

DAVOS

Lightning split the northern sky, etching the black tower of the Night Lamp against the blue-white sky. Six heartbeats later came the thunder, like a distant drum.

The guards marched Davos Seaworth across a bridge of black basalt and under an iron portcullis showing signs of rust. Beyond lay a deep salt moat and a drawbridge supported by a pair of massive chains. Green waters surged below, sending up plumes of spray to smash against the foundations of the castle. Then came a second gatehouse, larger than the first, its stones bearded with green algae. Davos stumbled across a muddy yard with his hands bound at the wrists. A cold rain stung his eyes. The guards prodded him up the steps, into Breakwater's cavernous stone keep.

Once inside, the captain removed his cloak and hung it from a peg, so as not to leave puddles on the threadbare Myrish carpet. Davos did the same, fumbling at the clasp with his bound hands. He had not forgotten the courtesies he had learned on Dragonstone during his years of service.

They found the lord alone in the gloom of his hall, making a supper of beer and bread and sister's stew. Twenty iron sconces were mounted along his thick stone walls, but only four held torches, and none of them was lit. Two fat tallow candles gave a meagre, flickering light. Davos could hear the rain lashing at the walls, and a steady dripping where the roof had sprung a leak.

"M'lord," said the captain, "we found this man in the Belly o' the Whale, trying to buy his way off island. He had twelve dragons on him, and this thing too." The captain put it on the table by the lord: a wide ribbon of black velvet trimmed with cloth-of-gold, and bearing three seals; a crowned stag stamped in golden beeswax, a flaming heart in red, a hand in white.

Davos waited wet and dripping, his wrists chafing where the wet rope dug into his skin. One word from this lord and he would soon be hanging from the Gallows Gate of Sisterton, but at least he was out of the rain, with solid

stone beneath his feet in place of a heaving deck. He was soaked and sore and haggard, worn thin by grief and betrayal, and sick to death of storms.

The lord wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and picked up the ribbon for a closer squint. Lightning flashed outside, making the arrow loops blaze blue and white for half a heartbeat. *One, two, three, four*, Davos counted, before the thunder came. When it quieted, he listened to the dripping, and the duller roar beneath his feet, where the waves were smashing against Breakwater's huge stone arches and swirling through its dungeons. He might well end up down there, fettered to a wet stone floor and left to drown when the tide came rushing in. *No*, he tried to tell himself, *a smuggler might die that way, but not a King's Hand. I'm worth more if he sells me to his queen.*

The lord fingered the ribbon, frowning at the seals. He was an ugly man, big and fleshy, with an oarsman's thick shoulders and no neck. Coarse grey stubble, going white in patches, covered his cheeks and chin. Above a massive shelf of brow he was bald. His nose was lumpy and red with broken veins, his lips thick, and he had a sort of webbing between the three middle fingers of his right hand. Davos had heard that some of the lords of the Three Sisters had webbed hands and feet, but he had always put that down as just another sailor's story.

The lord leaned back. "Cut him free," he said, "and peel those gloves off him. I want to see his hands."

The captain did as he was told. As he jerked up his captive's maimed left hand the lightning flashed again, throwing the shadow of Davos Seaworth's shortened fingers across the blunt and brutal face of Godric Borrell, Lord of Sweetsister. "Any man can steal a ribbon," the lord said, "but those fingers do not lie. You are the onion knight."

"I have been called that, my lord." Davos was a lord himself, and had been a knight for long years now, but deep down he was still what he had always been, a smuggler of common birth who had bought his knighthood with a hold of onions and salt fish. "I have been called worse things too."

"Aye. Traitor. Rebel. Turncloak."

He bristled at the last. "I have never turned my cloak, my lord. I am a king's man."

"Only if Stannis is a king." The lord weighed him with hard black eyes. "Most knights who land upon my shores seek me in my hall, not in the Belly of the Whale. A vile smuggler's den, that place. Are you returning to your old trade, onion knight?"

