



## DAVOS

**T**he cell was warmer than any cell had a right to be.

It was dark, yes. Flickering orange light fell through the ancient iron bars from the torch in the sconce on the wall outside, but the back half of the cell remained drenched in gloom. It was dank as well, as might be expected on an isle such as Dragonstone, where the sea was never far. And there were rats, as many as any dungeon could expect to have and a few more besides.

But Davos could not complain of chill. The smooth stony passages beneath the great mass of Dragonstone were always warm, and Davos had often heard it said they grew warmer the farther down one went. He was well below the castle, he judged, and the wall of his cell often felt warm to his touch when he pressed a palm against it. Perhaps the old tales were true, and Dragonstone was built with the stones of hell.

He was sick when they first brought him here. The cough that had plagued him since the battle grew worse, and a fever took hold of him as well. His lips broke with blood blisters, and the warmth of the cell did not stop his shivering. *I will not linger long*, he remembered thinking. *I will die soon, here in the dark.*

Davos soon found that he was wrong about that, as about so much else. Dimly he remembered gentle hands and a firm voice, and young Maester Pylos looking down on him. He was given hot garlic broth to drink, and milk of the poppy to take away his aches and shivers. The poppy made him

sleep and while he slept they leeches him to drain off the bad blood. Or so he surmised, by the leech marks on his arms when he woke. Before very long the coughing stopped, the blisters vanished, and his broth had chunks of whitefish in it, and carrots and onions as well. And one day he realized that he felt stronger than he had since *Black Betha* shattered beneath him and flung him in the river.

He had two gaolers to tend him. One was broad and squat, with thick shoulders and huge strong hands. He wore a leather brigantine dotted with iron studs, and once a day brought Davos a bowl of oaten porridge. Sometimes he sweetened it with honey or poured in a bit of milk. The other gaoler was older, stooped and sallow, with greasy unwashed hair and pebbled skin. He wore a doublet of white velvet with a ring of stars worked upon the breast in golden thread. It fit him badly, being both too short and too loose, and was soiled and torn besides. He would bring Davos plates of meat and mash, or fish stew, and once even half a lamprey pie. The lamprey was so rich he could not keep it down, but even so, it was a rare treat for a prisoner in a dungeon.

Neither sun nor moon shone in the dungeons; no windows pierced the thick stone walls. The only way to tell day from night was by his gaolers. Neither man would speak to him, though he knew they were no mutes; sometimes he heard them exchange a few brusque words as the watch was changing. They would not even tell him their names, so he gave them names of his own. The short strong one he called Porridge, the stooped sallow one Lamprey, for the pie. He marked the passage of days by the meals they brought, and by the changing of the torches in the sconce outside his cell.

A man grows lonely in the dark, and hungers for the sound of a human voice. Davos would talk to the gaolers whenever they came to his cell, whether to bring him food or change his slops pail. He knew they would be deaf to pleas for freedom or mercy; instead he asked them questions, hoping perhaps one day one might answer. "What news of the war?" he asked, and "Is the king well?" He asked after his son Devan, and the Princess Shireen, and Salladhor Saan. "What is the weather like?" he asked, and "Have the autumn storms begun yet? Do ships still sail the narrow sea?"

It made no matter what he asked; they never answered, though sometimes Porridge gave him a look, and for half a heartbeat Davos would think that he was about to speak. With Lamprey there was not even that much. *I am not a man to him*, Davos thought, *only a stone that eats and shits and speaks*. He decided after a while that he liked Porridge much the better. Porridge at least seemed to know he was alive, and there was a queer sort of kindness to the man. Davos suspected that he fed the rats; that was why there were so many. Once he thought he heard the gaoler talking to them as if they were children, but perhaps he'd only dreamed that.

*They do not mean to let me die*, he realized. *They are keeping me alive, for some purpose of their own*. He did not like to think what that might be. Lord Sunglass had been confined in the cells beneath Dragonstone for a time, as had Ser Hubbard Rambton's sons; all of them had ended on the pyre. *I should have given myself to the sea*, Davos thought as he sat staring at the torch beyond the bars. *Or let the sail pass me by, to perish on my rock. I would sooner feed crabs than flames*.

Then one night as he was finishing his supper, Davos felt a queer flush come over him. He glanced up through the bars, and there she stood in shimmering scarlet with her great ruby at her throat, her red eyes gleaming as bright as the torch that bathed her. "Melisandre," he said, with a calm he did not feel.

"Onion Knight," she replied, just as calmly, as if the two of them had met on a stair or in the yard, and were exchanging polite greetings. "Are you well?"

"Better than I was."

"Do you lack for anything?"

"My king. My son. I lack for them." He pushed the bowl aside and stood. "Have you come to burn me?"

