

DAVOS

Blackwater Bay was rough and choppy, whitecaps everywhere. *Black Betha* rode the flood tide, her sail cracking and snapping at each shift of wind. *Wraith* and *Lady Marya* sailed beside her, no more than twenty yards between their hulls. His sons could keep a line. Davos took pride in that.

Across the sea warhorns boomed, deep throaty moans like the calls of monstrous serpents, repeated ship to ship. “Bring down the sail,” Davos commanded. “Lower mast. Oarsmen to your oars.” His son Matthos relayed the commands. The deck of *Black Betha* churned as crewmen ran to their tasks, pushing through the soldiers who always seemed to be in the way no matter where they stood. Ser Imry had decreed that they would enter the river on oars alone, so as not to expose their sails to the scorpions and spitfires on the walls of King’s Landing.

Davos could make out *Fury* well to the southeast, her sails shimmering golden as they came down, the crowned stag of Baratheon blazoned on the canvas. From her decks Stannis Baratheon had commanded the assault on Dragonstone sixteen years before, but this time he had chosen to ride with his army, trusting *Fury* and the command of his fleet to his wife’s brother Ser Imry, who’d come over to his cause at Storm’s End with Lord Alester and all the other Florents.

Davos knew *Fury* as well as he knew his own ships. Above her three hundred oars was a deck given over wholly to scorpions, and topside she mounted catapults fore and aft, large enough to fling barrels of burning pitch. A most formidable ship, and very swift as well, although Ser Imry had packed her bow to stern with armored knights and men-at-arms, at some cost to her speed.

The warhorns sounded again, commands drifting back from the *Fury*. Davos felt a tingle in his missing fingertips. “Out oars,” he shouted. “Form line.” A hundred blades dipped down into the water as the oarmaster’s drum began to boom. The sound was like the beating of a great slow heart, and the oars moved at every stroke, a hundred men pulling as one.

Wooden wings had sprouted from the *Wraith* and *Lady Marya* as well. The three galleys kept pace, their blades churning the water. “Slow cruise,” Davos called. Lord Velaryon’s silver-hulled *Pride of Driftmark* had moved into her position to port of *Wraith*, and *Bold Laughter* was coming up fast, but *Harridan* was only now getting her oars into the water and *Seahorse* was still struggling to bring down her mast. Davos looked astern. Yes, there, far to the south, that could only be *Swordfish*, lagging as ever. She dipped two hundred oars and mounted the largest ram in the fleet, though Davos had grave doubts about her captain.

He could hear soldiers shouting encouragement to each other across the water. They’d been little more than ballast since Storm’s End, and were eager to get at the foe, confident of victory. In that, they were of one mind with their admiral, Lord High Captain Ser Imry Florent.

Three days past, he had summoned all his captains to a war council aboard the *Fury* while the fleet lay anchored at the mouth of the Wendwater, in order to acquaint them with his dispositions. Davos and his sons had been assigned a place in the second line of battle, well out on the dangerous starboard wing. “A place of honor,” Allard had declared, well satisfied with the chance to prove his valor. “A place of peril,” his father had pointed out. His sons had given him pitying looks, even young Maric. *The Onion Knight has become an old woman*, he could hear them thinking, *still a smuggler at heart*.

Well, the last was true enough, he would make no apologies for it. *Seaworth* had a lordly ring to it, but down deep he was still Davos of Flea Bottom, coming home to his city on its three high hills. He knew as much of ships and sails and shores as any man in the Seven Kingdoms, and had fought his share of desperate fights sword to sword on a wet deck. But to this sort of battle he came a maiden, nervous and afraid. Smugglers do not sound warhorns and raise banners. When they smell danger, they raise sail and run before the wind.