"No, my lord. I was looking for passage to White Harbor. The king sent me, with a message for its lord."

"Then you are in the wrong place, with the wrong lord." Lord Godric seemed amused. "This is Sisterton, on Sweetsister."

"I know it is." There was nothing sweet about Sisterton, though. It was a vile town, a sty, small and mean and rank with the odors of pig shit and rotting fish. Davos remembered it well from his smuggling days. The Three Sisters had been a favorite haunt of smugglers for hundreds of years, and a pirate's nest before that. Sisterton's streets were mud and planks, its houses daub-and-wattle hovels roofed with straw, and by the Gallows Gate there were always hanged men with their entrails dangling out.

"You have friends here, I do not doubt," said the lord. "Every smuggler has friends on the Sisters. Some of them are my friends as well. The ones who aren't, them I hang. I let them strangle slowly, with their guts slapping up against their knees." The hall grew bright again, as lightning lit the windows. Two heartbeats later came the thunder. "If it is White Harbor that you want, why are you in Sisterton? What brought you here?"

A king's command and a friend's betrayal, Davos might have said. Instead he answered, "Storms."

Nine-and-twenty ships had set sail from the Wall. If half of them were still afloat, Davos would be shocked. Black skies, bitter winds, and lashing rains had hounded them all the way down the coast. The galleys *Oledo* and *Old Mother's Son* had been driven onto the rocks of Skagos, the isle of unicorns and cannibals where even the Blind Bastard had feared to land; the great cog *Saathos Saan* had foundered off the Grey Cliffs. "Stannis will be

paying for them,” Salladhor Saan had fumed. “He will be paying for them with good gold, every one.” It was as if some angry god was exacting payment for their easy voyage north, when they had ridden a steady southerly from Dragonstone to the Wall. Another gale had ripped away the rigging of the *Bountiful Harvest*, forcing Salla to have her taken under tow. Ten leagues north of Widow’s Watch the seas rose again, slamming the *Harvest* into one of the galleys towing her and sinking both. The rest of the Lysene fleet had been scattered across the narrow sea. Some would straggle into one port or another. Others would never be seen again.

“Salladhor the Beggar, that’s what your king has made me,” Salladhor Saan complained to Davos, as the remnants of his fleet limped across the Bite. “Salladhor the Smashed. Where are my ships? And my gold, where is all the gold that I was promised?” When Davos had tried to assure him that he would have his payment, Salla had erupted. “When, *when*? On the morrow, on the new moon, when the red comet comes again? He is promising me gold and gems, always promising, but this gold I have not seen. I have his word, he is saying, oh yes, his royal word, he writes it down. Can Salladhor Saan eat the king’s word? Can he quench his thirst with parchments and waxy seals? Can he tumble promises into a feather bed and fuck them till they squeal?”

Davos had tried to persuade him to stay true. If Salla abandoned Stannis and his cause, he pointed out, he abandoned all hope of collecting the gold that was due him. A victorious King Tommen was not like to pay his defeated uncle’s debts, after all. Salla’s only hope was to remain loyal to Stannis Baratheon until he won the Iron Throne. Elsewise he would never see a groat of his money. He had to be patient.

Perhaps some lord with honey on his tongue might have swayed the Lysene pirate prince, but Davos was an onion knight, and his words had only provoked Salla to fresh outrage. “On Dragonstone I was patient,” he said, “when the red woman burned wooden gods and screaming men. All the long way to the Wall I was patient. At Eastwatch I was patient ... and cold, so very cold. Bah, I say. Bah to your patience, and bah to your king. My men are hungry. They are wishing to fuck their wives again, to count their sons, to see the Stepstones and the pleasure gardens of Lys. Ice and storms

and empty promises, these they are *not* wanting. This north is much too cold, and getting colder.”

I knew the day would come, Davos told himself. I was fond of the old rogue, but never so great a fool as to trust him.

