannis would feast his bannermen, his lady wife... and the red woman, Melisandre of Asshai.

I must rest, Maester Cressen told himself. I must have all my strength come dark. My hands must not shake, nor my courage flag. It is a dreadful thing I do, yet it must be done. If there are gods, surely they will forgive me. He had slept so poorly of late. A nap would refresh him for the ordeal ahead. Wearily, he tottered off to his bed. Yet when he closed his eyes, he could still see the light of the comet, red and flery and vividly alive amidst the darkness of his dreams. *Perhaps it is my comet*, he thought drowsily at the last, just before sleep took him. *An omen of blood, foretelling murder... yes...*

When he woke it was full dark, his bedchamber was black, and every joint in his body ached. Cressen pushed himself up, his head throbbing. Clutching for his cane, he rose unsteady to his feet. *So late*, he thought. *They did not summon me.* He was always summoned for feasts, seated near the salt, close to Lord Stannis. His lord's face swam up before him, not the man he was but the boy he had been, standing cold in the shadows while the sun shone on his elder brother. Whatever he did, Robert had done first, and better. Poor boy... he must hurry, for *his* sake.

The maester found the crystals where he had left them, and scooped them off the parchment. Cressen owned no hollow rings, such as the poisoners of Lys were said to favor, but a myriad of pockets great and small were sewn inside the loose sleeves of his robe. He secreted the strangler seeds in one of them, threw open his door, and called, "Pylos? Where are you?" When he heard no reply, he called again, louder. "Pylos, I need help." Still there came no answer. That was queer; the young maester had his cell only a half turn down the stair, within easy earshot.

In the end, Cressen had to shout for the servants. "Make haste," he told them. "I have slept too long. They will be feasting by now... drinking... I

should have been woken.” What had happened to Maester Pylos? Truly, he did not understand.

Again he had to cross the long gallery. A night wind whispered through the great windows, sharp with the smell of the sea. Torches flickered along the walls of Dragonstone, and in the camp beyond, he could see hundreds of cookfires burning, as if a field of stars had fallen to the earth. Above, the comet blazed red and malevolent. *I am too old and wise to fear such things*, the maester told himself.

The doors to the Great Hall were set in the mouth of a stone dragon. He told the servants to leave him outside. It would be better to enter alone; he must not appear feeble. Leaning heavily on his cane, Cressen climbed the last few steps and hobbled beneath the gateway teeth. A pair of guardsmen opened the heavy red doors before him, unleashing a sudden blast of noise and light. Cressen stepped down into the dragon’s maw.

Over the clatter of knife and plate and the low mutter of table talk, he heard Patchface singing, “...*dance, my lord, dance my lord*,” to the accompaniment of jangling cowbells. The same dreadful song he’d sung this morning. “*The shadows come to stay, my lord, stay my lord, stay my lord*.” The lower tables were crowded with knights, archers, and sellsword captains, tearing apart loaves of black bread to soak in their fish stew. Here there was no loud laughter, no raucous shouting such as marred the dignity of other men’s feasts; Lord Stannis did not permit such.

Cressen made his way toward the raised platform where the lords sat with the king. He had to step wide around Patchface. Dancing, his bells ringing, the fool neither saw nor heard his approach. As he hopped from one leg to the other, Patchface lurched into Cressen, knocking his cane out from under him. They went crashing down together amidst the rushes in a tangle of arms and legs, while a sudden gale of laughter went up around them. No doubt it was a comical sight.

Patchface sprawled half on top of him, motley fool’s face pressed close to his own. He had lost his tin helm with its antlers and bells. “Under the sea, you fall *up*,” he declared. “I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.” Giggling, the fool rolled off, bounded to his feet, and did a little dance.

Trying to make the best of it, the maester smiled feebly and struggled to rise, but his hip was in such pain that for a moment he was half afraid that he had broken it all over again. He felt strong hands grasp him under the arms and lift him back to his feet. “Thank you, ser,” he murmured, turning to see which knight had come to his aid...

“Maester,” said Lady Melisandre, her deep voice flavored with the music of the Jade Sea. “You ought take more care.” As ever, she wore red head to heel, a long loose gown of flowing silk as bright as fire, with dagged sleeves and deep slashes in the bodice that showed glimpses of a darker bloodred fabric beneath. Around her throat was a red gold choker tighter than any maester’s chain, ornamented with a single great ruby.

