

# DAVOS

The *Merry Midwife* stole into White Harbor on the evening tide, her patched sail rippling with every gust of wind.

She was an old cog, and even in her youth no one had ever called her pretty. Her figurehead showed a laughing woman holding an infant by one foot, but the woman's cheeks and the babe's bottom were both pocked by wormholes. Uncounted layers of drab brown paint covered her hull; her sails were grey and tattered. She was not a ship to draw a second glance, unless it was to wonder how she stayed afloat. The *Merry Midwife* was known in White Harbor too. For years she had plied a humble trade between there and Sisterton.

It was not the sort of arrival that Davos Seaworth had anticipated when he'd set sail with Salla and his fleet. All this had seemed simpler then. The ravens had not brought King Stannis the allegiance of White Harbor, so His Grace would send an envoy to treat with Lord Manderly in person. As a show of strength, Davos would arrive aboard Salla's galleas *Valyrian*, with the rest of the Lysene fleet behind her. Every hull was striped: black and yellow, pink and blue, green and white, purple and gold. The Lyseni loved bright hues, and Salladhor Saan was the most colorful of all. *Salladhor the Splendid*, Davos thought, *but the storms wrote an end to all of that.*

Instead he would smuggle himself into the city, as he might have done twenty years before. Until he knew how matters stood here, it was more prudent to play the common sailor, not the lord.

White Harbor's walls of whitewashed stone rose before them, on the eastern shore where the White Knife plunged into the firth. Some of the city's defenses had been strengthened since the last time Davos had been here, half a dozen years before. The jetty that divided the inner and outer harbors had been fortified with a long stone wall, thirty feet tall and almost a mile long, with towers every hundred yards. There was smoke rising from Seal Rock as well, where once there had been only ruins. *That could be good or bad, depending on what side Lord Wyman chooses.*

Davos had always been fond of this city, since first he'd come here as a cabin boy on *Cobblecat*. Though small compared to Oldtown and King's Landing, it was clean and well-ordered, with wide straight cobbled streets that made it easy for a man to find his way. The houses were built of whitewashed stone, with steeply pitched roofs of dark grey slate. Roro Uhoris, the *Cobblecat*'s cranky old master, used to claim that he could tell one port from another just by the way they smelled. Cities were like women, he insisted; each one had its own unique scent. Oldtown was as flowery as a perfumed dowager. Lannisport was a milkmaid, fresh and earthy, with woodsmoke in her hair. King's Landing reeked like some unwashed whore. But White Harbor's scent was sharp and salty, and a little fishy too. "She smells the way a mermaid ought to smell," Roro said. "She smells of the sea."

*She still does*, thought Davos, but he could smell the peat smoke drifting off Seal Rock too. The sea stone dominated the approaches to the outer harbor, a massive grey-green upthrust looming fifty feet above the waters. Its top was crowned with a circle of weathered stones, a ringfort of the First Men that had stood desolate and abandoned for hundreds of years. It was not abandoned now. Davos could see scorpions and spitfires behind the standing stones, and crossbowmen peering between them. *It must be cold up there, and wet*. On all his previous visits, seals could be seen basking on the broken rocks below. The Blind Bastard always made him count them whenever the *Cobblecat* set sail from White Harbor; the more seals there were, Roro said, the more luck they would have on their voyage. There were no seals now. The smoke and the soldiers had frightened them away. *A wiser man would see a caution in that. If I had a thimble full of sense, I would have gone with Salla*. He could have made his way back south, to Marya and their sons. *I have lost four sons in the king's service, and my fifth serves as his squire. I should have the right to cherish the two boys who still remain. It has been too long since I saw them*.

At Eastwatch, the black brothers told him there was no love between the Manderlys of White Harbor and the Boltons of the Dreadfort. The Iron Throne had raised Roose Bolton up to Warden of the North, so it stood to reason that Wyman Manderly should declare for Stannis. *White Harbor*

*cannot stand alone. The city needs an ally, a protector. Lord Wyman needs King Stannis as much as Stannis needs him.* Or so it seemed at Eastwatch.

Sisterton had undermined those hopes. If Lord Borrell told it true, if the Manderlys meant to join their strength to the Boltons and the Freys ... no, he would not dwell on that. He would know the truth soon enough. He prayed he had not come too late.

*That jetty wall conceals the inner harbor,* he realized, as the *Merry Midwife* was pulling down her sail. The outer harbor was larger, but the inner harbor offered better anchorage, sheltered by the city wall on one side and the looming mass of the Wolf's Den on another, and now by the jetty wall as well. At Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, Cotter Pyke told Davos that Lord Wyman was building war galleys. There could have been a score of ships concealed behind those walls, waiting only a command to put to sea.

