



## DAVOS

Their voices rose like cinders, swirling up into purple evening sky. “Lead us from the darkness, O my Lord. Fill our hearts with fire, so we may walk your shining path.”

The nightfire burned against the gathering dark, a great bright beast whose shifting orange light threw shadows twenty feet tall across the yard. All along the walls of Dragonstone the army of gargoyles and grotesques seemed to stir and shift.

Davos looked down from an arched window in the gallery above. He watched Melisandre lift her arms, as if to embrace the shivering flames. “R’hllo,” she sang in a voice loud and clear, “you are the light in our eyes, the fire in our hearts, the heat in our loins. Yours is the sun that warms our days, yours the stars that guard us in the dark of night.”

“*Lord of Light, defend us. The night is dark and full of terrors.*” Queen Selyse led the responses, her pinched face full of fervor. King Stannis stood beside her, jaw clenched hard, the points of his red-gold crown shimmering whenever he moved his head. *He is with them, but not of them*, Davos thought. Princess Shireen was between them, the mottled grey patches on her face and neck almost black in the firelight.

“*Lord of Light, protect us,*” the queen sang. The king did not respond with the others. He was staring into the flames. Davos wondered what he

saw there. *Another vision of the war to come? Or something closer to home?*

“R’hllor who gave us breath, we thank you,” sang Melisandre. “R’hllor who gave us day, we thank you.”

“*We thank you for the sun that warms us,*” Queen Selyse and the other worshipers replied. “*We thank you for the stars that watch us. We thank you for our hearths and for our torches, that keep the savage dark at bay.*” There were fewer voices saying the responses than there had been the night before, it seemed to Davos; fewer faces flushed with orange light about the fire. But would there be fewer still on the morrow . . . or more?

The voice of Ser Axell Florent rang loud as a trumpet. He stood barrel-chested and bandy-legged, the firelight washing his face like a monstrous orange tongue. Davos wondered if Ser Axell would thank him, after. The work they did tonight might well make him the King’s Hand, as he dreamed.

Melisandre cried, “We thank you for Stannis, by your grace our king. We thank you for the pure white fire of his goodness, for the red sword of justice in his hand, for the love he bears his leal people. Guide him and defend him, R’hllor, and grant him strength to smite his foes.”

“*Grant him strength,*” answered Queen Selyse, Ser Axell, Devan, and the rest. “*Grant him courage. Grant him wisdom.*”

When he was a boy, the septons had taught Davos to pray to the Crone for wisdom, to the Warrior for courage, to the Smith for strength. But it was the Mother he prayed to now, to keep his sweet son Devan safe from the red woman’s demon god.

“Lord Davos? We’d best be about it.” Ser Andrew touched his elbow gently. “My lord?”

The title still rang queer in his ears, yet Davos turned away from the window. “Aye. It’s time.” Stannis, Melisandre, and the queen’s men would be at their prayers an hour or more. The red priests lit their fires every day at sunset, to thank R’hllor for the day just ending, and beg him to send his sun back on the morrow to banish the gathering darkness. *A smuggler must know the tides and when to seize them.* That was all he was at the end of the

day; Davos the smuggler. His maimed hand rose to his throat for his luck, and found nothing. He snatched it down and walked a bit more quickly.

His companions kept pace, matching their strides to his own. The Bastard of Nightsong had a pox-ravaged face and an air of tattered chivalry; Ser Gerald Gower was broad, bluff, and blond; Ser Andrew Estermont stood a head taller, with a spade-shaped beard and shaggy brown eye-brows. They were all good men in their own ways, Davos thought. *And they will all be dead men soon, if this night's work goes badly.*

"Fire is a living thing," the red woman told him, when he asked her to teach him how to see the future in the flames. "It is always moving, always changing . . . like a book whose letters dance and shift even as you try to read them. It takes years of training to see the shapes beyond the flames, and more years still to learn to tell the shapes of what will be from what may be or what was. Even then it comes hard, *hard*. You do not understand that, you men of the sunset lands." Davos asked her then how it was that Ser Axell had learned the trick of it so quickly, but to that she only smiled enigmatically and said, "Any cat may stare into a fire and see red mice at play."

He had not lied to his king's men, about that or any of it. "The red woman may see what we intend," he warned them.

"We should start by killing her, then," urged Lewys the Fishwife. "I know a place where we could waylay her, four of us with sharp swords . . ."

"You'd doom us all," said Davos. "Maester Cressen tried to kill her, and she knew at once. From her flames, I'd guess. It seems to me that she is very quick to sense any threat to her own person, but surely she cannot see *everything*. If we ignore her, perhaps we might escape her notice."