Had he been admiral, he might have done it all differently. For a start, he would have sent a few of his swiftest ships to probe upriver and see what awaited them, instead of smashing in headlong. When he had suggested as

much to Ser Imry, the Lord High Captain had thanked him courteously, but his eyes were not as polite. *Who is this lowborn craven?* those eyes asked. *Is he the one who bought his knighthood with an onion?*

With four times as many ships as the boy king, Ser Imry saw no need for caution or deceptive tactics. He had organized the fleet into ten lines of battle, each of twenty ships. The first two lines would sweep up the river to engage and destroy Joffrey's little fleet, or "the boy's toys" as Ser Imry dubbed them, to the mirth of his lordly captains. Those that followed would land companies of archers and spearmen beneath the city walls, and only then join the fight on the river. The smaller, slower ships to the rear would ferry over the main part of Stannis's host from the south bank, protected by Salladhor Saan and his Lyseni, who would stand out in the bay in case the Lannisters had other ships hidden up along the coast, poised to sweep down on their rear.

To be fair, there was reason for Ser Imry's haste. The winds had not used them kindly on the voyage up from Storm's End. They had lost two cogs to the rocks of Shipbreaker Bay on the very day they set sail, a poor way to begin. One of the Myrish galleys had foundered in the Straits of Tarth, and a storm had overtaken them as they were entering the Gullet, scattering the fleet across half the narrow sea. All but twelve ships had finally regrouped behind the sheltering spine of Massey's Hook, in the calmer waters of Blackwater Bay, but not before they had lost considerable time.

Stannis would have reached the Rush days ago. The kingsroad ran from Storm's End straight to King's Landing, a much shorter route than by sea, and his host was largely mounted; near twenty thousand knights, light horse, and freeriders, Renly's unwilling legacy to his brother. They would have made good time, but armored destriers and twelve-foot lances would avail them little against the deep waters of the Blackwater Rush and the high stone walls of the city. Stannis would be camped with his lords on the south bank of the river, doubtless seething with impatience and wondering what Ser Imry had done with his fleet.

Off Merling Rock two days before, they had sighted a half-dozen fishing skiffs. The fisherfolk had fled before them, but one by one they had been overtaken and boarded. “A small spoon of victory is just the thing to settle the stomach before battle,” Ser Imry had declared happily. “It makes the men hungry for a larger helping.” But Davos had been more interested in what the captives had to say about the defenses at King’s Landing. The dwarf had been busy building some sort of boom to close off the mouth of the river, though the fishermen differed as to whether the work had been completed or not. He found himself wishing it had. If the river was closed to them, Ser Imry would have no choice but to pause and take stock.

The sea was full of sound: shouts and calls, warhorns and drums and the trill of pipes, the slap of wood on water as thousands of oars rose and fell. “*Keep line,*” Davos shouted. A gust of wind tugged at his old green cloak. A jerkin of boiled leather and a pothelm at his feet were his only armor. At sea, heavy steel was as like to cost a man his life as to save it, he believed. Ser Imry and the other highborn captains did not share his view; they glittered as they paced their decks.

Harridan and *Seahorse* had slipped into their places now, and Lord Celtigar’s *Red Claw* beyond them. To starboard of Allard’s *Lady Marya* were the three galleys that Stannis had seized from the unfortunate Lord Sunglass, *Piety*, *Prayer*, and *Devotion*, their decks crawling with archers. Even *Swordfish* was closing, lumbering and rolling through a thickening sea under both oars and sail. *A ship of that many oars ought to be much faster*, Davos reflected with disapproval. *It’s that ram she carries, it’s too big, she has no balance.*

The wind was gusting from the south, but under oars it made no matter. They would be sweeping in on the flood tide, but the Lannisters would have the river current to their favor, and the Blackwater Rush flowed strong and swift where it met the sea. The first shock would inevitably favor the foe. *We are fools to meet them on the Blackwater*, Davos thought. In any encounter on the open sea, their battle lines would envelop the enemy fleet on both flanks, driving them inward to destruction. On the river, though, the numbers and weight of Ser Imry’s ships would count for less. They could

Swordfish had joined the line at last, though she still had her sail raised. “Fast cruise,” Davos barked. The drum began to beat more quickly, and the stroke picked up, the blades of the oars cutting water, *splash-swoosh, splash-swoosh, splash-swoosh*. On deck, soldiers banged sword against shield, while archers quietly strung their bows and pulled the first arrow from the quivers at their belts. The galleys of the first line of battle obscured his vision, so Davos paced the deck searching for a better view. He saw no sign of any boom; the mouth of the river was open, as if to swallow them all. Except...