“Storms.” Lord Godric said the word as fondly as another man might say his lover’s name. “Storms were sacred on the Sisters before the Andals came. Our gods of old were the Lady of the Waves and the Lord of the Skies. They made storms every time they mated.” He leaned forward. “These kings never bother with the Sisters. Why should they? We are small and poor. And yet you’re here. Delivered to me by the storms.”

Delivered to you by a friend, Davos thought.

Lord Godric turned to his captain. “Leave this man with me. He was never here.”

“No, m’lord. Never.” The captain took his leave, his wet boots leaving damp footprints across the carpet. Beneath the floor the sea was rumbling and restless, pounding at the castle’s feet. The outer door closed with a sound like distant thunder, and again the lightning came, as if in answer.

“My lord,” said Davos, “if you would send me on to White Harbor, His Grace would count it as an act of friendship.”

“I could send you to White Harbor,” the lord allowed. “Or I could send you to some cold wet hell.”

Sisterton is hell enough. Davos feared the worst. The Three Sisters were fickle bitches, loyal only to themselves. Supposedly they were sworn to the Arryns of the Vale, but the Eyrie’s grasp upon the islands was tenuous at best.

“Sunderland would require me to hand you over if he knew of you.” Borrell did fealty for Sweetsister, as Longthorpe did for Longsister and Torrent for Littlesister; all were sworn to Triston Sunderland, the Lord of the Three Sisters. “He’d sell you to the queen for a pot of that Lannister gold. Poor

man needs every dragon, with seven sons all determined to be knights.” The lord picked up a wooden spoon and attacked his stew again. “I used to curse the gods who gave me only daughters until I heard Triston bemoaning the cost of destriers. You would be surprised to know how many fish it takes to buy a decent suit of plate and mail.”

I had seven sons as well, but four are burned and dead. “Lord Sunderland is sworn to the Eyrie,” Davos said. “By rights he should deliver me to Lady Arryn.” He would stand a better chance with her than with the Lannisters, he judged. Though she had taken no part in the War of the Five Kings, Lysa Arryn was a daughter of Riverrun, and aunt to the Young Wolf.

“Lysa Arryn’s dead,” Lord Godric said, “murdered by some singer. Lord Littlefinger rules the Vale now. Where are the pirates?” When Davos did not answer, he rapped his spoon against the table. “The Lyseni. Torrent spied their sails from Littlesister, and before him the Flints from Widow’s Watch. Orange sails, and green, and pink. Salladhor Saan. Where is he?”

“At sea.” Salla would be sailing around the Fingers and down the narrow sea. He was returning to the Stepstones with what few ships remained him. Perhaps he would acquire a few more along the way, if he came upon some likely merchantmen. *A little piracy to help the leagues go by.* “His Grace has sent him south, to trouble the Lannisters and their friends.” The lie was one he had rehearsed as he rowed toward Sisterton through the rain. Soon or late the world would learn that Salladhor Saan had abandoned Stannis Baratheon, leaving him without a fleet, but they would not hear it from the lips of Davos Seaworth.

Lord Godric stirred his stew. “Did that old pirate Saan make you swim to shore?”

“I came ashore in an open boat, my lord.” Salla had waited until the beacon of the Night Lamp shone off the *Valyrian*’s port bow before he put him off. Their friendship had been worth that much, at least. The Lyseni would gladly have taken him south with him, he avowed, but Davos had refused. Stannis needed Wyman Manderly, and had trusted Davos to win him. He would not betray that trust, he told Salla. “Bah,” the pirate prince replied, “he will kill you with these honors, old friend. He will kill you.”

“I have never had a King’s Hand beneath my roof before,” Lord Godric said. “Would Stannis ransom you, I wonder?”

Would he? Stannis had given Davos lands and titles and offices, but would he pay good gold to buy back his life? *He has no gold. Else he’d still have Salla.* “You will find His Grace at Castle Black if my lord would like to ask that of him.”