"There is no honor in hiding and sneaking," objected Ser Triston of Tally Hill, who had been a Sunglass man before Lord Guncer went to Melisandre's fires.

"Is it so honorable to burn?" Davos asked him. "You saw Lord Sunglass die. Is that what you want? I don't need men of honor now. I need *smugglers*. Are you with me, or no?"

They were. Gods be good, they were.

Maester Pylos was leading Edric Storm through his sums when Davos pushed open the door. Ser Andrew was close behind him; the others had been left to guard the steps and cellar door. The maester broke off. "That will be enough for now, Edric."

The boy was puzzled by the intrusion. "Lord Davos, Ser Andrew. We were doing sums."

Ser Andrew smiled. "I hated sums when I was your age, coz."

"I don't mind them so much. I like history best, though. It's full of tales."

"Edric," said Maester Pylos, "run and get your cloak now. You're to go with Lord Davos."

"I am?" Edric got to his feet. "Where are we going?" His mouth set stubbornly. "I won't go pray to the Lord of Light. I am a Warrior's man, like my father."

"We know," Davos said. "Come, lad, we must not dawdle."

Edric donned a thick hooded cloak of undyed wool. Maester Pylos helped him fasten it, and pulled the hood up to shadow his face. "Are you coming with us, Maester?" the boy asked.

"No." Pylos touched the chain of many metals he wore about his neck. "My place is here on Dragonstone. Go with Lord Davos now, and do as he says. He is the King's Hand, remember. What did I tell you about the King's Hand?"

"The Hand speaks with the king's voice."

The young maester smiled. "That's so. Go now."

Davos had been uncertain of Pylos. Perhaps he resented him for taking old Cressen's place. But now he could only admire the man's courage. *This could mean his life as well.*

Outside the maester's chambers, Ser Gerald Gower waited by the steps. Edric Storm looked at him curiously. As they made their descent he asked, "Where are we going, Lord Davos?"

"To the water. A ship awaits you."

The boy stopped suddenly. "A ship?"

"One of Salladhor Saan's. Salla is a good friend of mine."

“I shall go with you, Cousin,” Ser Andrew assured him. “There’s nothing to be frightened of.”

“I am not *frightened*,” Edric said indignantly. “Only . . . is Shireen coming too?”

“No,” said Davos. “The princess must remain here with her father and mother.”

“I have to see her then,” Edric explained. “To say my farewells. Otherwise she’ll be sad.”

*Not so sad as if she sees you burn.* “There is no time,” Davos said. “I will tell the princess that you were thinking of her. And you can write her, when you get to where you’re going.”

The boy frowned. “Are you sure I must go? Why would my uncle send me from Dragonstone? Did I displease him? I never meant to.” He got that stubborn look again. “I want to see my uncle. I want to see King Stannis.”

Ser Andrew and Ser Gerald exchanged a look. “There’s no time for that, Cousin,” Ser Andrew said.

“I want to see him!” Edric insisted, louder.

“He does not want to see you.” Davos had to say something, to get the boy moving. “I am his Hand, I speak with his voice. Must I go to the king and tell him that you would not do as you were told? Do you know how angry that will make him? Have you ever seen your uncle angry?” He pulled off his glove and showed the boy the four fingers that Stannis had shortened. “I have.”

It was all lies; there had been no anger in Stannis Baratheon when he cut the ends off his onion knight’s fingers, only an iron sense of justice. But Edric Storm had not been born then, and could not know that. And the threat had the desired effect. “He should not have done that,” the boy said, but he let Davos take him by the hand and draw him down the steps.

The Bastard of Nightsong joined them at the cellar door. They walked quickly, across a shadowed yard and down some steps, under the stone tail of a frozen dragon. Lewys the Fishwife and Omer Blackberry waited at the postern gate, two guards bound and trussed at their feet. “The boat?” Davos asked them.

“It’s there,” Lewys said. “Four oarsmen. The galley is anchored just past the point. *Mad Prendos*.”

Davos chuckled. *A ship named after a madman. Yes, that’s fitting.* Salla had a streak of the pirate’s black humor.

He went to one knee before Edric Storm. “I must leave you now,” he said. “There’s a boat waiting, to row you out to a galley. Then it’s off across the sea. You are Robert’s son so I know you will be brave, no matter what happens.”

“I will. Only . . .” The boy hesitated.

“Think of this as an adventure, my lord.” Davos tried to sound hale and cheerful. “It’s the start of your life’s great adventure. May the Warrior defend you.”

“And may the Father judge you justly, Lord Davos.” The boy went with his cousin Ser Andrew out the postern gate. The others followed, all but the Bastard of Nightsong. *May the Father judge me justly*, Davos thought ruefully. But it was the king’s judgment that concerned him now.

