



DAVOS

For a moment it seemed as though the king had not heard. Stannis showed no pleasure at the news, no anger, no disbelief, not even relief. He stared at his Painted Table with teeth clenched hard. “You are certain?” he asked.

“I am not seeing the body, no, Your Kingliness,” said Salladhor Saan. “Yet in the city, the lions prance and dance. *The Red Wedding*, the smallfolk are calling it. They swear Lord Frey had the boy’s head hacked off, sewed the head of his direwolf in its place, and nailed a crown about his ears. His lady mother was slain as well, and thrown naked in the river.”

At a wedding, thought Davos. *As he sat at his slayer’s board, a guest beneath his roof. These Freys are cursed.* He could smell the burning blood again, and hear the leech hissing and spitting on the brazier’s hot coals.

“It was the Lord’s wrath that slew him,” Ser Axell Florent declared. “It was the hand of R’hllor!”

“*Praise the Lord of Light!*” sang out Queen Selyse, a pinched thin hard woman with large ears and a hairy upper lip.

“Is the hand of R’hllor spotted and palsied?” asked Stannis. “This sounds more Walder Frey’s handiwork than any god’s.”

“R’hllor chooses such instruments as he requires.” The ruby at Melisandre’s throat shone redly. “His ways are mysterious, but no man may withstand his fiery will.”

“No man may withstand him!” the queen cried.

“Be quiet, woman. You are not at a nightfire now.” Stannis considered the Painted Table. “The wolf leaves no heirs, the kraken too many. The lions will devour them unless . . . Saan, I will require your fastest ships to carry envoys to the Iron Islands and White Harbor. I shall offer pardons.” The way he snapped his teeth showed how little he liked that word. “Full pardons, for all those who repent of treason and swear fealty to their rightful king. They must see . . .”

“They will not.” Melisandre’s voice was soft. “I am sorry, Your Grace. This is not an end. More false kings will soon rise to take up the crowns of those who’ve died.”

“More?” Stannis looked as though he would gladly have throttled her. “More usurpers? *More* traitors?”

“I have seen it in the flames.”

Queen Selyse went to the king’s side. “The Lord of Light sent Melisandre to guide you to your glory. Heed her, I beg you. R’hllor’s holy flames do not lie.”

“There are lies and lies, woman. Even when these flames speak truly, they are full of tricks, it seems to me.”

“An ant who hears the words of a king may not comprehend what he is saying,” Melisandre said, “and all men are ants before the fiery face of god. If sometimes I have mistaken a warning for a prophecy or a prophecy for a warning, the fault lies in the reader, not the book. But this I know for a certainty—envoys and pardons will not serve you now, no more than leeches. You must show the realm a sign. A sign that proves your power!”

“*Power?*” The king snorted. “I have thirteen hundred men on Dragonstone, another three hundred at Storm’s End.” His hand swept over the Painted Table. “The rest of Westeros is in the hands of my foes. I have no fleet but Salladhor Saan’s. No coin to hire sellswords. No prospect of plunder or glory to lure freeriders to my cause.”

“Lord husband,” said Queen Selyse, “you have more men than Aegon did three hundred years ago. All you lack are dragons.”

The look Stannis gave her was dark. “Nine mages crossed the sea to hatch Aegon the Third’s cache of eggs. Baelor the Blessed prayed over his for half a year. Aegon the Fourth built dragons of wood and iron. Aerion Brightflame drank wildfire to transform himself. The mages failed, King Baelor’s prayers went unanswered, the wooden dragons burned, and Prince Aerion died screaming.”

Queen Selyse was adamant. “None of these was the chosen of R’hllor. No red comet blazed across the heavens to herald their coming. None wielded Lightbringer, the red sword of heroes. And none of them paid the price. Lady Melisandre will tell you, my lord. Only death can pay for life.”

“The boy?” The king almost spat the words.

“The boy,” agreed the queen.

“The boy,” Ser Axell echoed.

“I was sick unto death of this wretched boy before he was even born,” the king complained. “His very name is a roaring in my ears and a dark cloud upon my soul.”

“Give the boy to me and you need never hear his name spoken again,” Melisandre promised.

No, but you’ll hear him screaming when she burns him. Davos held his tongue. It was wiser not to speak until the king commanded it.

