



DAVOS

He watched the sail grow for a long time, trying to decide whether he would sooner live or die.

Dying would be easier, he knew. All he had to do was crawl inside his cave and let the ship pass by, and death would find him. For days now the fever had been burning through him, turning his bowels to brown water and making him shiver in his restless sleep. Each morning found him weaker. *It will not be much longer*, he had taken to telling himself.

If the fever did not kill him, thirst surely would. He had no fresh water here, but for the occasional rainfall that pooled in hollows on the rock. Only three days past (or had it been four? On his rock, it was hard to tell the days apart) his pools had been dry as old bone, and the sight of the bay rippling green and grey all around him had been almost more than he could bear. Once he began to drink seawater the end would come swiftly, he knew, but all the same he had almost taken that first swallow, so parched was his throat. A sudden squall had saved him. He had grown so feeble by then that it was all he could do to lie in the rain with his eyes closed and his mouth open, and let the water splash down on his cracked lips and swollen tongue. But afterward he felt a little stronger, and the island's pools and cracks and crevices once more had brimmed with life.

But that had been three days ago (or maybe four), and most of the water was gone now. Some had evaporated, and he had sucked up the rest. By the

morrow he would be tasting the mud again, and licking the damp cold stones at the bottom of the depressions.

And if not thirst or fever, starvation would kill him. His island was no more than a barren spire jutting up out of the immensity of Blackwater Bay. When the tide was low, he could sometimes find tiny crabs along the stony strand where he had washed ashore after the battle. They nipped his fingers painfully before he smashed them apart on the rocks to suck the meat from their claws and the guts from their shells.

But the strand vanished whenever the tide came rushing in, and Davos had to scramble up the rock to keep from being swept out into the bay once more. The point of the spire was fifteen feet above the water at high tide, but when the bay grew rough the spray went even higher, so there was no way to keep dry, even in his cave (which was really no more than a hollow in the rock beneath an overhang). Nothing grew on the rock but lichen, and even the seabirds shunned the place. Now and again some gulls would land atop the spire and Davos would try to catch one, but they were too quick for him to get close. He took to flinging stones at them, but he was too weak to throw with much force, so even when his stones hit, the gulls would only scream at him in annoyance and then take to the air.

There were other rocks visible from his refuge, distant stony spires taller than his own. The nearest stood a good forty feet above the water, he guessed, though it was hard to be sure at this distance. A cloud of gulls swirled about it constantly, and often Davos thought of crossing over to raid their nests. But the water was cold here, the currents strong and treacherous, and he knew he did not have the strength for such a swim. That would kill him as sure as drinking seawater.

Autumn in the narrow sea could often be wet and rainy, he remembered from years past. The days were not bad so long as the sun was shining, but the nights were growing colder and sometimes the wind would come gusting across the bay, driving a line of whitecaps before it, and before long Davos would be soaked and shivering. Fever and chills assaulted him in turn, and of late he had developed a persistent racking cough.

His cave was all the shelter he had, and that was little enough. Driftwood and bits of charred debris would wash up on the strand during low tide, but

he had no way to strike a spark or start a fire. Once, in desperation, he had tried rubbing two pieces of driftwood against each other, but the wood was rotted, and his efforts earned him only blisters. His clothes were sodden as well, and he had lost one of his boots somewhere in the bay before he washed up here.

Thirst; hunger; exposure. They were his companions, with him every hour of every day, and in time he had come to think of them as his friends. Soon enough, one or the other of his friends would take pity on him and free him from this endless misery. Or perhaps he would simply walk into the water one day, and strike out for the shore that he knew lay somewhere to the north, beyond his sight. It was too far to swim, as weak as he was, but that did not matter. Davos had always been a sailor; he was meant to die at sea. *The gods beneath the waters have been waiting for me*, he told himself. *It's past time I went to them.*

But now there was a sail; only a speck on the horizon, but growing larger. *A ship where no ship should be.* He knew where his rock lay, more or less; it was one of a series of sea monts that rose from the floor of Blackwater Bay. The tallest of them jutted a hundred feet above the tide, and a dozen lesser monts stood thirty to sixty feet high. Sailors called them *spears of the merling king*, and knew that for every one that broke the surface, a dozen lurked treacherously just below it. Any captain with sense kept his course well away from them.

Davos watched the sail swell through pale red-rimmed eyes, and tried to hear the sound of the wind caught in the canvas. *She is coming this way.* Unless she changed course soon, she would pass within hailing distance of his meager refuge. It might mean life. If he wanted it. He was not sure he did.