“These two?” asked Ser Rolland of the guards, when he had closed and barred the gate.

“Drag them into a cellar,” said Davos. “You can cut them free when Edric’s safely under way.”

The Bastard gave a curt nod. There were no more words to say; the easy part was done. Davos pulled his glove on, wishing he had not lost his luck. He had been a better man and a braver one with that bag of bones around his neck. He ran his shortened fingers through thinning brown hair, and wondered if it needed to be cut. He must look presentable when he stood before the king.

Dragonstone had never seemed so dark and fearsome. He walked slowly, his footsteps echoing off black walls and dragons. *Stone dragons who will never wake, I pray.* The Stone Drum loomed huge ahead of him. The guards at the door uncrossed their spears as he approached. *Not for the onion knight, but for the King’s Hand.* Davos was the Hand going in, at least. He wondered what he would be coming out. *If I ever do . . .*

The steps seemed longer and steeper than before, or perhaps it was just that he was tired. *The Mother never made me for tasks like this.* He had risen too high and too fast, and up here on the mountain the air was too thin for him to breathe. As a boy he'd dreamed of riches, but that was long ago. Later, grown, all he had wanted was a few acres of good land, a hall to grow old in, a better life for his sons. The Blind Bastard used to tell him that a clever smuggler did not overreach, nor draw too much attention to himself. *A few acres, a timbered roof, a "ser" before my name, I should have been content.* If he survived this night, he would take Devan and sail home to Cape Wrath and his gentle Marya. *We will grieve together for our dead sons, raise the living ones to be good men, and speak no more of kings.*

The Chamber of the Painted Table was dark and empty when Davos entered; the king would still be at the nightfire, with Melisandre and the queen's men. He knelt and made a fire in the hearth, to drive the chill from the round chamber and chase the shadows back into their corners. Then he went around the room to each window in turn, opening the heavy velvet curtains and unlatching the wooden shutters. The wind came in, strong with the smell of salt and sea, and pulled at his plain brown cloak.

At the north window, he leaned against the sill for a breath of the cold night air, hoping to catch a glimpse of *Mad Prendos* raising sail, but the sea seemed black and empty as far as the eye could see. *Is she gone already?* He could only pray that she was, and the boy with her. A half moon was sliding in and out amongst thin high clouds, and Davos could see familiar stars. There was the Galley, sailing west; there the Crone's Lantern, four bright stars that enclosed a golden haze. The clouds hid most of the Ice Dragon, all but the bright blue eye that marked due north. *The sky is full of smugglers' stars.* They were old friends, those stars; Davos hoped that meant good luck.

But when he lowered his gaze from the sky to the castle ramparts, he was not so certain. The wings of the stone dragons cast great black shadows in the light from the nightfire. He tried to tell himself that they were no more than carvings, cold and lifeless. *This was their place, once. A place of dragons and dragonlords, the seat of House Targaryen.* The Targaryens were the blood of old Valyria . . .

The wind sighed through the chamber, and in the hearth the flames gusted and swirled. He listened to the logs crackle and spit. When Davos left the window his shadow went before him, tall and thin, and fell across the Painted Table like a sword. And there he stood for a long time, waiting. He heard their boots on the stone steps as they ascended. The king's voice went before him. "... is not three," he was saying.

"Three is three," came Melisandre's answer. "I swear to you, Your Grace, I saw him die and heard his mother's wail."

"In the nightfire." Stannis and Melisandre came through the door together. "The flames are full of tricks. What is, what will be, what may be. You cannot tell me for a certainty . . ."

"Your Grace." Davos stepped forward. "Lady Melisandre saw it true. Your nephew Joffrey is dead."

If the king was surprised to find him at the Painted Table, he gave no sign. "Lord Davos," he said. "He was not my nephew. Though for years I believed he was."

"He choked on a morsel of food at his wedding feast," Davos said. "It may be that he was poisoned."

"He is the third," said Melisandre.

"I can count, woman." Stannis walked along the table, past Oldtown and the Arbor, up toward the Shield Islands and the mouth of the Mander. "Weddings have become more perilous than battles, it would seem. Who was the poisoner? Is it known?"

"His uncle, it's said. The Imp."

Stannis ground his teeth. "A dangerous man. I learned that on the Blackwater. How do you come by this report?"

"The Lyseni still trade at King's Landing. Salladhor Saan has no reason to lie to me."