In his smuggling days, Davos had often jested that he knew the waterfront at King’s Landing a deal better than the back of his hand, since he had not spent a good part of his life sneaking in and out of the back of his hand. The squat towers of raw new stone that stood opposite one another at the mouth of the Blackwater might mean nothing to Ser Imry Florent, but to him it was as if two extra fingers had sprouted from his knuckles.

Shading his eyes against the westering sun, he peered at those towers more closely. They were too small to hold much of a garrison. The one on the north bank was built against the bluff with the Red Keep frowning above; its counterpart on the south shore had its footing in the water. *They dug a cut through the bank*, he knew at once. That would make the tower very difficult to assault; attackers would need to wade through the water or bridge the little channel. Stannis had posted bowmen below, to fire up at the defenders whenever one was rash enough to lift his head above the ramparts, but otherwise had not troubled.

Something flashed down low where the dark water swirled around the base of the tower. It was sunlight on steel, and it told Davos Seaworth all he needed to know. *A chain boom... and yet they have not closed the river against us. Why?*

He could make a guess at that as well, but there was no time to consider the question. A shout went up from the ships ahead, and the warhorns blew again: the enemy was before them.

Between the flashing oars of *Sceptre* and *Faithful*, Davos saw a thin line of galleys drawn across the river, the sun glinting off the gold paint that marked their hulls. He knew those ships as well as he knew his own. When he had been a smuggler, he'd always felt safer knowing whether the sail on the horizon marked a fast ship or a slow one, and whether her captain was a young man hungry for glory or an old one serving out his days.

Ahoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo, the warhorns called. "Battle speed," Davos shouted. On port and starboard he heard Dale and Allard giving the same command. Drums began to beat furiously, oars rose and fell, and *Black Betha* surged forward. When he glanced toward *Wraith*, Dale gave him a salute. *Swordfish* was lagging once more, wallowing in the wake of the smaller ships to either side; otherwise the line was straight as a shield wall.

The river that had seemed so narrow from a distance now stretched wide as a sea, but the city had grown gigantic as well. Glowering down from Aegon's High Hill, the Red Keep commanded the approaches. Its iron-crowned battlements, massive towers, and thick red walls gave it the aspect of a ferocious beast hunched above river and streets. The bluffs on which it crouched were steep and rocky, spotted with lichen and gnarled thorny trees. The fleet would have to pass below the castle to reach the harbor and city beyond.

The first line was in the river now, but the enemy galleys were backing water. *They mean to draw us in. They want us jammed close, constricted, no way to sweep around their flanks... and with that boom behind us.* He paced his deck, craning his neck for a better look at Joffrey's fleet. The boy's toys included the ponderous *Godsgrace*, he saw, the old slow *Prince Aemon*, the *Lady of Silk* and her sister *Lady's Shame*, *Wildwind*, *Kingslander*, *White Hart*, *Lance*, *Seaflower*. But where was the *Lionstar*? Where was the beautiful *Lady Lyanna* that King Robert had named in honor of the maid he'd loved and lost? And where was *King Robert's Hammer*? She was the largest war galley in the royal fleet, four hundred oars, the only warship the boy king owned capable of overmatching *Fury*. By rights she should have formed the heart of any defense.

Davos tasted a trap, yet he saw no sign of any foes sweeping in behind them, only the great fleet of Stannis Baratheon in their ordered ranks, stretching back to the watery horizon. *Will they raise the chain and cut us in two?* He could not see what good that would serve. The ships left out in the bay could still land men north of the city; a slower crossing, but safer.