“Give me the boy for R’hllor,” the red woman said, “and the ancient prophecy shall be fulfilled. Your dragon shall awaken and spread his stony wings. The kingdom shall be yours.”

Ser Axell went to one knee. “On bended knee I beg you, sire. Wake the stone dragon and let the traitors tremble. Like Aegon you begin as Lord of Dragonstone. Like Aegon you shall conquer. Let the false and the fickle feel your flames.”

“Your own wife begs as well, lord husband.” Queen Selyse went down on both knees before the king, hands clasped as if in prayer. “Robert and Delena defiled our bed and laid a curse upon our union. This boy is the foul fruit of their fornications. Lift his shadow from my womb and I will bear you many trueborn sons, I know it.” She threw her arms around his legs. “He is only one boy, born of your brother’s lust and my cousin’s shame.”

“He is mine own blood. Stop clutching me, woman.” King Stannis put a hand on her shoulder, awkwardly untangling himself from her grasp. “Perhaps Robert did curse our marriage bed. He swore to me that he never meant to shame me, that he was drunk and never knew which bedchamber he entered that night. But does it matter? The boy was not at fault, whatever the truth.”

Melisandre put her hand on the king’s arm. “The Lord of Light cherishes the innocent. There is no sacrifice more precious. From his king’s blood and his untainted fire, a dragon shall be born.”

Stannis did not pull away from Melisandre’s touch as he had from his queen’s. The red woman was all Selyse was not; young, full-bodied, and strangely beautiful, with her heart-shaped face, coppery hair, and unearthly red eyes. “It would be a wondrous thing to see stone come to life,” he admitted, grudging. “And to mount a dragon . . . I remember the first time my father took me to court, Robert had to hold my hand. I could not have been older than four, which would have made him five or six. We agreed afterward that the king had been as noble as the dragons were fearsome.” Stannis snorted. “Years later, our father told us that Aerys had cut himself on the throne that morning, so his Hand had taken his place. It was Tywin Lannister who’d so impressed us.” His fingers touched the surface of the table, tracing a path lightly across the varnished hills. “Robert took the skulls down when he donned the crown, but he could not bear to have them destroyed. Dragon wings over Westeros . . . there would be such a . . .”

“*Your Grace!*” Davos edged forward. “Might I speak?”

Stannis closed his mouth so hard his teeth snapped. “My lord of the Rainwood. Why do you think I made you Hand, if not to speak?” The king waved a hand. “Say what you will.”

Warrior, make me brave. “I know little of dragons and less of gods . . . but the queen spoke of curses. No man is as cursed as the kinslayer, in the eyes of gods and men.”

“There are no gods save R’hllor and the Other, whose name must not be spoken.” Melisandre’s mouth made a hard red line. “And small men curse what they cannot understand.”

“I am a small man,” Davos admitted, “so tell me why you need this boy Edric Storm to wake your great stone dragon, my lady.” He was determined to say the boy’s name as often as he could.

“Only death can pay for life, my lord. A great gift requires a great sacrifice.”

“Where is the greatness in a baseborn child?”

“He has kings’ blood in his veins. You have seen what even a little of that blood could do—”

“I saw you burn some leeches.”

“And two false kings are dead.”

“Robb Stark was murdered by Lord Walder of the Crossing, and we have heard that Balon Greyjoy fell from a bridge. Who did your leeches kill?”

“Do you doubt the power of R’hllor?”

No. Davos remembered too well the living shadow that had squirmed from out her womb that night beneath Storm’s End, its black hands pressing at her thighs. *I must go carefully here, or some shadow may come seeking me as well.* “Even an onion smuggler knows two onions from three. You are short a king, my lady.”

Stannis gave a snort of laughter. “He has you there, my lady. Two is not three.”

“To be sure, Your Grace. One king might die by chance, even two . . . but three? If Joffrey should die in the midst of all his power, surrounded by his armies and his Kingsguard, would not that show the power of the Lord at work?”

“It might.” The king spoke as if he grudged each word.

“Or not.” Davos did his best to hide his fear.

“Joffrey *shall* die,” Queen Selyse declared, serene in her confidence.

“It may be that he is dead already,” Ser Axell added.