Her strange red eyes studied him through the bars. "This is a bad place, is it not? A dark place, and foul. The good sun does not shine here, nor the bright moon." She lifted a hand toward the torch in the wall sconce. "This is all that stands between you and the darkness, Onion Knight. This little fire, this gift of R'hllor. Shall I put it out?"

“No.” He moved toward the bars. “Please.” He did not think he could bear that, to be left alone in utter blackness with no one but the rats for company.

The red woman’s lips curved upward in a smile. “So you have come to love the fire, it would seem.”

“I need the torch.” His hands opened and closed. *I will not beg her. I will not.*

“I am like this torch, Ser Davos. We are both instruments of R’hllor. We were made for a single purpose—to keep the darkness at bay. Do you believe that?”

“No.” Perhaps he should have lied, and told her what she wanted to hear, but Davos was too accustomed to speaking truth. “You are the mother of darkness. I saw that under Storm’s End, when you gave birth before my eyes.”

“Is the brave Ser Onions so frightened of a passing shadow? Take heart, then. Shadows only live when given birth by light, and the king’s fires burn so low I dare not draw off any more to make another son. It might well kill him.” Melisandre moved closer. “With another man, though . . . a man whose flames still burn hot and high . . . if you truly wish to serve your king’s cause, come to my chamber one night. I could give you pleasure such as you have never known, and with your life-fire I could make . . .”

“. . . a horror.” Davos retreated from her. “I want no part of you, my lady. Or your god. May the Seven protect me.”

Melisandre sighed. “They did not protect Guncer Sunglass. He prayed thrice each day, and bore seven seven-pointed stars upon his shield, but when R’hllor reached out his hand his prayers turned to screams, and he burned. Why cling to these false gods?”

“I have worshiped them all my life.”

“All your life, Davos Seaworth? As well say *it was so yesterday*.” She shook her head sadly. “You have never feared to speak the truth to kings, why do you lie to yourself? Open your eyes, ser knight.”

“What is it you would have me see?”

“The way the world is made. The truth is all around you, plain to behold. The night is dark and full of terrors, the day bright and beautiful and full of hope. One is black, the other white. There is ice and there is fire. Hate and love. Bitter and sweet. Male and female. Pain and pleasure. Winter and summer. Evil and good.” She took a step toward him. “*Death and life. Everywhere, opposites. Everywhere, the war.*”

“The war?” asked Davos.

“The war,” she affirmed. “*There are two*, Onion Knight. Not seven, not one, not a hundred or a thousand. *Two!* Do you think I crossed half the world to put yet another vain king on yet another empty throne? The war has been waged since time began, and before it is done, all men must choose where they will stand. On one side is R’hllor, the Lord of Light, the Heart of Fire, the God of Flame and Shadow. Against him stands the Great Other whose name may not be spoken, the Lord of Darkness, the Soul of Ice, the God of Night and Terror. Ours is not a choice between Baratheon and Lannister, between Greyjoy and Stark. It is death we choose, or life. Darkness, or light.” She clasped the bars of his cell with her slender white hands. The great ruby at her throat seemed to pulse with its own radiance. “So tell me, Ser Davos Seaworth, and tell me truly—does your heart burn with the shining light of R’hllor? Or is it black and cold and full of worms?” She reached through the bars and laid three fingers upon his breast, as if to feel the truth of him through flesh and wool and leather.

“My heart,” Davos said slowly, “is full of doubts.”

Melisandre sighed. “Ahhhh, Davos. The good knight is honest to the last, even in his day of darkness. It is well you did not lie to me. I would have known. The Other’s servants oft hide black hearts in gaudy light, so R’hllor gives his priests the power to see through falsehoods.” She stepped lightly away from the cell. “Why did you mean to kill me?”

“I will tell you,” said Davos, “if you will tell me who betrayed me.” It could only have been Salladhor Saan, and yet even now he prayed it was not so.

The red woman laughed. “No one betrayed you, onion knight. I saw your purpose in my flames.”

*The flames.* “If you can see the future in these flames, how is it that we burned upon the Blackwater? You gave my sons to the fire . . . my sons, my ship, my men, all burning . . .”

Melisandre shook her head. “You wrong me, onion knight. Those were no fires of mine. Had I been with you, your battle would have had a different ending. But His Grace was surrounded by unbelievers, and his pride proved stronger than his faith. His punishment was grievous, but he has learned from his mistake.”

*Were my sons no more than a lesson for a king, then?* Davos felt his mouth tighten.