Borrell grunted. “Is the Imp at Castle Black as well?”

“The Imp?” Davos did not understand the question. “He is at King’s Landing, condemned to die for the murder of his nephew.”

“The Wall is the last to learn, my father used to say. The dwarf’s escaped. He twisted through the bars of his cell and tore his own father apart with his bare hands. A guardsman saw him flee, red from head to heel, as if he’d bathed in blood. The queen will make a lord of any man who kills him.”

Davos struggled to believe what he was hearing. “You are telling me that Tywin Lannister is dead?”

“At his son’s hand, aye.” The lord took a drink of beer. “When there were kings on the Sisters, we did not suffer dwarfs to live. We cast them all into the sea, as an offering to the gods. The septons made us stop that. A pack of pious fools. Why would the gods give a man such a shape but to mark him as a monster?”

Lord Tywin dead. This changes all. “My lord, will you grant me leave to send a raven to the Wall? His Grace will want to know of Lord Tywin’s death.”

“He’ll know. But not from me. Nor you, so long as you are here beneath my leaky roof. I’ll not have it said that I gave Stannis aid and counsel. The Sunderlands dragged the Sisters into two of the Blackfyre Rebellions, and we all suffered grievously for that.” Lord Godric waved his spoon toward a chair. “Sit. Before you fall, ser. My hall is cold and damp and dark, but not without some courtesy. We’ll find dry clothes for you, but first you’ll eat.”

He shouted, and a woman entered the hall. “We have a guest to feed. Bring beer and bread and sister’s stew.”

The beer was brown, the bread black, the stew a creamy white. She served it in a trencher hollowed out of a stale loaf. It was thick with leeks, carrots, barley, and turnips white and yellow, along with clams and chunks of cod and crabmeat, swimming in a stock of heavy cream and butter. It was the sort of stew that warmed a man right down to his bones, just the thing for a wet, cold night. Davos spooned it up gratefully.

“You have tasted sister’s stew before?”

“I have, my lord.” The same stew was served all over the Three Sisters, in every inn and tavern.

“This is better than what you’ve had before. Gella makes it. My daughter’s daughter. Are you married, onion knight?”

“I am, my lord.”

“A pity. Gella’s not. Homely women make the best wives. There’s three kinds of crabs in there. Red crabs and spider crabs and conquerors. I won’t eat spider crab, except in sister’s stew. Makes me feel half a cannibal.” His lordship gestured at the banner hanging above the cold black hearth. A spider crab was embroidered there, white on a grey-green field. “We heard tales that Stannis burned his Hand.”

The Hand who went before me. Melisandre had given Alester Florent to her god on Dragonstone, to conjure up the wind that bore them north. Lord Florent had been strong and silent as the queen’s men bound him to the post, as dignified as any half-naked man could hope to be, but as the flames licked up his legs he had begun to scream, and his screams had blown them all the way to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, if the red woman could be believed. Davos had disliked that wind. It had seemed to him to smell of burning flesh, and the sound of it was anguished as it played amongst the lines. *It could as easily have been me.* “I did not burn,” he assured Lord Godric, “though Eastwatch almost froze me.”

“The Wall will do that.” The woman brought them a fresh loaf of bread, still hot from the oven. When Davos saw her hand, he stared. Lord Godric did not fail to make note of it. “Aye, she has the mark. Like all Borrells, for five thousand years. My daughter’s daughter. Not the one who makes the stew.” He tore the bread apart and offered half to Davos. “Eat. It’s good.”