Her hair was not the orange or strawberry color of common red-haired men, but a deep burnished copper that shone in the light of the torches. Even her eyes were red... but her skin was smooth and white, unblemished, pale as cream. Slender she was, graceful, taller than most knights, with full breasts and narrow waist and a heart-shaped face. Men’s eyes that once found her did not quickly look away, not even a maester’s eyes. Many called her beautiful. She was not beautiful. She was red, and terrible, and red.

“I... thank you, my lady.”

“A man your age must look to where he steps,” Melisandre said courteously. “The night is dark and full of terrors.”

He knew the phrase, some prayer of her faith. *It makes no matter, I have a faith of my own.* “Only children fear the dark,” he told her. Yet even as he said the words, he heard Patchface take up his song again. “*The shadows come to dance, my lord, dance my lord, dance my lord.*”

“Now here is a riddle,” Melisandre said. “A clever fool and a foolish wise man.” Bending, she picked up Patchface’s helm from where it had fallen and set it on Cressen’s head. The cowbells rang softly as the tin bucket slid down over his ears. “A crown to match your chain, Lord Maester,” she announced. All around them, men were laughing.

Cressen pressed his lips together and fought to still his rage. She thought he was feeble and helpless, but she would learn otherwise before

the night was done. Old he might be, yet he was still a maester of the Citadel. “I need no crown but truth,” he told her, removing the fool’s helm from his head.

“There are truths in this world that are not taught at Oldtown.” Melisandre turned from him in a swirl of red silk and made her way back to the high table, where King Stannis and his queen were seated. Cressen handed the antlered tin bucket back to Patchface, and made to follow.

Maester Pylos sat in his place.

The old man could only stop and stare. “Maester Pylos,” he said at last. “You... you did not wake me.”

“His Grace commanded me to let you rest.” Pylos had at least the grace to blush. “He told me you were not needed here.”

Cressen looked over the knights and captains and lords sitting silent. Lord Celtigar, aged and sour, wore a mantle patterned with red crabs picked out in garnets. Handsome Lord Velaryon chose sea-green silk, the white gold seahorse at his throat matching his long fair hair. Lord Bar Emmon, that plump boy of fourteen, was swathed in purple velvet trimmed with white seal, Ser Axell Florent remained homely even in russet and fox fur, pious Lord Sunglass wore moonstones at throat and wrist and finger, and the Lysene captain Salladhor Saan was a sunburst of scarlet satin, gold, and jewels. Only Ser Davos dressed simply, in brown doublet and green wool mantle, and only Ser Davos met his gaze, with pity in his eyes.

“You are too ill and too confused to be of use to me, old man.” It sounded so like Lord Stannis’s voice, but it could not be, it could not. “Pylos will counsel me henceforth. Already he works with the ravens, since you can no longer climb to the rookery. I will not have you kill yourself in my service.”

Maester Cressen blinked. *Stannis, my lord, my sad sullen boy, son I never had, you must not do this, don’t you know how I have cared for you, lived for you, loved you despite all? Yes, loved you, better than Robert even, or Renly, for you were the one unloved, the one who needed me most.* Yet all he said was, “As you command, my lord, but... but I am hungry. Might not I have a place at your table?” *At your side, I belong at your side...*

Ser Davos rose from the bench. “I should be honored if the maester would sit here beside me, Your Grace.”

“As you will.” Lord Stannis turned away to say something to Melisandre, who had seated herself at his right hand, in the place of high honor. Lady Selyse was on his left, flashing a smile as bright and brittle as her jewels.

Too far, Cressen thought dully, looking at where Ser Davos was seated. Half of the lords bannermen were between the smuggler and the high table. *I must be closer to her if I am to get the strangler into her cup, yet how?*

Patchface was capering about as the maester made his slow way around the table to Davos Seaworth. “Here we eat fish,” the fool declared happily, waving a cod about like a scepter. “Under the sea, the fish eat us. I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.”

Ser Davos moved aside to make room on the bench. “We all should be in motley tonight,” he said gloomily as Cressen seated himself, “for this is fool’s business we’re about. The red woman has seen victory in her flames, so Stannis means to press his claim, no matter what the numbers. Before she’s done we’re all like to see what Patchface saw, I fear—the bottom of the sea.”

Cressen slid his hands up into his sleeves as if for warmth. His fingers found the hard lumps the crystals made in the wool. “Lord Stannis.”

Stannis turned from the red woman, but it was Lady Selyse who replied. “*King* Stannis. You forget yourself, Maester.”

