

TYRION

On a hill overlooking the kingsroad, a long trestle table of rough-hewn pine had been erected beneath an elm tree and covered with a golden cloth. There, beside his pavilion, Lord Tywin took his evening meal with his chief knights and lords bannermen, his great crimson-and-gold standard waving overhead from a lofty pike.

Tyrion arrived late, saddlesore, and sour, all too vividly aware of how amusing he must look as he waddled up the slope to his father. The day's march had been long and tiring. He thought he might get quite drunk tonight. It was twilight, and the air was alive with drifting fireflies.

The cooks were serving the meat course: five suckling pigs, skin seared and crackling, a different fruit in every mouth. The smell made his mouth water. "My pardons," he began, taking his place on the bench beside his uncle.

"Perhaps I'd best charge you with burying our dead, Tyrion," Lord Tywin said. "If you are as late to battle as you are to table, the fighting will all be done by the time you arrive."

"Oh, surely you can save me a peasant or two, Father," Tyrion replied. "Not too many, I wouldn't want to be greedy." He filled his wine cup and watched a serving man carve into the pig. The crisp skin crackled under his knife, and hot juice ran from the meat. It was the loveliest sight Tyrion had seen in ages.

"Ser Addam's outriders say the Stark host has moved south from the Twins," his father reported as his trencher was filled with slices of pork. "Lord Frey's levies have joined them. They are likely no more than a day's march north of us."

"Please, Father," Tyrion said. "I'm about to eat."

"Does the thought of facing the Stark boy unman you, Tyrion? Your brother Jaime would be eager to come to grips with him."

“I’d sooner come to grips with that pig. Robb Stark is not half so tender, and he never smelled as good.”

Lord Lefford, the sour bird who had charge of their stores and supplies, leaned forward. “I hope your savages do not share your reluctance, else we’ve wasted our good steel on them.”

“My savages will put your steel to excellent use, my lord,” Tyrion replied. When he had told Lefford he needed arms and armor to equip the three hundred men Ulf had fetched down out of the foothills, you would have thought he’d asked the man to turn his virgin daughters over to their pleasure.

Lord Lefford frowned. “I saw that great hairy one today, the one who insisted that he must have *two* battle-axes, the heavy black steel ones with twin crescent blades.”

“Shagga likes to kill with either hand,” Tyrion said as a trencher of steaming pork was laid in front of him.

“He still had that wood-axe of his strapped to his back.”

“Shagga is of the opinion that three axes are even better than two.” Tyrion reached a thumb and forefinger into the salt dish, and sprinkled a healthy pinch over his meat.

Ser Kevan leaned forward. “We had a thought to put you and your wildlings in the vanguard when we come to battle.”

Ser Kevan seldom “had a thought” that Lord Tywin had not had first. Tyrion had skewered a chunk of meat on the point of his dagger and brought it to his mouth. Now he lowered it. “The vanguard?” he repeated dubiously. Either his lord father had a new respect for Tyrion’s abilities, or he’d decided to rid himself of his embarrassing get for good. Tyrion had the gloomy feeling he knew which.

“They seem ferocious enough,” Ser Kevan said.

“Ferocious?” Tyrion realized he was echoing his uncle like a trained bird. His father watched, judging him, weighing every word. “Let me tell you how ferocious they are. Last night, a Moon Brother stabbed a Stone Crow over a sausage. So today as we made camp three Stone Crows seized

the man and opened his throat for him. Perhaps they were hoping to get the sausage back, I couldn't say. Bronn managed to keep Shagga from chopping off the dead man's cock, which was fortunate, but even so Ulf is demanding blood money, which Conn and Shagga refuse to pay."

"When soldiers lack discipline, the fault lies with their lord commander," his father said.

His brother Jaime had always been able to make men follow him eagerly, and die for him if need be. Tyrion lacked that gift. He bought loyalty with gold, and compelled obedience with his name. "A *bigger* man would be able to put the fear in them, is that what you're saying, my lord?"

Lord Tywin Lannister turned to his brother. "If my son's men will not obey his commands, perhaps the vanguard is not the place for him. No doubt he would be more comfortable in the rear, guarding our baggage train."

"Do me no kindnesses, Father," he said angrily. "If you have no other command to offer me, I'll lead your van."

Lord Tywin studied his dwarf son. "I said nothing about command. You will serve under Ser Gregor."

Tyrion took one bite of pork, chewed a moment, and spit it out angrily. "I find I am not hungry after all," he said, climbing awkwardly off the bench. "Pray excuse me, my lords."

Lord Tywin inclined his head, dismissing him. Tyrion turned and walked away. He was conscious of their eyes on his back as he waddled down the hill. A great gust of laughter went up from behind him, but he did not look back. He hoped they all choked on their suckling pigs.