It was, though any stale crust would have tasted just as fine to Davos; it meant he was a guest here, for this one night at least. The lords of the Three Sisters had a black repute, and none more so than Godric Borrell, Lord of Sweetsister, Shield of Sisterton, Master of Breakwater Castle, and Keeper of the Night Lamp ... but even robber lords and wreckers were bound by the ancient laws of hospitality. *I will see the dawn, at least*, Davos told himself. *I have eaten of his bread and salt.*

Though there were stranger spices than salt in this sister’s stew. “Is it saffron that I’m tasting?” Saffron was worth more than gold. Davos had only tasted it once before, when King Robert had sent a half a fish to him at a feast on Dragonstone.

“Aye. From Qarth. There’s pepper too.” Lord Godric took a pinch between his thumb and forefinger and sprinkled his own trencher. “Cracked black pepper from Volantis, nothing finer. Take as much as you require if you’re feeling peppery. I’ve got forty chests of it. Not to mention cloves and nutmeg, and a pound of saffron. Took it off a sloe-eyed maid.” He laughed. He still had all his teeth, Davos saw, though most of them were yellow and one on the top was black and dead. “She was making for Braavos, but a gale swept her into the Bite and she smashed up against some of my rocks. So you see, you are not the only gift the storms have brought me. The sea’s a treacherous cruel thing.”

Not as treacherous as men, thought Davos. Lord Godric’s forebears had been pirate kings until the Starks came down on them with fire and sword. These days the Sistermen left open piracy to Salladhor Saan and his ilk and confined themselves to wrecking. The beacons that burned along the shores of the Three Sisters were supposed to warn of shoals and reefs and rocks and lead the way to safety, but on stormy nights and foggy ones, some Sistermen would use false lights to draw unwary captains to their doom.

“The storms did you a kindness, blowing you to my door,” Lord Godric said. “You’d have found a cold welcome in White Harbor. You come too late, ser. Lord Wyman means to bend his knee, and not to Stannis.” He took a swallow of his beer. “The Manderlys are no northmen, not down deep. ’Twas no more than nine hundred years ago when they came north, laden down with all their gold and gods. They’d been great lords on the Mander until they overreached themselves and the green hands slapped them down. The wolf king took their gold, but he gave them land and let them keep their gods.” He mopped at his stew with a chunk of bread. “If Stannis thinks the fat man will ride the stag, he’s wrong. The *Lionstar* put in at Sisterton twelve days ago to fill her water casks. Do you know her? Crimson sails and a gold lion on her prow. And full of Freys, making for White Harbor.”

“Freys?” That was the last thing that Davos would have expected. “The Freys killed Lord Wyman’s son, we heard.”

“Aye,” Lord Godric said, “and the fat man was so wroth that he took a vow to live on bread and wine till he had his vengeance. But before the day was out, he was stuffing clams and cakes into his mouth again. There’s ships that go between the Sisters and White Harbor all the time. We sell them crabs and fish and goat cheese, they sell us wood and wool and hides. From all I hear, his lordship’s fatter than ever. So much for vows. Words are wind, and the wind from Manderly’s mouth means no more than the wind escaping out his bottom.” The lord tore off another chunk of bread to swipe out his trencher. “The Freys were bringing the fat fool a bag of bones. Some call that courtesy, to bring a man his dead son’s bones. Had it been my son, I would have returned the courtesy and thanked the Freys before I hanged them, but the fat man’s too noble for that.” He stuffed the bread into his mouth, chewed, swallowed. “I had the Freys to supper. One sat just where you’re sitting now. *Rhaegar*, he named himself. I almost laughed right in his face. He’d lost his wife, he said, but he meant to get himself a new one in White Harbor. Ravens have been flying back and forth. Lord Wyman and Lord Walder have made a pact, and mean to seal it with a marriage.”

Davos felt as though the lord had punched him in the belly. *If he tells it true, my king is lost.* Stannis Baratheon had desperate need of White Harbor. If Winterfell was the heart of the north, White Harbor was its

mouth. Its firth had remained free of ice even in the depths of winter for centuries. With winter coming on, that could mean much and more. So could the city's silver. The Lannisters had all the gold of Casterly Rock, and had wed the wealth of Highgarden. King Stannis's coffers were exhausted. *I must try, at least. There may be some way that I can stop this marriage.* "I have to reach White Harbor," he said. "Your lordship, I beg you, help me."

