

TYRION

The slot in his helm limited Tyrion's vision to what was before him, but when he turned his head he saw three galleys beached on the tourney grounds, and a fourth, larger than the others, standing well out into the river, firing barrels of burning pitch from a catapult.

"Wedge," Tyrion commanded as his men streamed out of the sally port. They formed up in spearhead, with him at the point. Ser Mandon Moore took the place to his right, flames shimmering against the white enamel of his armor, his dead eyes shining passionlessly through his helm. He rode a coal-black horse barded all in white, with the pure white shield of the Kingsguard strapped to his arm. On the left, Tyrion was surprised to see Podrick Payne, a sword in his hand. "You're too young," he said at once. "Go back."

"I'm your squire, my lord."

Tyrion could spare no time for argument. "With me, then. Stay close." He kicked his horse into motion.

They rode knee to knee, following the line of the looming walls. Joffrey's standard streamed crimson and gold from Ser Mandon's staff, stag and lion dancing hoof to paw. They went from a walk to a trot, wheeling wide around the base of the tower. Arrows darted from the city walls while stones spun and tumbled overhead, crashing down blindly onto earth and water, steel and flesh. Ahead loomed the King's Gate and a surging mob of soldiers wrestling with a huge ram, a shaft of black oak with an iron head. Archers off the ships surrounded them, loosing their shafts at whatever defenders showed themselves on the gatehouse walls. "Lances," Tyrion commanded. He sped to a canter.

The ground was sodden and slippery, equal parts mud and blood. His stallion stumbled over a corpse, his hooves sliding and churning the earth, and for an instant Tyrion feared his charge would end with him tumbling from the saddle before he even reached the foe, but somehow he and his

horse both managed to keep their balance. Beneath the gate men were turning, hurriedly trying to brace for the shock. Tyrion lifted his axe and shouted, “*King’s Landing!*” Other voices took up the cry, and now the arrowhead flew, a long scream of steel and silk, pounding hooves and sharp blades kissed by fire.

Ser Mandon dropped the point of his lance at the last possible instant, and drove Joffrey’s banner through the chest of a man in a studded jerkin, lifting him full off his feet before the shaft snapped. Ahead of Tyrion was a knight whose surcoat showed a fox peering through a ring of flowers. *Florent* was his first thought, but *helmless* ran a close second. He smashed the man in the face with all the weight of axe and arm and charging horse, taking off half his head. The shock of impact numbed his shoulder. *Shagga would laugh at me*, he thought, riding on.

A spear thudded against his shield. Pod galloped beside him, slashing down at every foe they passed. Dimly, he heard cheers from the men on the walls. The battering ram crashed down into the mud, forgotten in an instant as its handlers fled or turned to fight. Tyrion rode down an archer, opened a spearman from shoulder to armpit, glanced a blow off a swordfish-crested helm. At the ram his big red reared but the black stallion leapt the obstacle smoothly and Ser Mandon flashed past him, death in snow-white silk. His sword sheared off limbs, cracked heads, broke shields asunder—though few enough of the enemy had made it across the river with shields intact.

Tyrion urged his mount over the ram. Their foes were fleeing. He moved his head right to left and back again, but saw no sign of Podrick Payne. An arrow clattered against his cheek, missing his eye slit by an inch. His jolt of fear almost unhorsed him. *If I’m to sit here like a stump, I had as well paint a target on my breastplate.*

He spurred his horse back into motion, trotting over and around a scatter of corpses. Downriver, the Blackwater was jammed with the hulks of burning galleys. Patches of wildfire still floated atop the water, sending fiery green plumes swirling twenty feet into the air. They had dispersed the men on the battering ram, but he could see fighting all along the riverfront. Ser Balon Swann’s men, most like, or Lancel’s, trying to throw the enemy

back into the water as they swarmed ashore off the burning ships. “We’ll ride for the Mud Gate,” he commanded.

Ser Mandon shouted, “*The Mud Gate!*” And they were off again. “*King’s Landing!*” his men cried raggedly, and “*Halfman! Halfman!*” He wondered who had taught them that. Through the steel and padding of his helm, he heard anguished screams, the hungry crackle of flame, the shuddering of warhorns, and the brazen blast of trumpets. Fire was everywhere. *Gods be good, no wonder the Hound was frightened. It’s the flames he fears...*

A splintering crash rang across the Blackwater as a stone the size of a horse landed square amidships on one of the galleys. *Ours or theirs?* Through the roiling smoke, he could not tell. His wedge was gone; every man was his own battle now. *I should have turned back*, he thought, riding on.

The axe was heavy in his fist. A handful still followed him, the rest dead or fled. He had to wrestle his stallion to keep his head to the east. The big destrier liked fire no more than Sandor Clegane had, but the horse was easier to cow.