Dusk had settled, turning all the banners black. The Lannister camp sprawled for miles between the river and the kingsroad. In amongst the men and the horses and the trees, it was easy to get lost, and Tyrion did. He passed a dozen great pavilions and a hundred cookfires. Fireflies drifted amongst the tents like wandering stars. He caught the scent of garlic sausage, spiced and savory, so tempting it made his empty stomach growl. Away in the distance, he heard voices raised in some bawdy song. A

giggling woman raced past him, naked beneath a dark cloak, her drunken pursuer stumbling over tree roots. Farther on, two spearmen faced each other across a little trickle of a stream, practicing their thrust-and-parry in the fading light, their chests bare and slick with sweat.

No one looked at him. No one spoke to him. No one paid him any mind. He was surrounded by men sworn to House Lannister, a vast host twenty thousand strong, and yet he was alone.

When he heard the deep rumble of Shagga's laughter booming through the dark, he followed it to the Stone Crows in their small corner of the night. Conn son of Coratt waved a tankard of ale. "Tyrion Halfman! Come, sit by our fire, share meat with the Stone Crows. We have an ox."

"I can see that, Conn son of Coratt." The huge red carcass was suspended over a roaring fire, skewered on a spit the size of a small tree. No doubt it was a small tree. Blood and grease dripped down into the flames as two Stone Crows turned the meat. "I thank you. Send for me when the ox is cooked." From the look of it, that might even be before the battle. He walked on.

Each clan had its own cookfire; Black Ears did not eat with Stone Crows, Stone Crows did not eat with Moon Brothers, and no one ate with Burned Men. The modest tent he had coaxed out of Lord Lefford's stores had been erected in the center of the four fires. Tyrion found Bronn sharing a skin of wine with the new servants. Lord Tywin had sent him a groom and a body servant to see to his needs, and even insisted he take a squire. They were seated around the embers of a small cookfire. A girl was with them; slim, dark-haired, no more than eighteen by the look of her. Tyrion studied her face for a moment, before he spied fishbones in the ashes. "What did you eat?"

"Trout, m'lord," said his groom. "Bronn caught them."

Trout, he thought. *Suckling pig. Damn my father.* He stared mournfully at the bones, his belly rumbling.

His squire, a boy with the unfortunate name of Podrick Payne, swallowed whatever he had been about to say. The lad was a distant cousin to Ser Ilyn Payne, the king's headsman... and almost as quiet, although not

for want of a tongue. Tyrion had made him stick it out once, just to be certain. “Definitely a tongue,” he had said. “Someday you must learn to use it.”

At the moment, he did not have the patience to try and coax a thought out of the lad, whom he suspected had been inflicted on him as a cruel jape. Tyrion turned his attention back to the girl. “Is this her?” he asked Bronn.

She rose gracefully and looked down at him from the lofty height of five feet or more. “It is, m’lord, and she can speak for herself, if it please you.”

He cocked his head to one side. “I am Tyrion, of House Lannister. Men call me the Imp.”

“My mother named me Shae. Men call me... often.”

Bronn laughed, and Tyrion had to smile. “Into the tent, Shae, if you would be so kind.” He lifted the flap and held it for her. Inside, he knelt to light a candle.

The life of a soldier was not without certain compensations. Wherever you have a camp, you are certain to have camp followers. At the end of the day’s march, Tyrion had sent Bronn back to find him a likely whore. “I would prefer one who is reasonably young, with as pretty a face as you can find,” he had said. “If she has washed sometime this year, I shall be glad. If she hasn’t, wash her. Be certain that you tell her who I am, and warn her of *what* I am.” Jyck had not always troubled to do that. There was a look the girls got in their eyes sometimes when they first beheld the lordling they’d been hired to pleasure... a look that Tyrion Lannister did not ever care to see again.

He lifted the candle and looked her over. Bronn had done well enough; she was doe-eyed and slim, with small firm breasts and a smile that was by turns shy, insolent, and wicked. He liked that. “Shall I take my gown off, m’lord?” she asked.

“In good time. Are you a maiden, Shae?”

“If it please you, m’lord,” she said demurely.

“What would please me would be the truth of you, girl.”

“Aye, but that will cost you double.”

Tyrion decided they would get along splendidly. “I am a Lannister. Gold I have in plenty, and you’ll find me generous... but I’ll want more from you than what you’ve got between your legs, though I’ll want that too. You’ll share my tent, pour my wine, laugh at my jests, rub the ache from my legs after each day’s ride... and whether I keep you a day or a year, for so long as we are together you will take no other men into your bed.”

“Fair enough.” She reached down to the hem of her thin roughspun gown and pulled it up over her head in one smooth motion, tossing it aside. There was nothing underneath but Shae. “If he don’t put down that candle, m’lord will burn his fingers.”