Stannis looked at them with annoyance. “Are you trained crows, to croak at me in turns? Enough.”

“Husband, hear me—” the queen entreated.

“Why? Two is not three. Kings can count as well as smugglers. You may go.” Stannis turned his back on them.

Melisandre helped the queen to her feet. Selyse swept stiffly from the chamber, the red woman trailing behind. Ser Axell lingered long enough to give Davos one last look. *An ugly look on an ugly face*, he thought as he met the stare.

After the others had gone, Davos cleared his throat. The king looked up. “Why are you still here?”

“Sire, about Edric Storm . . .”

Stannis made a sharp gesture. “Spare me.”

Davos persisted. “Your daughter takes her lessons with him, and plays with him every day in Aegon’s Garden.”

“I know that.”

“Her heart would break if anything ill should—”

“I know that as well.”

“If you would only see him—”

“I have seen him. He looks like Robert. Aye, and worships him. Shall I tell him how often his beloved father ever gave him a thought? My brother liked the making of children well enough, but after birth they were a bother.”

“He asks after you every day, he—”

“You are making me angry, Davos. I will hear no more of this bastard boy.”

“His name is Edric Storm, sire.”

“I know his name. Was there ever a name so apt? It proclaims his bastardy, his high birth, and the turmoil he brings with him. Edric Storm. There, I have said it. Are you satisfied, my lord Hand?”

“Edric—” he started.

“—is *one boy*! He may be the best boy who ever drew breath and it would not matter. My duty is to the realm.” His hand swept across the Painted Table. “How many boys dwell in Westeros? How many girls? How many men, how many women? The darkness will devour them all, she says.

The night that never ends. She talks of prophecies . . . a hero reborn in the sea, living dragons hatched from dead stone . . . she speaks of *signs* and swears they point to me. I never asked for this, no more than I asked to be king. Yet dare I disregard her?” He ground his teeth. “We do not choose our destinies. Yet we must . . . we must do our duty, no? Great or small, *we must do our duty*. Melisandre swears that she has seen me in her flames, facing the dark with Lightbringer raised on high. *Lightbringer!*” Stannis gave a derisive snort. “It glimmers prettily, I’ll grant you, but on the Blackwater this magic sword served me no better than any common steel. A dragon would have turned that battle. Aegon once stood here as I do, looking down on this table. Do you think we would name him Aegon the Conqueror today if he had not had *dragons*?”

“Your Grace,” said Davos, “the cost . . .”

“*I know the cost!* Last night, gazing into that hearth, I saw things in the flames as well. I saw a king, a crown of fire on his brows, burning . . . *burning*, Davos. His own crown consumed his flesh and turned him into ash. Do you think I need Melisandre to tell me what that means? Or *you*?” The king moved, so his shadow fell upon King’s Landing. “If Joffrey should die . . . what is the life of one bastard boy against a kingdom?”

“Everything,” said Davos, softly.

Stannis looked at him, jaw clenched. “Go,” the king said at last, “before you talk yourself back into the dungeon.”

Sometimes the storm winds blow so strong a man has no choice but to furl his sails. “Aye, Your Grace.” Davos bowed, but Stannis had seemingly forgotten him already.

It was chilly in the yard when he left the Stone Drum. A wind blew briskly from the east, making the banners snap and flap noisily along the walls. Davos could smell salt in the air. *The sea*. He loved that smell. It made him want to walk a deck again, to raise his canvas and sail off south to Marya and his two small ones. He thought of them most every day now, and even more at night. Part of him wanted nothing so much as to take Devan and go home. *I cannot. Not yet. I am a lord now, and the King’s Hand, I must not fail him.*

He raised his eyes to gaze up at the walls. In place of merlons, a thousand grotesques and gargoyles looked down on him, each different from all the others; wyverns, griffins, demons, manticores, minotaurs, basilisks, hellhounds, cockatrices, and a thousand queerer creatures sprouted from the castle's battlements as if they'd grown there. And the dragons were everywhere. The Great Hall was a dragon lying on its belly. Men entered through its open mouth. The kitchens were a dragon curled up in a ball, with the smoke and steam of the ovens vented through its nostrils. The towers were dragons hunched above the walls or poised for flight; the Windwurm seemed to scream defiance, while Sea Dragon Tower gazed serenely out across the waves. Smaller dragons framed the gates. Dragon claws emerged from walls to grasp at torches, great stone wings enfolded the smith and armory, and tails formed arches, bridges, and exterior stairs.