Behind the city's thick white walls, the New Castle rose proud and pale upon its hill. Davos could see the domed roof of the Sept of the Snows as well, surmounted by tall statues of the Seven. The Manderlys had brought the Faith north with them when they were driven from the Reach. White Harbor had its godswood too, a brooding tangle of root and branch and stone locked away behind the crumbling black walls of the Wolf's Den, an ancient fortress that served only as a prison now. But for the most part the septons ruled here.

The merman of House Manderly was everywhere in evidence, flying from the towers of the New Castle, above the Seal Gate, and along the city walls. At Eastwatch, the northmen insisted that White Harbor would never abandon its allegiance to Winterfell, but Davos saw no sign of the direwolf of Stark. *There are no lions either. Lord Wyman cannot have declared for Tommen yet, or he would have raised his standard.*

The dockside wharves were swarming. A clutter of small boats were tied up along the fish market, off-loading their catches. He saw three river runners too, long lean boats built tough to brave the swift currents and rocky shoots of the White Knife. It was the seagoing vessels that interested him most, however; a pair of carracks as drab and tattered as the *Merry Midwife*, the

trading galley *Storm Dancer*, the cogs *Brave Magister* and *Horn of Plenty*, a galleas from Braavos marked by her purple hull and sails ...

... and there beyond, the warship.

The sight of her sent a knife through his hopes. Her hull was black and gold, her figurehead a lion with an upraised paw. *Lionstar*, read the letters on her stern, beneath a fluttering banner that bore the arms of the boy king on the Iron Throne. A year ago, he would not have been able to read them, but Maester Pylos had taught him some of the letters back on Drag-onstone. For once, the reading gave him little pleasure. Davos had been praying that the galley had been lost in the same storms that had ravaged Salla's fleet, but the gods had not been so kind. The Freys were here, and he would need to face them.

The *Merry Midwife* tied up to the end of a weathered wooden pier in the outer harbor, well away from *Lionstar*. As her crew made her fast to the pilings and lowered a gangplank, her captain sauntered up to Davos. Casso Mogat was a mongrel of the narrow sea, fathered on a Sisterton whore by an Ibbenese whaler. Only five feet tall and very hirsute, he dyed his hair and whiskers a mossy green. It made him look like a tree stump in yellow boots. Despite his appearance, he seemed a good sailor, though a hard master to his crew. "How long will you be gone?"

"A day at least. It may be longer." Davos had found that lords liked to keep you waiting. They did it to make you anxious, he suspected, and to demonstrate their power.

"The *Midwife* will linger here three days. No longer. They will look for me back in Sisterton."

"If things go well, I could be back by the morrow."

"And if these things go badly?"

*I may not be back at all.* "You need not wait for me."

A pair of customs men were clambering aboard as he went down the gangplank, but neither gave him so much as a glance. They were there to see the captain and inspect the hold; common seamen did not concern them, and few men looked as common as Davos. He was of middling height, his shrewd peasant's face weathered by wind and sun, his grizzled beard and brown hair well salted with grey. His garb was plain as well: old boots, brown breeches and blue tunic, a woolen mantle of undyed wool, fastened with a wooden clasp. He wore a pair of salt-stained leather gloves to hide the stubby fingers of the hand that Stannis had shortened, so many years ago. Davos hardly looked a lord, much less a King's Hand. That was all to the good until he knew how matters stood here.

He made his way along the wharf and through the fish market. The *Brave Magister* was taking on some mead. The casks stood four high along the pier. Behind one stack he glimpsed three sailors throwing dice. Farther on the fishwives were crying the day's catch, and a boy was beating time on a drum as a shabby old bear danced in a circle for a ring of river runners. Two spearmen had been posted at the Seal Gate, with the badge of House Manderly upon their breasts, but they were too intent on flirting with a dockside whore to pay Davos any mind. The gate was open, the portcullis raised. He joined the traffic passing through.

Inside was a cobbled square with a fountain at its center. A stone merman rose from its waters, twenty feet tall from tail to crown. His curly beard was green and white with lichen, and one of the prongs of his trident had broken off before Davos had been born, yet somehow he still managed to impress. *Old Fishfoot* was what the locals called him. The square was named for some dead lord, but no one ever called it anything but Fishfoot Yard.