“He is old, his mind wanders,” the king told her gruffly. “What is it, Cressen? Speak your mind.”

“As you intend to sail, it is vital that you make common cause with Lord Stark and Lady Arryn...”

“I make common cause with no one,” Stannis Baratheon said.

“No more than light makes common cause with darkness.” Lady Selyse took his hand.

Stannis nodded. “The Starks seek to steal half my kingdom, even as the Lannisters have stolen my throne and my own sweet brother the swords and

service and strongholds that are mine by rights. They are all usurpers, and they are all my enemies.”

I have lost him, Cressen thought, despairing. If only he could somehow approach Melisandre unseen... he needed but an instant’s access to her cup. “You are the rightful heir to your brother Robert, the true Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men,” he said desperately, “but even so, you cannot hope to triumph without allies.”

“He has an ally,” Lady Selyse said. “R’hllor, the Lord of Light, the Heart of Fire, the God of Flame and Shadow.”

“Gods make uncertain allies at best,” the old man insisted, “and *that* one has no power here.”

“You think not?” The ruby at Melisandre’s throat caught the light as she turned her head, and for an instant it seemed to glow bright as the comet. “If you will speak such folly, Maester, you ought to wear your crown again.”

“Yes,” Lady Selyse agreed. “Patches’s helm. It suits you well, old man. Put it on again, I command you.”

“Under the sea, no one wears hats,” Patchface said. “I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.”

Lord Stannis’s eyes were shadowed beneath his heavy brow, his mouth tight as his jaw worked silently. He always ground his teeth when he was angry. “Fool,” he growled at last, “my lady wife commands. Give Cressen your helm.”

No, the old maester thought, *this is not you, not your way, you were always just, always hard yet never cruel, never, you did not understand mockery, no more than you understood laughter.*

Patchface danced closer, his cowbells ringing, *clang-a-lang, ding-ding, clink-clank-clink-clank*. The maester sat silent while the fool set the antlered bucket on his brow. Cressen bowed his head beneath the weight. His bells clanged. “Perhaps he ought sing his counsel henceforth,” Lady Selyse said.

“You go too far, woman,” Lord Stannis said. “He is an old man, and he’s served me well.”

And I will serve you to the last, my sweet lord, my poor lonely son, Cressen thought, for suddenly he saw the way. Ser Davos's cup was before him, still half-full of sour red. He found a hard flake of crystal in his sleeve, held it tight between thumb and forefinger as he reached for the cup. *Smooth motions, deft, I must not fumble now,* he prayed, and the gods were kind. In the blink of an eye, his fingers were empty. His hands had not been so steady for years, nor half so fluid. Davos saw, but no one else, he was certain. Cup in hand, he rose to his feet. "Mayhaps I have been a fool. Lady Melisandre, will you share a cup of wine with me? A cup in honor of your god, your Lord of Light? A cup to toast his power? "

The red woman studied him. "If you wish."

He could feel them all watching him. Davos clutched at him as he left the bench, catching his sleeve with the fingers that Lord Stannis had shortened. "What are you doing?" he whispered.

"A thing that must be done," Maester Cressen answered, "for the sake of the realm, and the soul of my lord." He shook off Davos's hand, spilling a drop of wine on the rushes.

She met him beneath the high table with every man's eyes upon them. But Cressen saw only her. Red silk, red eyes, the ruby red at her throat, red lips curled in a faint smile as she put her hand atop his own, around the cup. Her skin felt hot, feverish. "It is not too late to spill the wine, Maester."

"No," he whispered hoarsely. "No."

"As you will." Melisandre of Asshai took the cup from his hands and drank long and deep. There was only half a swallow of wine remaining when she offered it back to him. "And now you."

His hands were shaking, but he made himself be strong. A maester of the Citadel must not be afraid. The wine was sour on his tongue. He let the empty cup drop from his fingers to shatter on the floor. "He *does* have power here, my lord," the woman said. "And fire cleanses." At her throat, the ruby shimmered redly.

Cressen tried to reply, but his words caught in his throat. His cough became a terrible thin whistle as he strained to suck in air. Iron fingers

tightened round his neck. As he sank to his knees, still he shook his head, denying her, denying her power, denying her magic, denying her god. And the cowbells pealed in his antlers, singing *fool, fool, fool* while the red woman looked down on him in pity, the candle flames dancing in her red red eyes.