Davos had often heard it said that the wizards of Valyria did not cut and chisel as common masons did, but worked stone with fire and magic as a potter might work clay. But now he wondered. *What if they were real dragons, somehow turned to stone?*

"If the red woman brings them to life, the castle will come crashing down, I am thinking. What kind of dragons are full of rooms and stairs and furniture? And windows. And chimneys. And privy shafts."

Davos turned to find Salladhor Saan beside him. "Does this mean you have forgiven my treachery, Salla?"

The old pirate wagged a finger at him. "Forgiving, yes. Forgetting, no. All that good gold on Claw Isle that might have been mine, it makes me old and tired to think of it. When I die impoverished, my wives and concubines will curse you, Onion Lord. Lord Celtigar had many fine wines that now I am not tasting, a sea eagle he had trained to fly from the wrist, and a magic horn to summon krakens from the deep. Very useful such a horn would be, to pull down Tyroshi and other vexing creatures. But do I have this horn to blow? No, because the king made my old friend his Hand." He slipped his arm through Davos's and said, "The queen's men love you not, old friend. I am hearing that a certain Hand has been making friends of his own. This is true, yes?"

You hear too much, you old pirate. A smuggler had best know men as well as tides, or he would not live to smuggle long. The queen's men might remain fervent followers of the Lord of Light, but the lesser folk of Dragonstone were drifting back to the gods they'd known all their lives. They said Stannis was ensorceled, that Melisandre had turned him away from the Seven to bow before some demon out of shadow, and . . . worst sin of all . . . that she and her god had failed him. And there were knights and lordlings who felt the same. Davos had sought them out, choosing them with the same care with which he'd once picked his crews. Ser Gerald Gower fought stoutly on the Blackwater, but afterward had been heard to say that R'hllor must be a feeble god to let his followers be chased off by a dwarf and a dead man. Ser Andrew Estermont was the king's cousin, and had served as his squire years ago. The Bastard of Nightsong had commanded the rearguard that allowed Stannis to reach the safety of Salladhor Saan's galleys, but he worshiped the Warrior with a faith as fierce as he was. *King's men, not queen's men.* But it would not do to boast of them.

"A certain Lysene pirate once told me that a good smuggler stays out of sight," Davos replied carefully. "Black sails, muffled oars, and a crew that knows how to hold their tongues."

The Lyseni laughed. "A crew with no tongues is even better. Big strong mutes who cannot read or write." But then he grew more somber. "But I am glad to know that someone watches your back, old friend. Will the king give the boy to the red priestess, do you think? One little dragon could end this great big war."

Old habit made him reach for his luck, but his fingerbones no longer hung about his neck, and he found nothing. "He will not do it," said Davos. "He could not harm his own blood."

"Lord Renly will be glad to hear this."

"Renly was a traitor in arms. Edric Storm is innocent of any crime. His Grace is a just man."

Salla shrugged. "We shall be seeing. Or you shall. For myself, I am returning to sea. Even now, rascally smugglers may be sailing across the Blackwater Bay, hoping to avoid paying their lord's lawful duties." He

slapped Davos on the back. "Take care. You with your mute friends. You are grown so very great now, yet the higher a man climbs the farther he has to fall."

Davos reflected on those words as he climbed the steps of Sea Dragon Tower to the maester's chambers below the rookery. He did not need Salla to tell him that he had risen too high. *I cannot read, I cannot write, the lords despise me, I know nothing of ruling, how can I be the King's Hand? I belong on the deck of a ship, not in a castle tower.*

He had said as much to Maester Pylos. "You are a notable captain," the maester replied. "A captain rules his ship, does he not? He must navigate treacherous waters, set his sails to catch the rising wind, know when a storm is coming and how best to weather it. This is much the same."

Pylos meant it kindly, but his assurances rang hollow. "It is not at all the same!" Davos had protested. "A kingdom's not a ship . . . and a good thing, or this kingdom would be sinking. I know wood and rope and water, yes, but how will that serve me now? Where do I find the wind to blow King Stannis to his throne?"