The Yard was teeming this afternoon. A woman was washing her small-clothes in Fishfoot's fountain and hanging them off his trident to dry. Beneath the arches of the peddler's colonnade the scribes and money changers had set up for business, along with a hedge wizard, an herb woman, and a very bad juggler. A man was selling apples from a barrow, and a woman was offering herring with chopped onions. Chickens and children were everywhere underfoot. The huge oak-and-iron doors of the Old Mint had always been closed when Davos had been in Fishfoot Yard

before, but today they stood open. Inside he glimpsed hundreds of women, children, and old men, huddled on the floor on piles of furs. Some had little cookfires going.

Davos stopped beneath the colonnade and traded a halfpenny for an apple. “Are people living in the Old Mint?” he asked the apple seller.

“Them as have no other place to live. Smallfolk from up the White Knife, most o’ them. Hornwood’s people too. With that Bastard o’ Bolton running loose, they all want to be inside the walls. I don’t know what his lordship means to do with all o’ them. Most turned up with no more’n the rags on their backs.”

Davos felt a pang of guilt. *They came here for refuge, to a city untouched by the fighting, and here I turn up to drag them back into the war.* He took a bite of the apple and felt guilty about that as well. “How do they eat?”

The apple seller shrugged. “Some beg. Some steal. Lots o’ young girls taking up the trade, the way girls always do when it’s all they got to sell. Any boy stands five feet tall can find a place in his lordship’s barracks, long as he can hold a spear.”

*He’s raising men, then.* That might be good ... or bad, depending. The apple was dry and mealy, but Davos made himself take another bite. “Does Lord Wyman mean to join the Bastard?”

“Well,” said the apple seller, “the next time his lordship comes down here hunkering for an apple, I’ll be sure and ask him.”

“I heard his daughter was to wed some Frey.”

“His granddaughter. I heard that too, but his lordship forgot t’ invite me to the wedding. Here, you going to finish that? I’ll take the rest back. Them seeds is good.”

Davos tossed him back the core. *A bad apple, but it was worth half a penny to learn that Manderly is raising men.* He made his way around Old Fishfoot, past where a young girl was selling cups of fresh milk from her

nanny goat. He was remembering more of the city now that he was here. Down past where Old Fishfoot's trident pointed was an alley where they sold fried cod, crisp and golden brown outside and flaky white within. Over there was a brothel, cleaner than most, where a sailor could enjoy a woman without fear of being robbed or killed. Off the other way, in one of those houses that clung to the walls of the Wolf's Den like barnacles to an old hull, there used to be a brewhouse where they made a black beer so thick and tasty that a cask of it could fetch as much as Arbor gold in Braavos and the Port of Ibben, provided the locals left the brewer any to sell.

It was wine he wanted, though—sour, dark, and dismal. He strolled across the yard and down a flight of steps, to a winesink called the Lazy Eel, underneath a warehouse full of sheepskins. Back in his smuggling days, the Eel had been renowned for offering the oldest whores and vilest wine in White Harbor, along with meat pies full of lard and gristle that were inedible on their best days and poisonous on their worst. With fare like that, most locals shunned the place, leaving it for sailors who did not know any better. You never saw a city guardsman down in the Lazy Eel, or a customs officer.

Some things never change. Inside the Eel, time stood still. The barrel-vaulted ceiling was stained black with soot, the floor was hard-packed earth, the air smelled of smoke and spoiled meat and stale vomit. The fat tallow candles on the tables gave off more smoke than light, and the wine that Davos ordered looked more brown than red in the gloom. Four whores were seated near the door, drinking. One gave him a hopeful smile as he entered. When Davos shook his head, the woman said something that made her companions laugh. After that none of them paid him any mind.

Aside from the whores and the proprietor, Davos had the Eel to himself. The cellar was large, full of nooks and shadowed alcoves where a man could be alone. He took his wine to one of them and sat with his back to a wall to wait.

Before long, he found himself staring at the hearth. The red woman could see the future in the fire, but all that Davos Seaworth ever saw were the shadows of the past: the burning ships, the fiery chain, the green shadows flashing across the belly of the clouds, the Red Keep brooding over all.

Davos was a simple man, raised up by chance and war and Stannis. He did not understand why the gods would take four lads as young and strong as his sons, yet spare their weary father. Some nights he thought he had been left to rescue Edric Storm ... but by now King Robert's bastard boy was safe in the Stepstones, yet Davos still remained. *Do the gods have some other task for me?* he wondered. *If so, White Harbor may be some part of it.* He tried the wine, then poured half his cup onto the floor beside his foot.

As dusk fell outside, the benches at the Eel began to fill with sailors. Davos called to the proprietor for another cup. When he brought it, he brought him a candle too. "You want food?" the man asked. "We got meat pies."