A flight of flickering orange birds took wing from the castle, twenty or thirty of them; pots of burning pitch, arcing out over the river trailing threads of flame. The waters ate most, but a few found the decks of galleys in the first line of battle, spreading flame when they shattered. Men-at-arms were scrambling on *Queen Alysanne's* deck, and he could see smoke rising from three different spots on *Dragonsbane*, nearest the bank. By then a second flight was on its way, and arrows were falling as well, hissing down from the archers' nests that studded the towers above. A soldier tumbled over *Cat's* gunwale, crashed off the oars, and sank. *The first man to die today*, Davos thought, *but he will not be the last.*

Atop the Red Keep's battlements streamed the boy king's banners: the crowned stag of Baratheon on its gold field, the lion of Lannister on crimson. More pots of pitch came flying. Davos heard men shriek as fire spread across *Courageous*. Her oarsmen were safe below, protected from missiles by the half deck that sheltered them, but the men-at-arms crowded topside were not so fortunate. The starboard wing was taking all the damage, as he had feared. *It will be our turn soon*, he reminded himself, uneasy. *Black Betha* was well in range of the firepots, being the sixth ship out from the north bank. To starboard, she had only Allard's *Lady Marya*, the ungainly *Swordfish*—so far behind now that she was nearer the third line than the second—and *Piety, Prayer, and Devotion*, who would need all the godly intervention they could get, placed as vulnerably as they were.

As the second line swept past the twin towers, Davos took a closer look. He could see three links of a huge chain snaking out from a hole no bigger than a man's head and disappearing under the water. The towers had a single door, set a good twenty feet off the ground. Bowmen on the roof of the northern tower were firing down at *Prayer* and *Devotion*. The archers

on *Devotion* fired back, and Davos heard a man scream as the arrows found him.

“Captain ser.” His son Matthos was at his elbow. “Your helm.” Davos took it with both hands and slid it over his head. The pothelm was visorless; he hated having his vision impeded.

By then the pitch pots were raining down around them. He saw one shatter on the deck of *Lady Marya*, but Allard’s crew quickly beat it out. To port, warhorns sounded from the *Pride of Driftmark*. The oars flung up sprays of water with every stroke. The yard-long shaft of a scorpion came down not two feet from Matthos and sank into the wood of the deck, thrumming. Ahead, the first line was within bowshot of the enemy; flights of arrows flew between the ships, hissing like striking snakes.

South of the Blackwater, Davos saw men dragging crude rafts toward the water while ranks and columns formed up beneath a thousand streaming banners. The fiery heart was everywhere, though the tiny black stag imprisoned in the flames was too small to make out. *We should be flying the crowned stag*, he thought. *The stag was King Robert’s sigil, the city would rejoice to see it. This stranger’s standard serves only to set men against us.*

He could not behold the fiery heart without thinking of the shadow Melisandre had birthed in the gloom beneath Storm’s End. *At least we fight this battle in the light, with the weapons of honest men*, he told himself. The red woman and her dark children would have no part of it. Stannis had shipped her back to Dragonstone with his bastard nephew Edric Storm. His captains and bannermen had insisted that a battlefield was no place for a woman. Only the queen’s men had dissented, and then not loudly. All the same, the king had been on the point of refusing them until Lord Bryce Caron said, “Your Grace, if the sorceress is with us, afterward men will say it was her victory, not yours. They will say you owe your crown to her spells.” That had turned the tide. Davos himself had held his tongue during the arguments, but if truth be told, he had not been sad to see the back of her. He wanted no part of Melisandre or her god.

To starboard, *Devotion* drove toward shore, sliding out a plank. Archers scrambled into the shallows, holding their bows high over their heads to

keep the strings dry. They splashed ashore on the narrow strand beneath the bluffs. Rocks came bouncing down from the castle to crash among them, and arrows and spears as well, but the angle was steep and the missiles seemed to do little damage.

Prayer landed two dozen yards upstream and *Piety* was slanting toward the bank when the defenders came pounding down the riverside, the hooves of their warhorses sending up gouts of water from the shallows. The knights fell among the archers like wolves among chickens, driving them back toward the ships and into the river before most could notch an arrow. Men-at-arms rushed to defend them with spear and axe, and in three heartbeats the scene had turned to blood-soaked chaos. Davos recognized the dog's-head helm of the Hound. A white cloak streamed from his shoulders as he rode his horse up the plank onto the deck of *Prayer*, hacking down anyone who blundered within reach.