Why should I live? he thought as tears blurred his vision. *Gods be good, why? My sons are dead, Dale and Allard, Maric and Matthos, perhaps Devan as well. How can a father outlive so many strong young sons? How would I go on? I am a hollow shell, the crab's died, there's nothing left inside. Don't they know that?*

They had sailed up the Blackwater Rush flying the fiery heart of the Lord of Light. Davos and *Black Betha* had been in the second line of battle,

between Dale's *Wraith* and Allard on *Lady Marya*. Maric his third-born was oarmaster on *Fury*, at the center of the first line, while Matthos served as his father's second. Beneath the walls of the Red Keep Stannis Baratheon's galleys had joined in battle with the boy king Joffrey's smaller fleet, and for a few moments the river had rung to the thrum of bowstrings and the crash of iron rams shattering oars and hulls alike.

And then some vast beast had let out a roar, and green flames were all around them: wildfire, pyromancer's piss, the jade demon. Matthos had been standing at his elbow on the deck of *Black Betha* when the ship seemed to lift from the water. Davos found himself in the river, flailing as the current took him and spun him around and around. Upstream, the flames had ripped at the sky, fifty feet high. He had seen *Black Betha* afire, and *Fury*, and a dozen other ships, had seen burning men leaping into the water to drown. *Wraith* and *Lady Marya* were gone, sunk or shattered or vanished behind a veil of wildfire, and there was no time to look for them, because the mouth of the river was almost upon him, and across the mouth of the river the Lannisters had raised a great iron chain. From bank to bank there was nothing but burning ships and wildfire. The sight of it seemed to stop his heart for a moment, and he could still remember the sound of it, the crackle of flames, the hiss of steam, the shrieks of dying men, and the beat of that terrible heat against his face as the current swept him down toward hell.

All he needed to do was nothing. A few moments more, and he would be with his sons now, resting in the cool green mud on the bottom of the bay, with fish nibbling at his face.

Instead he sucked in a great gulp of air and dove, kicking for the bottom of the river. His only hope was to pass under the chain and the burning ships and the wildfire that floated on the surface of the water, to swim hard for the safety of the bay beyond. Davos had always been a strong swimmer, and he'd worn no steel that day, but for the helm he'd lost when he'd lost *Black Betha*. As he knifed through the green murk, he saw other men struggling beneath the water, pulled down to drown beneath the weight of plate and mail. Davos swam past them, kicking with all the strength left in his legs, giving himself up to the current, the water filling his eyes. Deeper he went, and deeper, and deeper still. With every stroke it grew harder to

hold his breath. He remembered seeing the bottom, soft and dim, as a stream of bubbles burst from his lips. Something touched his leg . . . a snag or a fish or a drowning man, he could not tell.

He needed air by then, but he was afraid. Was he past the chain yet, was he out in the bay? If he came up under a ship he would drown, and if he surfaced amidst the floating patches of wildfire his first breath would sear his lungs to ash. He twisted in the water to look up, but there was nothing to see but green darkness and then he spun too far and suddenly he could no longer tell up from down. Panic took hold of him. His hands flailed against the bottom of the river and sent up a cloud of mud that blinded him. His chest was growing tighter by the instant. He clawed at the water, kicking, pushing himself, turning, his lungs screaming for air, kicking, kicking, lost now in the river murk, kicking, kicking, kicking until he could kick no longer. When he opened his mouth to scream, the water came rushing in, tasting of salt, and Davos Seaworth knew that he was drowning.

The next he knew the sun was up, and he lay upon a stony strand beneath a spire of naked stone, with the empty bay all around and a broken mast, a burned sail, and a swollen corpse beside him. The mast, the sail, and the dead man vanished with the next high tide, leaving Davos alone on his rock amidst the spears of the merling king.

His long years as a smuggler had made the waters around King's Landing more familiar to him than any home he'd ever had, and he knew his refuge was no more than a speck on the charts, in a place that honest sailors steered away from, not toward . . . though Davos himself had come by it once or twice in his smuggling days, the better to stay unseen. *When they find me dead here, if ever they do, perhaps they will name the rock for me,* he thought. *Onion Rock, they'll call it; it will be my tombstone and my legacy.* He deserved no more. *The Father protects his children,* the septons taught, but Davos had led his boys into the fire. Dale would never give his wife the child they had prayed for, and Allard, with his girl in Oldtown and his girl in King's Landing and his girl in Braavos, they would all be weeping soon. Matthos would never captain his own ship, as he'd dreamed. Maric would never have his knighthood.

How can I live when they are dead? So many brave knights and mighty lords have died, better men than me, and highborn. Crawl inside your cave,

Davos. Crawl inside and shrink up small and the ship will go away, and no one will trouble you ever again. Sleep on your stone pillow, and let the gulls peck out your eyes while the crabs feast on your flesh. You've feasted on enough of them, you owe them. Hide, smuggler. Hide, and be quiet, and die.