The maester laughed at that. "And there you have it, my lord. Words are wind, you know, and you've blown mine away with your good sense. His Grace knows what he has in you, I think."

"Onions," said Davos glumly. "That is what he has in me. The King's Hand should be a highborn lord, someone wise and learned, a battle commander or a great knight . . ."

"Ser Ryam Redwyne was the greatest knight of his day, and one of the worst Hands ever to serve a king. Septon Murmison's prayers worked miracles, but as Hand he soon had the whole realm praying for his death. Lord Butterwell was renowned for wit, Myles Smallwood for courage, Ser Otto Hightower for learning, yet they failed as Hands, every one. As for birth, the dragonkings oft chose Hands from amongst their own blood, with results as various as Baelor Breakspear and Maegor the Cruel. Against this, you have Septon Barth, the blacksmith's son the Old King plucked from the Red Keep's library, who gave the realm forty years of peace and plenty." Pylos smiled. "Read your history, Lord Davos, and you will see that your doubts are groundless."

“How can I read history, when I cannot read?”

“Any man can read, my lord,” said Maester Pylos. “There is no magic needed, nor high birth. I am teaching the art to your son, at the king’s command. Let me teach you as well.”

It was a kindly offer, and not one that Davos could refuse. And so every day he repaired to the maester’s chambers high atop Sea Dragon Tower, to frown over scrolls and parchments and great leather tomes and try to puzzle out a few more words. His efforts often gave him headaches, and made him feel as big a fool as Patchface besides. His son Devan was not yet twelve, yet he was well ahead of his father, and for Princess Shireen and Edric Storm reading seemed as natural as breathing. When it came to books, Davos was more a child than any of them. Yet he persisted. He was the King’s Hand now, and a King’s Hand should read.

The narrow twisting steps of Sea Dragon Tower had been a sore trial to Maester Cressen after he broke his hip. Davos still found himself missing the old man. He thought Stannis must as well. Pylos seemed clever and diligent and well-meaning, but he was so young, and the king did not confide in him as he had in Cressen. The old man had been with Stannis so long . . . *Until he ran afoul of Melisandre, and died for it.*

At the top of the steps Davos heard a soft jingle of bells that could only herald Patchface. The princess’s fool was waiting outside the maester’s door for her like a faithful hound. Dough-soft and slump-shouldered, his broad face tattooed in a motley pattern of red and green squares, Patchface wore a helm made of a rack of deer antlers strapped to a tin bucket. A dozen bells hung from the tines and rang when he moved . . . which meant constantly, since the fool seldom stood still. He jingled and jangled his way everywhere he went; small wonder that Pylos had exiled him from Shireen’s lessons. “Under the sea the old fish eat the young fish,” the fool muttered at Davos. He bobbed his head, and his bells clanged and chimed and sang. “I know, I know, oh oh oh.”

“Up here the young fish teach the old fish,” said Davos, who never felt so ancient as when he sat down to try and read. It might have been different if aged Master Cressen had been the one teaching him, but Pylos was young enough to be his son.

He found the maester seated at his long wooden table covered with books and scrolls, across from the three children. Princess Shireen sat between the two boys. Even now Davos could take great pleasure in the sight of his own blood keeping company with a princess and a king's bastard. *Devan will be a lord now, not merely a knight. The Lord of the Rainwood.* Davos took more pride in that than in wearing the title himself. *He reads too. He reads and he writes, as if he had been born to it.* Pylos had naught but praise for his diligence, and the master-at-arms said Devan was showing promise with sword and lance as well. *And he is a godly lad, too.* "My brothers have ascended to the Hall of Light, to sit beside the Lord," Devan had said when his father told him how his four elder brothers had died. "I will pray for them at the nightfires, and for you as well, Father, so you might walk in the Light of the Lord till the end of your days."

"Good morrow to you, Father," the boy greeted him. *He looks so much like Dale did at his age,* Davos thought. His eldest had never dressed so fine as Devan in his squire's raiment, to be sure, but they shared the same square plain face, the same forthright brown eyes, the same thin brown flyaway hair. Devan's cheeks and chin were dusted with blond hair, a fuzz that would have shamed a proper peach, though the boy was fiercely proud of his "beard." *Just as Dale was proud of his, once.* Devan was the oldest of the three children at the table.