Beyond the castle, King's Landing rose on its hills behind the encircling walls. The riverfront was a blackened desolation; the Lannisters had burned everything and pulled back within the Mud Gate. The charred spars of sunken hulks sat in the shallows, forbidding access to the long stone quays. *We shall have no landing there.* He could see the tops of three huge trebuchets behind the Mud Gate. High on Visenya's Hill, sunlight blazed off the seven crystal towers of the Great Sept of Baelor.

Davos never saw the battle joined, but he heard it; a great rending crash as two galleys came together. He could not say which two. Another impact echoed over the water an instant later, and then a third. Beneath the screech of splintering wood, he heard the deep *thrum-thump* of the *Fury*'s fore catapult. *Stag of the Sea* split one of Joffrey's galleys clean in two, but *Dog's Nose* was afire and *Queen Alysanne* was locked between *Lady of Silk* and *Lady's Shame*, her crew fighting the boarders rail-to-rail.

Directly ahead, Davos saw the enemy's *Kingslander* drive between *Faithful* and *Sceptre*. The former slid her starboard oars out of the way before impact, but *Sceptre*'s portside oars snapped like so much kindling as *Kingslander* raked along her side. "Loose," Davos commanded, and his

bowmen sent a withering rain of shafts across the water. He saw *Kingslander's* captain fall, and tried to recall the man's name.

Ashore, the arms of the great trebuchets rose one, two, three, and a hundred stones climbed high into the yellow sky. Each one was as large as a man's head; when they fell they sent up great gouts of water, smashed through oak planking, and turned living men into bone and pulp and gristle. All across the river the first line was engaged. Grappling hooks were flung out, iron rams crashed through wooden hulls, boarders swarmed, flights of arrows whispered through each other in the drifting smoke, and men died... but so far, none of his.

Black Betha swept upriver, the sound of her oarmaster's drum thundering in her captain's head as he looked for a likely victim for her ram. The beleaguered *Queen Alysanne* was trapped between two Lannister warships, the three made fast by hooks and lines.

"*Ramming speed!*" Davos shouted.

The drumbeats blurred into a long fevered hammering, and *Black Betha* flew, the water turning white as milk as it parted for her prow. Allard had seen the same chance; *Lady Marya* ran beside them. The first line had been transformed into a confusion of separate struggles. The three tangled ships loomed ahead, turning, their decks a red chaos as men hacked at each other with sword and axe. *A little more*, Davos Seaworth beseeched the Warrior, *bring her around a little more, show me her broadside.*

The Warrior must have been listening. *Black Betha* and *Lady Marya* slammed into the side of *Lady's Shame* within an instant of each other, ramming her fore and aft with such force that men were thrown off the deck of *Lady of Silk* three boats away. Davos almost bit his tongue off when his teeth jarred together. He spat out blood. *Next time close your mouth, you fool.* Forty years at sea, and yet this was the first time he'd rammed another ship. His archers were loosing arrows at will.

"Back water," he commanded. When *Black Betha* reversed her oars, the river rushed into the splintered hole she left, and *Lady's Shame* fell to pieces before his eyes, spilling dozens of men into the river. Some of the living swam; some of the dead floated; the ones in heavy mail and plate sank to

the bottom, the quick and the dead alike. The pleas of drowning men echoed in his ears.

A flash of green caught his eye, ahead and off to port, and a nest of writhing emerald serpents rose burning and hissing from the stern of *Queen Alysanne*. An instant later Davos heard the dread cry of “*Wildfire!*”

He grimaced. Burning pitch was one thing, wildfire quite another. Evil stuff, and well-nigh unquenchable. Smother it under a cloak and the cloak took fire; slap at a fleck of it with your palm and your hand was aflame. “Piss on wildfire and your cock burns off,” old seamen liked to say. Still, Ser Imry had warned them to expect a taste of the alchemists’ vile *substance*. Fortunately, there were few true pyromancers left. *They will soon run out*, Ser Imry had assured them.