“It is night in your Seven Kingdoms now,” the red woman went on, “but soon the sun will rise again. The war continues, Davos Seaworth, and some will soon learn that even an ember in the ashes can still ignite a great blaze. The old maester looked at Stannis and saw only a man. You see a king. You are both wrong. He is the Lord’s chosen, the warrior of fire. I have seen him leading the fight against the dark, I have seen it in the flames. The flames do not lie, else you would not be here. It is written in prophecy as well. When the red star bleeds and the darkness gathers, Azor Ahai shall be born again amidst smoke and salt to wake dragons out of stone. The bleeding star has come and gone, and Dragonstone is the place of smoke and salt. Stannis Baratheon is Azor Ahai reborn!” Her red eyes blazed like twin fires, and seemed to stare deep into his soul. “You do not believe me. You doubt the truth of R’hllor even now . . . yet have served him all the same, and will serve him again. I shall leave you here to think on all that I have told you. And because R’hllor is the source of all good, I shall leave the torch as well.”

With a smile and swirl of scarlet skirts, she was gone. Only her scent lingered after. That, and the torch. Davos lowered himself to the floor of the cell and wrapped his arms about his knees. The shifting torchlight washed over him. Once Melisandre’s footsteps faded away, the only sound was the scrabbling of rats. *Ice and fire*, he thought. *Black and white. Dark and light.* Davos could not deny the power of her god. He had seen the shadow crawling from Melisandre’s womb, and the priestess knew things she had no way of knowing. *She saw my purpose in her flames.* It was good to learn that Salla had not sold him, but the thought of the red woman spying out his

secrets with her fires disquieted him more than he could say. *And what did she mean when she said that I had served her god and would serve him again?* He did not like that either.

He lifted his eyes to stare up at the torch. He looked for a long time, never blinking, watching the flames shift and shimmer. He tried to see beyond them, to peer through the fiery curtain and glimpse whatever lived back there . . . but there was nothing, only fire, and after a time his eyes began to water.

God-blind and tired, Davos curled up on the straw and gave himself to sleep.

Three days later—well, Porridge had come thrice, and Lamprey twice—Davos heard voices outside his cell. He sat up at once, his back to the stone wall, listening to the sounds of struggle. This was new, a change in his unchanging world. The noise was coming from the left, where the steps led up to daylight. He could hear a man's voice, pleading and shouting.

“ . . . *madness!*” the man was saying as he came into view, dragged along between two guardsmen with fiery hearts on their breasts. Porridge went before them, jangling a ring of keys, and Ser Axell Florent walked behind. “Axell,” the prisoner said desperately, “for the love you bear me, *unhand me!* You cannot do this, I'm no traitor.” He was an older man, tall and slender, with silvery grey hair, a pointed beard, and a long elegant face twisted in fear. “Where is Selyse, where is the queen? I demand to see her. The Others take you all! *Release me!*”

The guards paid no mind to his outcries. “Here?” Porridge asked in front of the cell. Davos got to his feet. For an instant he considered trying to rush them when the door was opened, but that was madness. There were too many, the guards wore swords, and Porridge was strong as a bull.

Ser Axell gave the gaoler a curt nod. “Let the traitors enjoy each other's company.”

“*I am no traitor!*” screeched the prisoner as Porridge was unlocking the door. Though he was plainly dressed, in grey wool doublet and black breeches, his speech marked him as highborn. *His birth will not serve him here,* thought Davos.

Porridge swung the bars wide, Ser Axell gave a nod, and the guards flung their charge in headlong. The man stumbled and might have fallen, but Davos caught him. At once he wrenched away and staggered back toward the door, only to have it slammed in his pale, pampered face. “No,” he shouted. “Nooooo.” All the strength suddenly left his legs, and he slid slowly to the floor, clutching at the iron bars. Ser Axell, Porridge, and the guards had already turned to leave. “You cannot do this,” the prisoner shouted at their retreating backs. “*I am the King’s Hand!*”

It was then that Davos knew him. “You are Alester Florent.”

The man turned his head. “Who . . . ?”

“Ser Davos Seaworth.”

Lord Alester blinked. “Seaworth . . . the onion knight. You tried to murder Melisandre.”

Davos did not deny it. “At Storm’s End you wore red-gold armor, with inlaid lapis flowers on your breastplate.” He reached down a hand to help the other man to his feet.

Lord Alester brushed the filthy straw from his clothing. “I . . . I must apologize for my appearance, ser. My chests were lost when the Lannisters overran our camp. I escaped with no more than the mail on my back and the rings on my fingers.”

*He still wears those rings*, noted Davos, who had lacked even all of his fingers.

“No doubt some cook’s boy or groom is prancing around King’s Landing just now in my slashed velvet doublet and jeweled cloak,” Lord Alester went on, oblivious. “But war has its horrors, as all men know. No doubt you suffered your own losses.”

“My ship,” said Davos. “All my men. Four of my sons.”

“May the . . . may the Lord of Light lead them through the darkness to a better world,” the other man said.