Men were crawling from the river, men burned and bleeding, coughing up water, staggering, most dying. He led his troop among them, delivering quicker cleaner deaths to those strong enough to stand. The war shrank to the size of his eye slit. Knights twice his size fled from him, or stood and died. They seemed little things, and fearful. “*Lannister!*” he shouted, slaying. His arm was red to the elbow, glistening in the light off the river. When his horse reared again, he shook his axe at the stars and heard them call out “*Halfman! Halfman!*” Tyrion felt drunk.

The battle fever. He had never thought to experience it himself, though Jaime had told him of it often enough. How time seemed to blur and slow and even stop, how the past and the future vanished until there was nothing but the instant, how fear fled, and thought fled, and even your body. “You don’t feel your wounds then, or the ache in your back from the weight of the armor, or the sweat running down into your eyes. You stop feeling, you stop thinking, you stop being *you*, there is only the fight, the foe, this man

and then the next and the next and the next, and you know they are afraid and tired but you're not, you're alive, and death is all around you but their swords move so slowly, you can dance through them laughing." *Battle fever. I am half a man and drunk with slaughter, let them kill me if they can!*

They tried. Another spearman ran at him. Tyrion lopped off the head of his spear, then his hand, then his arm, trotting around him in a circle. An archer, bowless, thrust at him with an arrow, holding it as if it were a knife. The destrier kicked at the man's thigh to send him sprawling, and Tyrion barked laughter. He rode past a banner planted in the mud, one of Stannis's fiery hearts, and chopped the staff in two with a swing of his axe. A knight rose up from nowhere to hack at his shield with a two-handed greatsword, again and again, until someone thrust a dagger under his arm. One of Tyrion's men, perhaps. He never saw.

"I yield, ser," a different knight called out, farther down the river. "Yield. Ser knight, I yield to you. My pledge, here, here." The man lay in a puddle of black water, offering up a lobstered gauntlet in token of submission. Tyrion had to lean down to take it from him. As he did, a pot of wildfire burst overhead, spraying green flame. In the sudden stab of light he saw that the puddle was not black but red. The gauntlet still had the knight's hand in it. He flung it back. "Yield," the man sobbed hopelessly, helplessly. Tyrion reeled away.

A man-at-arms grabbed the bridle of his horse and thrust at Tyrion's face with a dagger. He knocked the blade aside and buried the axe in the nape of the man's neck. As he was wresting it free, a blaze of white appeared at the edge of his vision. Tyrion turned, thinking to find Ser Mandon Moore beside him again, but this was a different white knight. Ser Balon Swann wore the same armor, but his horse trappings bore the battling black-and-white swans of his House. *He's more a spotted knight than a white one*, Tyrion thought inanely. Every bit of Ser Balon was spattered with gore and smudged by smoke. He raised his mace to point downriver. Bits of brain and bone clung to its head. "My lord, look."

Tyrion swung his horse about to peer down the Blackwater. The current still flowed black and strong beneath, but the surface was a roil of blood

and flame. The sky was red and orange and garish green. “What?” he said. Then he saw.

Steel-clad men-at-arms were clambering off a broken galley that had smashed into a pier. *So many, where are they coming from?* Squinting into the smoke and glare, Tyrion followed them back out into the river. Twenty galleys were jammed together out there, maybe more, it was hard to count. Their oars were crossed, their hulls locked together with grappling lines, they were impaled on each other’s rams, tangled in webs of fallen rigging. One great hulk floated hull up between two smaller ships. Wrecks, but packed so closely that it was possible to leap from one deck to the other and so cross the Blackwater.

Hundreds of Stannis Baratheon’s boldest were doing just that. Tyrion saw one great fool of a knight trying to ride across, urging a terrified horse over gunwales and oars, across tilting decks slick with blood and crackling with green fire. *We made them a bloody bridge*, he thought in dismay. Parts of the bridge were sinking and other parts were afire and the whole thing was creaking and shifting and like to burst asunder at any moment, but that did not seem to stop them. “Those are brave men,” he told Ser Balon in admiration. “Let’s go kill them.”

He led them through the guttering fires and the soot and ash of the riverfront, pounding down a long stone quay with his own men and Ser Balon’s behind him. Ser Mandon fell in with them, his shield a ragged ruin. Smoke and cinders swirled through the air, and the foe broke before their charge, throwing themselves back into the water, knocking over other men as they fought to climb up. The foot of the bridge was a half-sunken enemy galley with *Dragonsbane* painted on her prow, her bottom ripped out by one of the sunken hulks Tyrion had placed between the quays. A spearman wearing the red crab badge of House Celtigar drove the point of his weapon up through the chest of Balon Swann’s horse before he could dismount, spilling the knight from the saddle. Tyrion hacked at the man’s head as he flashed by, and by then it was too late to rein up. His stallion leapt from the end of the quay and over a splintered gunwale, landing with a splash and a

scream in ankle-deep water. Tyrion's axe went spinning, followed by Tyrion himself, and the deck rose up to give him a wet smack.