Davos reeled off commands; one bank of oars pushed off while the other backed water, and the galley came about. *Lady Marya* had won clear too, and a good thing; the fire was spreading over *Queen Alysanne* and her foes faster than he would have believed possible. Men wreathed in green flame leapt into the water, shrieking like nothing human. On the walls of King’s Landing, spitfires were belching death, and the great trebuchets behind the Mud Gate were throwing boulders. One the size of an ox crashed down between *Black Betha* and *Wraith*, rocking both ships and soaking every man on deck. Another, not much smaller, found *Bold Laughter*. The Velaryon galley exploded like a child’s toy dropped from a tower, spraying splinters as long as a man’s arm.

Through black smoke and swirling green fire, Davos glimpsed a swarm of small boats bearing downriver: a confusion of ferries and wherries, barges, skiffs, rowboats, and hulks that looked too rotten to float. It stank of desperation; such driftwood could not turn the tide of a fight, only get in the way. The lines of battle were hopelessly ensnarled, he saw. Off to port, *Lord Steffon*, *Ragged Jenna*, and *Swift Sword* had broken through and were sweeping upriver. The starboard wing was heavily engaged, however, and the center had shattered under the stones of those trebuchets, some captains turning downstream, others veering to port, anything to escape that crushing rain. *Fury* had swung her aft catapult to fire back at the city, but she lacked

the range; the barrels of pitch were shattering under the walls. *Sceptre* had lost most of her oars, and *Faithful* had been rammed and was starting to list. He took *Black Betha* between them, and struck a glancing blow at Queen Cersei's ornate carved-and-gilded pleasure barge, laden with soldiers instead of sweetmeats now. The collision spilled a dozen of them into the river, where *Betha's* archers picked them off as they tried to stay afloat.

Matthos's shout alerted him to the danger from port; one of the Lannister galleys was coming about to ram. "Hard to starboard," Davos shouted. His men used their oars to push free of the barge, while others turned the galley so her prow faced the onrushing *White Hart*. For a moment he feared he'd been too slow, that he was about to be sunk, but the current helped swing *Black Betha*, and when the impact came it was only a glancing blow, the two hulls scraping against each other, both ships snapping oars. A jagged piece of wood flew past his head, sharp as any spear. Davos flinched. "Board her!" he shouted. Grappling lines were flung. He drew his sword and led them over the rail himself.

The crew of the *White Hart* met them at the rail, but *Black Betha's* men-at-arms swept over them in a screaming steel tide. Davos fought through the press, looking for the other captain, but the man was dead before he reached him. As he stood over the body, someone caught him from behind with an axe, but his helm turned the blow, and his skull was left ringing when it might have been split. Dazed, it was all he could do to roll. His attacker charged screaming. Davos grasped his sword in both hands and drove it up point first into the man's belly.

One of his crewmen pulled him back to his feet. "Captain ser, the *Hart* is ours." It was true, Davos saw. Most of the enemy were dead, dying, or yielded. He took off his helm, wiped blood from his face, and made his way back to his own ship, trodding carefully on boards slimy with men's guts. Matthos lent him a hand to help him back over the rail.

For those few instants, *Black Betha* and *White Hart* were the calm eye in the midst of the storm. *Queen Alysanne* and *Lady of Silk*, still locked together, were a ranging green inferno, drifting downriver and dragging pieces of *Lady's Shame*. One of the Myrish galleys had slammed into them

and was now afire as well. *Cat* was taking on men from the fast-sinking *Courageous*. The captain of *Dragonsbane* had driven her between two quays, ripping out her bottom; her crew poured ashore with the archers and men-at-arms to join the assault on the walls. *Red Raven*, rammed, was slowly listing. *Stag of the Sea* was fighting fires and boarders both, but the fiery heart had been raised over Joffrey's *Loyal Man*. *Fury*, her proud bow smashed in by a boulder, was engaged with *Godsgrace*. He saw Lord Velaryon's *Pride of Driftmark* crash between two Lannister river runners, overturning one and lighting the other up with fire arrows. On the south bank, knights were leading their mounts aboard the cogs, and some of the smaller galleys were already making their way across, laden with men-at-arms. They had to thread cautiously between sinking ships and patches of drifting wildfire. The whole of King Stannis's fleet was in the river now, save for Salladhor Saan's *Lyseni*. Soon enough they would control the Blackwater. *Ser Imry will have his victory, Davos thought, and Stannis will bring his host across, but gods be good, the cost of this...*

"Captain ser!" Matthos touched his shoulder.