*May the Father judge them justly, and the Mother grant them mercy*, Davos thought, but he kept his prayer to himself. The Seven had no place on Dragonstone now.



“My own son is safe at Brightwater,” the lord went on, “but I lost a nephew on the *Fury*. Ser Imry, my brother Ryam’s son.”

It had been Ser Imry Florent who led them blindly up the Blackwater Rush with all oars pulling, paying no heed to the small stone towers at the mouth of the river. Davos was not like to forget him. “My son Maric was your nephew’s oarmaster.” He remembered his last sight of *Fury*, engulfed in wildfire. “Has there been any word of survivors?”

“The *Fury* burned and sank with all hands,” his lordship said. “Your son and my nephew were lost, with countless other good men. The war itself was lost that day, ser.”

*This man is defeated.* Davos remembered Melisandre’s talk of embers in the ashes igniting great blazes. *Small wonder he ended here.* “His Grace will never yield, my lord.”

“Folly, that’s folly.” Lord Alester sat on the floor again, as if the effort of standing for a moment had been too much for him. “Stannis Baratheon will never sit the Iron Throne. Is it treason to say the truth? A bitter truth, but no less true for that. His fleet is gone, save for the Lyseni, and Salladhor Saan will flee at the first sight of a Lannister sail. Most of the lords who supported Stannis have gone over to Joffrey or died . . .”

“Even the lords of the narrow sea? The lords sworn to Dragonstone?”

Lord Alester waved his hand feebly. “Lord Celtigar was captured and bent the knee. Monford Velaryon died with his ship, the red woman burned Sunglass, and Lord Bar Emmon is fifteen, fat, and feeble. Those are your lords of the narrow sea. Only the strength of House Florent is left to Stannis, against all the might of Highgarden, Sunspear, and Casterly Rock, and now most of the storm lords as well. The best hope that remains is to try and salvage something with a peace. That is all I meant to do. Gods be good, how can they call it *treason*?”

Davos stood frowning. “My lord, what did you do?”

“Not treason. Never treason. I love His Grace as much as any man. My own niece is his queen, and I remained loyal to him when wiser men fled. I am his *Hand*, the Hand of the King, how can I be a traitor? I only meant to save our lives, and . . . honor . . . yes.” He licked his lips. “I penned a letter. Salladhor Saan swore that he had a man who could get it to King’s Landing,

to Lord Tywin. His lordship is a . . . a man of reason, and my terms . . . the terms were fair . . . more than fair.”

“What terms were these, my lord?”

“It is filthy here,” Lord Alester said suddenly. “And that odor . . . what is that odor?”

“The pail,” said Davos, gesturing. “We have no privy here. What terms?”

His lordship stared at the pail in horror. “That Lord Stannis give up his claim to the Iron Throne and retract all he said of Joffrey’s bastardy, on the condition that he be accepted back into the king’s peace and confirmed as Lord of Dragonstone and Storm’s End. I vowed to do the same, for the return of Brightwater Keep and all our lands. I thought . . . Lord Tywin would see the sense in my proposal. He still has the Starks to deal with, and the ironmen as well. I offered to seal the bargain by wedding Shireen to Joffrey’s brother Tommen.” He shook his head. “The terms . . . they are as good as we are ever like to get. Even you can see that, surely?”

“Yes,” said Davos, “even me.” Unless Stannis should father a son, such a marriage would mean that Dragonstone and Storm’s End would one day pass to Tommen, which would doubtless please Lord Tywin. Meanwhile, the Lannisters would have Shireen as hostage to make certain Stannis raised no new rebellions. “And what did His Grace say when you proposed these terms to him?”

“He is always with the red woman, and . . . he is not in his right mind, I fear. This talk of a stone dragon . . . madness, I tell you, sheer madness. Did we learn nothing from Aerion Brightfire, from the nine mages, from the alchemists? Did we learn nothing from *Summerhall*? No good has ever come from these dreams of dragons, I told Axell as much. My way was better. Surer. And Stannis gave me his seal, he gave me leave to rule. The Hand speaks with the king’s voice.”

“Not in this.” Davos was no courtier, and he did not even try to blunt his words. “It is not in Stannis to yield, so long as he knows his claim is just. No more than he can unsay his words against Joffrey, when he believes them true. As for the marriage, Tommen was born of the same incest as Joffrey, and His Grace would sooner see Shireen dead than wed to such.”

A vein throbbed in Florent’s forehead. “*He has no choice.*”

“You are wrong, my lord. He can choose to die a king.”

“And us with him? Is that what you desire, Onion Knight?”

“No. But I am the king’s man, and I will make no peace without his leave.”

Lord Alester stared at him helplessly for a long moment, and then began to weep.