Madness followed. His horse had broken a leg and was screaming horribly. Somehow he managed to draw his dagger, and slit the poor creature's throat. The blood gushed out in a scarlet fountain, drenching his arms and chest. He found his feet again and lurched to the rail, and then he was fighting, staggering and splashing across crooked decks awash with water. Men came at him. Some he killed, some he wounded, and some went away, but always there were more. He lost his knife and gained a broken spear, he could not have said how. He clutched it and stabbed, shrieking curses. Men ran from him and he ran after them, clambering up over the rail to the next ship and then the next. His two white shadows were always with him; Balon Swann and Mandon Moore, beautiful in their pale plate. Surrounded by a circle of Velaryon spearmen, they fought back to back; they made battle as graceful as a dance.

His own killing was a clumsy thing. He stabbed one man in the kidney when his back was turned, and grabbed another by the leg and upended him into the river. Arrows hissed past his head and clattered off his armor; one lodged between shoulder and breastplate, but he never felt it. A naked man fell from the sky and landed on the deck, body bursting like a melon dropped from a tower. His blood spattered through the slit of Tyrion's helm. Stones began to plummet down, crashing through the decks and turning men to pulp, until the whole bridge gave a shudder and twisted violently underfoot, knocking him sideways.

Suddenly the river was pouring into his helm. He ripped it off and crawled along the listing deck until the water was only neck deep. A groaning filled the air, like the death cries of some enormous beast, *The ship*, he had time to think, *the ship's about to tear loose*. The broken galleys were ripping apart, the bridge breaking apart. No sooner had he come to that realization than he heard a sudden *crack*, loud as thunder, the deck lurched beneath him, and he slid back down into the water.

The list was so steep he had to climb back up, hauling himself along a snapped line inch by bloody inch. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the

hulk they'd been tangled with drifting downstream with the current, spinning slowly as men leapt over her side. Some wore Stannis's flaming heart, some Joffrey's stag-and-lion, some other badges, but it seemed to make no matter. Fires were burning upstream and down. On one side of him was a raging battle, a great confusion of bright banners waving above a sea of struggling men, shield walls forming and breaking, mounted knights cutting through the press, dust and mud and blood and smoke. On the other side, the Red Keep loomed high on its hill, spitting fire. They were on the wrong sides, though. For a moment Tyrion thought he was going mad, that Stannis and the castle had traded places. *How could Stannis cross to the north bank?* Belatedly he realized that the deck was turning, and somehow he had gotten spun about, so castle and battle had changed sides. *Battle, what battle, if Stannis hasn't crossed who is he fighting?* Tyrion was too tired to make sense of it. His shoulder ached horribly, and when he reached up to rub it he saw the arrow, and remembered. *I have to get off this ship.* Downstream was nothing but a wall of fire, and if the wreck broke loose the current would take him right into it.

Someone was calling his name faintly through the din of battle. Tyrion tried to shout back. "Here! Here, I'm here, help me!" His voice sounded so thin he could scarcely hear himself. He pulled himself up the slanting deck, and grabbed for the rail. The hull slammed into the next galley over and rebounded so violently he was almost knocked into the water. Where had all his strength gone? It was all he could do to hang on.

"MY LORD! TAKE MY HAND! MY LORD TYRION!"

There on the deck of the next ship, across a widening gulf of black water, stood Ser Mandon Moore, a hand extended. Yellow and green fire shone against the white of his armor, and his lobstered gauntlet was sticky with blood, but Tyrion reached for it all the same, wishing his arms were longer. It was only at the very last, as their fingers brushed across the gap, that something niggled at him... Ser Mandon was holding out his *left* hand, why...

Was that why he reeled backward, or did he see the sword after all? He would never know. The point slashed just beneath his eyes, and he felt its

cold hard touch and then a blaze of pain. His head spun around as if he'd been slapped. The shock of the cold water was a second slap more jolting than the first. He flailed for something to grab on to, knowing that once he went down he was not like to come back up. Somehow his hand found the splintered end of a broken oar. Clutching it tight as a desperate lover, he shinnied up foot by foot. His eyes were full of water, his mouth was full of blood, and his head throbbed horribly. *Gods give me strength to reach the deck...* There was nothing else, only the oar, the water, the deck.

Finally he rolled over the side and lay breathless and exhausted, flat on his back. Balls of green and orange flame crackled overhead, leaving streaks between the stars. He had a moment to think how pretty it was before Ser Mandon blocked out the view. The knight was a white steel shadow, his eyes shining darkly behind his helm. Tyrion had no more strength than a rag doll. Ser Mandon put the point of his sword to the hollow of his throat and curled both hands around the hilt.

And suddenly he lurched to the left, staggering into the rail. Wood split, and Ser Mandon Moore vanished with a shout and a splash. An instant later, the hulls came slamming together again, so hard the deck seemed to jump. Then someone was kneeling over him. "Jaime?" he croaked, almost choking on the blood that filled his mouth. Who else would save him, if not his brother?

"Be still, my lord, you're hurt bad." *A boy's voice, that makes no sense,* thought Tyrion. It sounded almost like Pod.