The sail was almost on him. A few moments more, and the ship would be safely past, and he could die in peace.

His hand reached for his throat, fumbling for the small leather pouch he always wore about his neck. Inside he kept the bones of the four fingers his king had shortened for him, on the day he made Davos a knight. *My luck.* His shortened fingers patted at his chest, groping, finding nothing. The pouch was gone, and the fingerbones with them. Stannis could never understand why he'd kept the bones. "To remind me of my king's justice," he whispered through cracked lips. But now they were gone. *The fire took my luck as well as my sons.* In his dreams the river was still aflame and demons danced upon the waters with fiery whips in their hands, while men blackened and burned beneath the lash. "Mother, have mercy," Davos prayed. "Save me, gentle Mother, save us all. My luck is gone, and my sons." He was weeping freely now, salt tears streaming down his cheeks. "The fire took it all . . . the fire . . ."

Perhaps it was only wind blowing against the rock, or the sound of the sea on the shore, but for an instant Davos Seaworth heard her answer. "You called the fire," she whispered, her voice as faint as the sound of waves in a seashell, sad and soft. "You burned us . . . burned us . . . burrrrned usssssss."

"It was *her!*" Davos cried. "Mother, don't forsake us. It was her who burned you, the red woman, Melisandre, *her!*" He could see her; the heart-shaped face, the red eyes, the long coppery hair, her red gowns moving like flames as she walked, a swirl of silk and satin. She had come from Asshai in the east, she had come to Dragonstone and won Selsye and her queen's men for her alien god, and then the king, Stannis Baratheon himself. He had gone so far as to put the fiery heart on his banners, the fiery heart of R'hllor, Lord of Light and God of Flame and Shadow. At Melisandre's urging, he had dragged the Seven from their sept at Dragonstone and burned them before the castle gates, and later he had burned the godswood at Storm's End as well, even the heart tree, a huge white weirwood with a solemn face.

“It was her work,” Davos said again, more weakly. *Her work, and yours, onion knight. You rowed her into Storm’s End in the black of night, so she might loose her shadow child. You are not guiltless, no. You rode beneath her banner and flew it from your mast. You watched the Seven burn at Dragonstone, and did nothing. She gave the Father’s justice to the fire, and the Mother’s mercy, and the wisdom of the Crone. Smith and Stranger, Maid and Warrior, she burnt them all to the glory of her cruel god, and you stood and held your tongue. Even when she killed old Maester Cressen, even then, you did nothing.*

The sail was a hundred yards away and moving fast across the bay. In a few more moments it would be past him, and dwindling.

Ser Davos Seaworth began to climb his rock.

He pulled himself up with trembling hands, his head swimming with fever. Twice his maimed fingers slipped on the damp stone and he almost fell, but somehow he managed to cling to his perch. If he fell he was dead, and he had to live. For a little while more, at least. There was something he had to do.

The top of the rock was too small to stand on safely, as weak as he was, so he crouched and waved his fleshless arms. “*Ship,*” he screamed into the wind. “*Ship, here, here!*” From up here, he could see her more clearly; the lean striped hull, the bronze figurehead, the billowing sail. There was a name painted on her hull, but Davos had never learned to read. “*Ship,*” he called again, “*help me, HELP ME!*”

A crewman on her forecastle saw him and pointed. He watched as other sailors moved to the gunwale to gape at him. A short while later the galley’s sail came down, her oars slid out, and she swept around toward his refuge. She was too big to approach the rock closely, but thirty yards away she launched a small boat. Davos clung to his rock and watched it creep toward him. Four men were rowing, while a fifth sat in the prow. “*You,*” the fifth man called out when they were only a few feet from his island, “*you up on the rock. Who are you?*”

A smuggler who rose above himself, thought Davos, a fool who loved his king too much, and forgot his gods. “I . . .” His throat was parched, and he had forgotten how to talk. The words felt strange on his tongue and sounded

stranger in his ears. “I was in the battle. I was . . . a captain, a . . . a knight, I was a knight.”

“Aye, ser,” the man said, “and serving which king?”

The galley might be Joffrey’s, he realized suddenly. If he spoke the wrong name now, she would abandon him to his fate. But no, her hull was striped. She was Lysene, she was Salladhor Saan’s. The Mother sent her here, the Mother in her mercy. She had a task for him. *Stannis lives*, he knew then. *I have a king still. And sons, I have other sons, and a wife loyal and loving.* How could he have forgotten? The Mother was merciful indeed.

“Stannis,” he shouted back at the Lyseni. “Gods be good, I serve King Stannis.”

“Aye,” said the man in the boat, “and so do we.”