Tyrion put down the candle, took her hand in his, and pulled her gently to him. She bent to kiss him. Her mouth tasted of honey and cloves, and her fingers were deft and practiced as they found the fastenings of his clothes.

When he entered her, she welcomed him with whispered endearments and small, shuddering gasps of pleasure. Tyrion suspected her delight was feigned, but she did it so well that it did not matter. *That* much truth he did not crave.

He had needed her, Tyrion realized afterward, as she lay quietly in his arms. Her or someone like her. It had been nigh on a year since he’d lain with a woman, since before he had set out for Winterfell in company with his brother and King Robert. He could well die on the morrow or the day after, and if he did, he would sooner go to his grave thinking of Shae than of his lord father, Lysa Arryn, or the Lady Catelyn Stark.

He could feel the softness of her breasts pressed against his arm as she lay beside him. That was a good feeling. A song filled his head. Softly, quietly, he began to whistle.

“What’s that, m’lord?” Shae murmured against him.

“Nothing,” he told her. “A song I learned as a boy, that’s all. Go to sleep, sweetling.”

When her eyes were closed and her breathing deep and steady, Tyrion slid out from beneath her, gently, so as not to disturb her sleep. Naked, he

crawled outside, stepped over his squire, and walked around behind his tent to make water.

Bronn was seated cross-legged under a chestnut tree, near where they'd tied the horses. He was honing the edge of his sword, wide awake; the sellsword did not seem to sleep like other men. "Where did you find her?" Tyrion asked him as he pissed.

"I took her from a knight. The man was loath to give her up, but your name changed his thinking somewhat... that, and my dirk at his throat."

"Splendid," Tyrion said dryly, shaking off the last drops. "I seem to recall saying *find me a whore*, not *make me an enemy*."

"The pretty ones were all claimed," Bronn said. "I'll be pleased to take her back if you'd prefer a toothless drab."

Tyrion limped closer to where he sat. "My lord father would call that insolence, and send you to the mines for impertinence."

"Good for me you're not your father," Bronn replied. "I saw one with boils all over her nose. Would you like her?"

"What, and break your heart?" Tyrion shot back. "I shall keep Shae. Did you perchance note the *name* of this knight you took her from? I'd rather not have him beside me in the battle."

Bronn rose, cat-quick and cat-graceful, turning his sword in his hand. "You'll have me beside you in the battle, dwarf."

Tyrion nodded. The night air was warm on his bare skin. "See that I survive this battle, and you can name your reward."

Bronn tossed the longsword from his right hand to his left, and tried a cut. "Who'd want to kill the likes of you?"

"My lord father, for one. He's put me in the van."

"I'd do the same. A small man with a big shield. You'll give the archers fits."

"I find you oddly cheering," Tyrion said. "I must be mad."

Bronn sheathed his sword. "Beyond a doubt."

When Tyrion returned to his tent, Shae rolled onto her elbow and murmured sleepily, “I woke and m’lord was gone.”

“M’lord is back now.” He slid in beside her.

Her hand went between his stunted legs, and found him hard. “Yes he is,” she whispered, stroking him.

He asked her about the man Bronn had taken her from, and she named the minor retainer of an insignificant lordling. “You need not fear his like, m’lord,” the girl said, her fingers busy at his cock. “He is a small man.”

“And what am I, pray?” Tyrion asked her. “A giant?”

“Oh, yes,” she purred, “my giant of Lannister.” She mounted him then, and for a time, she almost made him believe it. Tyrion went to sleep smiling...

... and woke in darkness to the blare of trumpets. Shae was shaking him by the shoulder. “M’lord,” she whispered. “Wake up, m’lord. I’m frightened.”

Groggy, he sat up and threw back the blanket. The horns called through the night, wild and urgent, a cry that said *hurry hurry hurry*. He heard shouts, the clatter of spears, the whicker of horses, though nothing yet that spoke to him of fighting. “My lord father’s trumpets,” he said. “Battle assembly. I thought Stark was yet a day’s march away.”

Shae shook her head, lost. Her eyes were wide and white.

Groaning, Tyrion lurched to his feet and pushed his way outside, shouting for his squire. Wisps of pale fog drifted through the night, long white fingers off the river. Men and horses blundered through the predawn chill; saddles were being cinched, wagons loaded, fires extinguished. The trumpets blew again: *hurry hurry hurry*. Knights vaulted onto snorting coursers while men-at-arms buckled their sword belts as they ran. When he found Pod, the boy was snoring softly. Tyrion gave him a sharp poke in the ribs with his toe. “My armor,” he said, “and be quick about it.” Bronn came trotting out of the mists, already armored and a horse, wearing his battered halfhelm. “Do you know what’s happened?” Tyrion asked him.