It was *Swordfish*, her two banks of oars lifting and falling. She had never brought down her sails, and some burning pitch had caught in her rigging. The flames spread as Davos watched, creeping out over ropes and sails until she trailed a head of yellow flame. Her ungainly iron ram, fashioned after the likeness of the fish from which she took her name, parted the surface of the river before her. Directly ahead, drifting toward her and swinging around to present a tempting plump target, was one of the Lannister hulks, floating low in the water. Slow green blood was leaking out between her boards.

When he saw that, Davos Seaworth's heart stopped beating.

"No," he said. "No, *NOOOOOOOOO!*" Above the roar and crash of battle, no one heard him but Matthos. Certainly the captain of the *Swordfish* did not, intent as he was on finally spearing something with his ungainly fat sword. The *Swordfish* went to battle speed. Davos lifted his maimed hand to clutch at the leather pouch that held his fingerbones.

With a grinding, splintering, tearing crash, *Swordfish* split the rotted hulk asunder. She burst like an overripe fruit, but no fruit had ever screamed that shattering wooden scream. From inside her Davos saw green gushing from a thousand broken jars, poison from the entrails of a dying beast, glistening, shining, spreading across the surface of the river...

“Back water,” he roared. “Away. Get us off her, back water, back water!” The grappling lines were cut, and Davos felt the deck move under his feet as *Black Betha* pushed free of *White Hart*. Her oars slid down into the water.

Then he heard a short sharp *woof*, as if someone had blown in his ear. Half a heartbeat later came the roar. The deck vanished beneath him, and black water smashed him across the face, filling his nose and mouth. He was choking, drowning. Unsure which way was up, Davos wrestled the river in blind panic until suddenly he broke the surface. He spat out water, sucked in air, grabbed hold of the nearest chunk of debris, and held on.

Swordfish and the hulk were gone, blackened bodies were floating downstream beside him, and choking men clinging to bits of smoking wood. Fifty feet high, a swirling demon of green flame danced upon the river. It had a dozen hands, in each a whip, and whatever they touched burst into fire. He saw *Black Betha* burning, and *White Hart* and *Loyal Man* to either side. *Piety*, *Cat*, *Courageous*, *Sceptre*, *Red Raven*, *Harrihan*, *Faithful*, *Fury*, they had all gone up, *Kingslander* and *Godsgrace* as well, the demon was eating his own. Lord Velaryon’s shining *Pride of Driftmark* was trying to turn, but the demon ran a lazy green finger across her silvery oars and they flared up like so many tapers. For an instant she seemed to be stroking the river with two banks of long bright torches.

The current had him in its teeth by then, spinning him around and around. He kicked to avoid a floating patch of wildfire. *My sons*, Davos thought, but there was no way to look for them amidst the roaring chaos. Another hulk heavy with wildfire went up behind him. The Blackwater itself seemed to boil in its bed, and burning spars and burning men and pieces of broken ships filled the air.

I'm being swept out into the bay. It wouldn't be as bad there; he ought to be able to make shore, he was a strong swimmer. Salladhor Saan's galleys would be out in the bay as well, Ser Imry had commanded them to stand off...

And then the current turned him about again, and Davos saw what awaited him downstream.

The chain. Gods save us, they've raised the chain.

Where the river broadened out into Blackwater Bay, the boom stretched taut, a bare two or three feet above the water. Already a dozen galleys had crashed into it, and the current was pushing others against them. Almost all were aflame, and the rest soon would be. Davos could make out the striped hulls of Salladhor Saan's ships beyond, but he knew he would never reach them. A wall of red-hot steel, blazing wood, and swirling green flame stretched before him. The mouth of the Blackwater Rush had turned into the mouth of hell.