"What kind of meat is in them?"

"The usual kind. It's good."

The whores laughed. "It's grey, he means," one said. "Shut your bloody yap. You eat them."

"I eat all kinds o' shit. Don't mean I like it."

Davos blew the candle out as soon as the proprietor moved off, and sat back in the shadows. Seamen were the worst gossips in the world when the wine was flowing, even wine as cheap as this. All he need do was listen.

Most of what he heard he'd learned in Sisterton, from Lord Godric or the denizens of the Belly of the Whale. Tywin Lannister was dead, butchered by his dwarf son; his corpse had stunk so badly that no one had been able to enter the Great Sept of Baelor for days afterward; the Lady of the Eyrie had been murdered by a singer; Littlefinger ruled the Vale now, but Bronze Yohn Royce had sworn to bring him down; Balon Greyjoy had died as well, and his brothers were fighting for the Seastone Chair; Sandor Clegane had turned outlaw and was plundering and killing in the lands along the Trident; Myr and Lys and Tyrosh were embroiled in another war; a slave revolt was raging in the east.

Other tidings were of greater interest. Robett Glover was in the city and had been trying to raise men, with little success. Lord Manderly had turned a



deaf ear to his pleas. White Harbor was weary of war, he was reported to have said. That was bad. The Ryswells and the Dustins had surprised the ironmen on the Fever River and put their longships to the torch. That was worse. And now the Bastard of Bolton was riding south with Hother Umber to join them for an attack on Moat Cailin. “The Whoresbane his own self,” claimed a riverman who’d just brought a load of hides and timber down the White Knife, “with three hundred spear-men and a hundred archers. Some Hornwood men have joined them, and Cerwyns too.” That was worst of all.

“Lord Wyman best send some men to fight if he knows what’s good for him,” said the old fellow at the end of the table. “Lord Roose, he’s the Warden now. White Harbor’s honor bound to answer his summons.”

“What did any Bolton ever know o’ honor?” said the Eel’s proprietor as he filled their cups with more brown wine.

“Lord Wyman won’t go no place. He’s too bloody fat.”

“I heard how he was ailing. All he does is sleep and weep, they say. He’s too sick to get out o’ his bed most days.”

“Too *fat*, you mean.”

“Fat or thin’s got naught to do with it,” said the Eel’s proprietor. “The lions got his son.”

No one spoke of King Stannis. No one even seemed to know that His Grace had come north to help defend the Wall. Wildlings and wights and giants had been all the talk at Eastwatch, but here no one seemed to be giving them so much as a thought.

Davos leaned into the firelight. “I thought the Freys killed his son. That’s what we heard in Sisterton.”

“They killed Ser Wendel,” said the proprietor. “His bones are resting in the Snowy Sept with candles all around them, if you want to have a look. Ser Wylis, though, he’s still a captive.”

*Worse and worse.* He had known that Lord Wyman had two sons, but he'd thought that both of them were dead. *If the Iron Throne has a hostage ...* Davos had fathered seven sons himself, and lost four on the Blackwater. He knew he would do whatever gods or men required of him to protect the other three. Steffon and Stannis were thousands of leagues from the fighting and safe from harm, but Devan was at Castle Black, a squire to the king. *The king whose cause may rise or fall with White Harbor.*

His fellow drinkers were talking about dragons now. "You're bloody mad," said an oarsman off *Storm Dancer*. "The Beggar King's been dead for years. Some Dothraki horselord cut his head off."

"So they tell us," said the old fellow. "Might be they're lying, though. He died half a world away, if he died at all. Who's to say? If a king wanted me dead, might be I'd oblige him and pretend to be a corpse. None of us has ever seen his body."

"I never saw Joffrey's corpse, nor Robert's," growled the Eel's proprietor. "Maybe they're all alive as well. Maybe Baelor the Blessed's just been having him a little nap all these years."

The old fellow made a face. "Prince Viserys weren't the only dragon, were he? Are we sure they killed Prince Rhaegar's son? A babe, he was."

"Wasn't there some princess too?" asked a whore. She was the same one who'd said the meat was grey.

"Two," said the old fellow. "One was Rhaegar's daughter, t'other was his sister."

"Daena," said the riverman. "That was the sister. Daena of Dragon-stone. Or was it Daera?"

"Daena was old King Baelor's wife," said the oarsman. "I rowed on a ship named for her once. The *Princess Daena*."

"If she was a king's wife, she'd be a queen."

“Baelor never had a queen. He was holy.”