Yet Edric Storm was three inches taller and broader in the chest and shoulders. He was his father's son in that; nor did he ever miss a morning's work with sword and shield. Those old enough to have known Robert and Renly as children said that the bastard boy had more of their look than Stannis had ever shared; the coal-black hair, the deep blue eyes, the mouth, the jaw, the cheekbones. Only his ears reminded you that his mother had been a Florent.

"Yes, good morrow, my lord," Edric echoed. The boy could be fierce and proud, but the maesters and castellans and masters-at-arms who'd raised him had schooled him well in courtesy. "Do you come from my uncle? How fares His Grace?"

"Well," Davos lied. If truth be told, the king had a haggard, haunted look about him, but he saw no need to burden the boy with his fears. "I hope I have not disturbed your lesson."

“We had just finished, my lord,” Maester Pylos said.

“We were reading about King Daeron the First.” Princess Shireen was a sad, sweet, gentle child, far from pretty. Stannis had given her his square jaw and Selyse her Florent ears, and the gods in their cruel wisdom had seen fit to compound her homeliness by afflicting her with greyscale in the cradle. The disease had left one cheek and half her neck grey and cracked and hard, though it had spared both her life and her sight. “He went to war and conquered Dorne. The Young Dragon, they called him.”

“He worshiped false gods,” said Devan, “but he was a great king otherwise, and very brave in battle.”

“He was,” agreed Edric Storm, “but my father was braver. The Young Dragon never won three battles in a day.”

The princess looked at him wide-eyed. “Did Uncle Robert win three battles in a day?”

The bastard nodded. “It was when he’d first come home to call his banners. Lords Grandison, Cafferren, and Fell planned to join their strength at Summerhall and march on Storm’s End, but he learned their plans from an informer and rode at once with all his knights and squires. As the plotters came up on Summerhall one by one, he defeated each of them in turn before they could join up with the others. He slew Lord Fell in single combat and captured his son Silveraxe.”

Devan looked to Pylos. “Is that how it happened?”

“I *said* so, didn’t I?” Edric Storm said before the maester could reply. “He smashed all three of them, and fought so bravely that Lord Grandison and Lord Cafferren became his men afterward, and Silveraxe too. No one ever beat my father.”

“Edric, you ought not boast,” Maester Pylos said. “King Robert suffered defeats like any other man. Lord Tyrell bested him at Ashford, and he lost many a tourney tilt as well.”

“He won more than he lost, though. And he killed Prince Rhaegar on the Trident.”

“That he did,” the maester agreed. “But now I must give my attention to Lord Davos, who has waited so patiently. We will read more of King

Daeron's *Conquest of Dorne* on the morrow."

Princess Shireen and the boys said their farewells courteously. When they had taken their leaves, Maester Pylos moved closer to Davos. "My lord, perhaps you would like to try a bit of *Conquest of Dorne* as well?" He slid the slender leather-bound book across the table. "King Daeron wrote with an elegant simplicity, and his history is rich with blood, battle, and bravery. Your son is quite engrossed."

"My son is not quite twelve. I am the King's Hand. Give me another letter, if you would."

"As you wish, my lord." Maester Pylos rummaged about his table, unrolling and then discarding various scraps of parchment. "There are no new letters. Perhaps an old one . . ."

Davos enjoyed a good story as well as any man, but Stannis had not named him Hand for his enjoyment, he felt. His first duty was to help his king rule, and for that he must needs understand the words the ravens brought. The best way to learn a thing was to do it, he had found; sails or scrolls, it made no matter.

"This might serve our purpose." Pylos passed him a letter.

Davos flattened down the little square of crinkled parchment and squinted at the tiny crabbed letters. Reading was hard on the eyes, that much he had learned early. Sometimes he wondered if the Citadel offered a champion's purse to the maester who wrote the smallest hand. Pylos had laughed at the notion, but . . .

"To the . . . five kings," read Davos, hesitating briefly over *five*, which he did not often see written out. "The king . . . be . . . the king . . . beware?"