Lord Godric began to eat his trencher, tearing it apart in his big hands. The stew had softened the stale bread. "I have no love for northmen," he announced. "The maesters say the Rape of the Three Sisters was two thousand years ago, but Sisterton has not forgotten. We were a free people before that, with our kings ruling over us. Afterward, we had to bend our knees to the Eyrie to get the northmen out. The wolf and the falcon fought over us for a thousand years, till between the two of them they had gnawed all the fat and flesh off the bones of these poor islands. As for your King Stannis, when he was Robert's master of ships he sent a fleet into my port without my leave and made me hang a dozen fine friends. Men like you. He went so far as to threaten to hang *me* if it should happen that some ship went aground because the Night Lamp had gone black. I had to eat his arrogance." He ate some of the trencher. "Now he comes north humbled, with his tail between his legs. Why should I give him any aid? Answer me that."

Because he is your rightful king, Davos thought. Because he is a strong man and a just one, the only man who can restore the realm and defend it against the peril that gathers in the north. Because he has a magic sword that glows with the light of the sun. The words caught in his throat. None of them would sway the Lord of Sweetsister. None of them would get him a foot closer to White Harbor. *What answer does he want? Must I promise him gold we do not have? A highborn husband for his daughter's daughter? Lands, honors, titles?* Lord Alester Florent had tried to play that game, and the king had burned him for it.

"The Hand has lost his tongue, it seems. He has no taste for sister's stew, or truth." Lord Godric wiped his mouth.

"The lion is dead," said Davos, slowly. "There's your truth, my lord. Tywin Lannister is dead."

“What if he is?”

“Who rules now in King’s Landing? Not Tommen, he is just a child. Is it Ser Kevan?”

Candlelight gleamed in Lord Godric’s black eyes. “If it were, you’d be in chains. It’s the queen who rules.”

Davos understood. *He nurses doubts. He does not want to find himself upon the losing side.* “Stannis held Storm’s End against the Tyrells and the Redwynes. He took Dragonstone from the last Targaryens. He smashed the Iron Fleet off Fair Isle. This child king will not prevail against him.”

“This child king commands the wealth of Casterly Rock and the power of Highgarden. He has the Boltons and the Freys.” Lord Godric rubbed his chin. “Still ... in this world only winter is certain. Ned Stark told my father that, here in this very hall.”

“Ned Stark was here?”

“At the dawn of Robert’s Rebellion. The Mad King had sent to the Eyrie for Stark’s head, but Jon Arryn sent him back defiance. Gulltown stayed loyal to the throne, though. To get home and call his banners, Stark had to cross the mountains to the Fingers and find a fisherman to carry him across the Bite. A storm caught them on the way. The fisherman drowned, but his daughter got Stark to the Sisters before the boat went down. They say he left her with a bag of silver and a bastard in her belly. Jon Snow, she named him, after Arryn.

“Be that as it may. My father sat where I sit now when Lord Eddard came to Sisterton. Our maester urged us to send Stark’s head to Aerys, to prove our loyalty. It would have meant a rich reward. The Mad King was open-handed with them as pleased him. By then we knew that Jon Arryn had taken Gulltown, though. Robert was the first man to gain the wall, and slew Marq Grafton with his own hand. ‘This Baratheon is fearless,’ I said. ‘He fights the way a king should fight.’ Our maester chuckled at me and told us that Prince Rhaegar was certain to defeat this rebel. That was when Stark said, ‘In this world only winter is certain. We may lose our heads, it’s true

... but what if we prevail?' My father sent him on his way with his head still on his shoulders. 'If you lose,' he told Lord Eddard, 'you were never here.' "

"No more than I was," said Davos Seaworth.