"I suppose not." The king ran his fingers across the table. "Joffrey . . . I remember once, this kitchen cat . . . the cooks were wont to feed her scraps and fish heads. One told the boy that she had kittens in her belly, thinking he might want one. Joffrey opened up the poor thing with a dagger to see if it were true. When he found the kittens, he brought them to show to his



father. Robert hit the boy so hard I thought he'd killed him." The king took off his crown and placed it on the table. "Dwarf or leech, this killer served the kingdom well. They *must* send for me now."

"They will not," said Melisandre. "Joffrey has a brother."

"Tommen." The king said the name grudgingly.

"They will crown Tommen, and rule in his name."

Stannis made a fist. "Tommen is gentler than Joffrey, but born of the same incest. Another monster in the making. Another leech upon the land. Westeros needs a man's hand, not a child's."

Melisandre moved closer. "Save them, sire. Let me wake the stone dragons. Three is three. Give me the boy."

"Edric Storm," Davos said.

Stannis rounded on him in a cold fury. "*I know his name*. Spare me your reproaches. I like this no more than you do, but my duty is to the realm. My duty . . ." He turned back to Melisandre. "You swear there is no other way? Swear it on your life, for I promise, you shall die by inches if you lie."

"You are he who must stand against the Other. The one whose coming was prophesied five thousand years ago. The red comet was your herald. You are the prince that was promised, and if you fail the world fails with you." Melisandre went to him, her red lips parted, her ruby throbbing. "Give me this boy," she whispered, "and I will give you your kingdom."

"He can't," said Davos. "Edric Storm is gone."

"Gone?" Stannis turned. "What do you mean, *gone*?"

"He is aboard a Lyseni galley, safely out to sea." Davos watched Melisandre's pale, heart-shaped face. He saw the flicker of dismay there, the sudden uncertainty. *She did not see it!*

The king's eyes were dark blue bruises in the hollows of his face. "The bastard was taken from Dragonstone without my leave? A galley, you say? If that Lysene pirate thinks to use the boy to squeeze gold from me—"

"This is your Hand's work, sire." Melisandre gave Davos a knowing look. "You will bring him back, my lord. You will."

“The boy is out of my reach,” said Davos. “And out of your reach as well, my lady.”

Her red eyes made him squirm. “I should have left you to the dark, ser. Do you know what you have done?”

“My duty.”

“Some might call it treason.” Stannis went to the window to stare out into the night. *Is he looking for the ship?* “I raised you up from dirt, Davos.” He sounded more tired than angry. “Was loyalty too much to hope for?”

“Four of my sons died for you on the Blackwater. I might have died myself. You have my loyalty, always.” Davos Seaworth had thought long and hard about the words he said next; he knew his life depended on them. “Your Grace, you made me swear to give you honest counsel and swift obedience, to defend your realm against your foes, to *protect your people*. Is not Edric Storm one of your people? One of those I swore to protect? I kept my oath. How could that be treason?”

Stannis ground his teeth again. “I never asked for this crown. Gold is cold and heavy on the head, but so long as I *am* the king, I have a duty . . . If I must sacrifice one child to the flames to save a million from the dark . . . *Sacrifice* . . . is never easy, Davos. Or it is no true sacrifice. Tell him, my lady.”

Melisandre said, “Azor Ahai tempered Lightbringer with the heart’s blood of his own beloved wife. If a man with a thousand cows gives one to god, that is nothing. But a man who offers the only cow he owns . . .”

“She talks of cows,” Davos told the king. “I am speaking of a boy, your daughter’s friend, your brother’s son.”

“A king’s son, with the power of kingsblood in his veins.” Melisandre’s ruby glowed like a red star at her throat. “Do you think you’ve saved this boy, Onion Knight? When the long night falls, Edric Storm shall die with the rest, wherever he is hidden. Your own sons as well. Darkness and cold will cover the earth. You meddle in matters you do not understand.”

“There’s much I don’t understand,” Davos admitted. “I have never pretended otherwise. I know the seas and rivers, the shapes of the coasts,

where the rocks and shoals lie. I know hidden coves where a boat can land unseen. And I know that a king protects his people, or he is no king at all.”

Stannis’s face darkened. “Do you mock me to my face? Must I learn a king’s duty from an onion smuggler?”

Davos knelt. “If I have offended, take my head. I’ll die as I lived, your loyal man. But hear me first. Hear me for the sake of the onions I brought you, and the fingers you took.”

Stannis slid Lightbringer from its scabbard. Its glow filled the chamber. “Say what you will, but say it quickly.” The muscles in the king’s neck stood out like cords.

Davos fumbled inside his cloak and drew out the crinkled sheet of parchment. It seemed a thin and flimsy thing, yet it was all the shield he had. “A King’s Hand should be able to read and write. Maester Pylos has been teaching me.” He smoothed the letter flat upon his knee and began to read by the light of the magic sword.