"*Beyond*," the maester corrected.

Davos grimaced. "The King beyond the Wall comes . . . comes *south*. He leads a . . . a . . . fast . . ."

"Vast."

". . . a *vast* host of wil . . . wild . . . wildlings. Lord M . . . Mmmor . . . Mormont sent a . . . raven from the . . . ha . . . ha . . ."

"Haunted. The *haunted forest*." Pylos underlined the words with the point of his finger.

“ . . . the haunted forest. He is . . . *under* a . . . attack?”

“Yes.”

Pleased, he plowed onward. “Oth . . . other birds have come since, with no words. We . . . fear . . . Mormont slain with all . . . with all his . . . stench . . . no, *strength*. We fear Mormont slain with all his strength . . .” Davos suddenly realized just what he was reading. He turned the letter over, and saw that the wax that had sealed it had been black. “This is from the Night’s Watch. Maester, has King Stannis seen this letter?”

“I brought it to Lord Alester when it first arrived. He was the Hand then. I believed he discussed it with the queen. When I asked him if he wished to send a reply, he told me not to be a fool. ‘His Grace lacks the men to fight his own battles, he has none to waste on wildlings,’ he said to me.”

That was true enough. And this talk of five kings would certainly have angered Stannis. “Only a starving man begs bread from a beggar,” he muttered.

“Pardon, my lord?”

“Something my wife said once.” Davos drummed his shortened fingers against the tabletop. The first time he had seen the Wall he had been younger than Devan, serving aboard the *Cobblecat* under Roro Uhoris, a Tyroshi known up and down the narrow sea as the Blind Bastard, though he was neither blind nor baseborn. Roro had sailed past Skagos into the Shivering Sea, visiting a hundred little coves that had never seen a trading ship before. He brought steel; swords, axes, helms, good chainmail hauberks, to trade for furs, ivory, amber, and obsidian. When the *Cobblecat* turned back south her holds were stuffed, but in the Bay of Seals three black galleys came out to herd her into Eastwatch. They lost their cargo and the Bastard lost his head, for the crime of trading weapons to the wildlings.

Davos had traded at Eastwatch in his smuggling days. The black brothers made hard enemies but good customers, for a ship with the right cargo. But while he might have taken their coin, he had never forgotten how the Blind Bastard’s head had rolled across the *Cobblecat*’s deck. “I met some wildlings when I was a boy,” he told Maester Pylos. “They were fair thieves but bad hagglers. One made off with our cabin girl. All in all, they seemed men like any other men, some fair, some foul.”

“Men are men,” Maester Pylos agreed. “Shall we return to our reading, my lord Hand?”

I am the Hand of the King, yes. Stannis might be the King of Westeros in name, but in truth he was the King of the Painted Table. He held Dragonstone and Storm’s End, and had an ever-more-uneasy alliance with Salladhor Saan, but that was all. How could the Watch have looked to him for help? *They may not know how weak he is, how lost his cause.* “King Stannis never saw this letter, you are quite certain? Nor Melisandre?”

“No. Should I bring it to them? Even now?”

“No,” Davos said at once. “You did your duty when you brought it to Lord Alester.” *If Melisandre knew of this letter . . .* What was it she had said? *One whose name may not be spoken is marshaling his power, Davos Seaworth. Soon comes the cold, and the night that never ends . . .* And Stannis had seen a vision in the flames, a ring of torches in the snow with terror all around.

“My lord, are you unwell?” asked Pylos.

I am frightened, Maester, he might have said. Davos was remembering a tale Salladhor Saan had told him, of how Azor Ahai tempered Lightbringer by thrusting it through the heart of the wife he loved. *He slew his wife to fight the dark. If Stannis is Azor Ahai come again, does that mean Edric Storm must play the part of Nissa Nissa?* “I was thinking, Maester. My pardons.” *What harm if some wildling king conquers the north?* It was not as though Stannis *held* the north. His Grace could scarcely be expected to defend people who refused to acknowledge him as king. “Give me another letter,” he said abruptly. “This one is too . . .”

“. . . difficult?” suggested Pylos.

Soon comes the cold, whispered Melisandre, *and the night that never ends.* “Troubling,” said Davos. “Too . . . troubling. A different letter, please.”