“Don’t mean he never wed his sister,” said the whore. “He just never bedded her, is all. When they made him king, he locked her up in a tower. His other sisters too. There was three.”

“Daenela,” the proprietor said loudly. “That was her name. The Mad King’s daughter, I mean, not Baelor’s bloody wife.”

“*Daenerys*,” Davos said. “She was named for the Daenerys who wed the Prince of Dorne during the reign of Daeron the Second. I don’t know what became of her.”

“I do,” said the man who’d started all the talk of dragons, a Braavosi oarsman in a somber woolen jack. “When we were down to Pentos we moored beside a trader called the *Sloe-Eyed Maid*, and I got to drinking with her captain’s steward. He told me a pretty tale about some slip of a girl who come aboard in Qarth, to try and book passage back to Westeros for her and three dragons. Silver hair she had, and purple eyes. ‘I took her to the captain my own self,’ this steward swore to me, ‘but he wasn’t having none of that. There’s more profit in cloves and saffron, he tells me, and spices won’t set fire to your sails.’ ”

Laughter swept the cellar. Davos did not join in. He knew what had befallen the *Sloe-Eyed Maid*. The gods were cruel to let a man sail across half the world, then send him chasing a false light when he was almost home. *That captain was a bolder man than me*, he thought, as he made his way to the door. One voyage to the east, and a man could live as rich as a lord until the end of his days. When he’d been younger, Davos had dreamed of making such voyages himself, but the years went dancing by like moths around a flame, and somehow the time had never been quite right. *One day*, he told himself. *One day when the war is done and King Stannis sits the Iron Throne and has no more need of onion knights. I’ll take Devan with me. Steff and Stanny too if they’re old enough. We’ll see these dragons and all the wonders of the world.*

Outside the wind was gusting, making the flames shiver in the oil lamps that lit the yard. It had grown colder since the sun went down, but Davos

remembered Eastwatch, and how the wind would come screaming off the Wall at night, knifing through even the warmest cloak to freeze a man's blood right in his veins. White Harbor was a warm bath by comparison.

There were other places he might get his ears filled: an inn famous for its lamprey pies, the alehouse where the wool factors and the customs men did their drinking, a mummer's hall where bawdy entertainments could be had for a few pennies. But Davos felt that he had heard enough. *I've come too late.* Old instinct made him reach for his chest, where once he'd kept his fingerbones in a little sack on a leather thong. There was nothing there. He had lost his luck in the fires of the Blackwater, when he'd lost his ship and sons.

*What must I do now?* He pulled his mantle tighter. *Do I climb the hill and present myself at the gates of the New Castle, to make a futile plea? Return to Sisterton? Make my way back to Marya and my boys? Buy a horse and ride the kingsroad, to tell Stannis that he has no friends in White Harbor, and no hope?*

Queen Selyse had feasted Salla and his captains, the night before the fleet had set sail. Cotter Pyke had joined them, and four other high officers of the Night's Watch. Princess Shireen had been allowed to attend as well. As the salmon was being served, Ser Axell Florent had entertained the table with the tale of a Targaryen princeling who kept an ape as a pet. This prince liked to dress the creature in his dead son's clothes and pretend he was a child, Ser Axell claimed, and from time to time he would propose marriages for him. The lords so honored always declined politely, but of course they did decline. "Even dressed in silk and velvet, an ape remains an ape," Ser Axell said. "A wiser prince would have known that you cannot send an ape to do a man's work." The queen's men laughed, and several grinned at Davos. *I am no ape*, he'd thought. *I am as much a lord as you, and a better man.* But the memory still stung.

The Seal Gate had been closed for the night. Davos would not be able to return to the *Merry Midwife* till dawn. He was here for the night. He gazed up at Old Fishfoot with his broken trident. *I have come through rain and wrack and storm. I will not go back without doing what I came for, no*

*matter how hopeless it may seem.* He might have lost his fingers and his luck, but he was no ape in velvet. He was a King's Hand.

Castle Stair was a street with steps, a broad white stone way that led up from the Wolf's Den by the water to the New Castle on its hill. Marble mermaids lit the way as Davos climbed, bowls of burning whale oil cradled in their arms. When he reached the top, he turned to look behind him. From here he could see down into the harbors. Both of them. Behind the jetty wall, the inner harbor was crowded with war galleys. Davos counted twenty-three. Lord Wyman was a fat man, but not an idle one, it seemed.

The gates of the New Castle had been closed, but a postern opened when he shouted, and a guard emerged to ask his business. Davos showed him the black and gold ribbon that bore the royal seals. "I need to see Lord Manderly at once," he said. "My business is with him, and him alone."