“The Stark boy stole a march on us,” Bronn said. “He crept down the kingsroad in the night, and now his host is less than a mile north of here, forming up in battle array.”

Hurry, the trumpets called, *hurry hurry hurry*.

“See that the clansmen are ready to ride.” Tyrion ducked back inside his tent. “Where are my clothes?” he barked at Shae. “There. No, the leather, damn it. Yes. Bring me my boots.”

By the time he was dressed, his squire had laid out his armor, such that it was. Tyrion owned a fine suit of heavy plate, expertly crafted to fit his misshapen body. Alas, it was safe at Casterly Rock, and he was not. He had to make do with oddments assembled from Lord Lefford’s wagons: mail hauberk and coif, a dead knight’s gorget, lobstered greaves and gauntlets and pointed steel boots. Some of it was ornate, some plain; not a bit of it matched, or fit as it should. His breastplate was meant for a bigger man; for his oversize head, they found a huge bucket-shaped greathelm topped with a foot-long triangular spike.

Shae helped Pod with the buckles and clasps. “If I die, weep for me,” Tyrion told the whore.

“How will you know? You’ll be dead.”

“I’ll know.”

“I believe you would.” Shae lowered the greathelm down over his head, and Pod fastened it to his gorget. Tyrion buckled on his belt, heavy with the weight of shortsword and dirk. By then his groom had brought up his mount, a formidable brown courser armored as heavily as he was. He needed help to mount; he felt as though he weighed a thousand stone. Pod handed him up his shield, a massive slab of heavy ironwood banded with steel. Lastly they gave him his battle-axe. Shae stepped back and looked him over. “M’lord looks fearsome.”

“M’lord looks a dwarf in mismatched armor,” Tyrion answered sourly, “but I thank you for the kindness. Podrick, should the battle go against us, see the lady safely home.” He saluted her with his axe, wheeled his horse about, and trotted off. His stomach was a hard knot, so tight it pained him.

Behind, his servants hurriedly began to strike his tent. Pale crimson fingers fanned out to the east as the first rays of the sun broke over the horizon. The western sky was a deep purple, speckled with stars. Tyrion wondered whether this was the last sunrise he would ever see... and whether wondering was a mark of cowardice. Did his brother Jaime ever contemplate death before a battle?

A warhorn sounded in the far distance, a deep mournful note that chilled the soul. The clansmen climbed onto their scrawny mountain horses, shouting curses and rude jokes. Several appeared to be drunk. The rising sun was burning off the drifting tendrils of fog as Tyrion led them off. What grass the horses had left was heavy with dew, as if some passing god had scattered a bag of diamonds over the earth. The mountain men fell in behind him, each clan arrayed behind its own leaders.

In the dawn light, the army of Lord Tywin Lannister unfolded like an iron rose, thorns gleaming.

His uncle would lead the center. Ser Kevan had raised his standards above the kingsroad. Quivers hanging from their belts, the foot archers arrayed themselves into three long lines, to east and west of the road, and stood calmly stringing their bows. Between them, pikemen formed squares; behind were rank on rank of men-at-arms with spear and sword and axe. Three hundred heavy horse surrounded Ser Kevan and the lords bannermen Lefford, Lydden, and Serrett with all their sworn retainers.

The right wing was all cavalry, some four thousand men, heavy with the weight of their armor. More than three quarters of the knights were there, massed together like a great steel fist. Ser Addam Marbrand had the command. Tyrion saw his banner unfurl as his standardbearer shook it out; a burning tree, orange and smoke. Behind him flew Ser Flement's purple unicorn, the brindled boar of Crakehall, the bantam rooster of Swyft, and more.

His lord father took his place on the hill where he had slept. Around him, the reserve assembled; a huge force, half mounted and half foot, five thousand strong. Lord Tywin almost always chose to command the reserve;

he would take the high ground and watch the battle unfold below him, committing his forces when and where they were needed most.

Even from afar, his lord father was resplendent. Tywin Lannister's battle armor put his son Jaime's gilded suit to shame. His greatcloak was sewn from countless layers of cloth-of-gold, so heavy that it barely stirred even when he charged, so large that its drape covered most of his stallion's hindquarters when he took the saddle. No ordinary clasp would suffice for such a weight, so the greatcloak was held in place by a matched pair of miniature lionesses crouching on his shoulders, as if poised to spring. Their mate, a male with a magnificent mane, reclined atop Lord Tywin's greathelm, one paw raking the air as he roared. All three lions were wrought in gold, with ruby eyes. His armor was heavy steel plate, enameled in a dark crimson, greaves and gauntlets inlaid with ornate gold scrollwork. His rondels were golden sunbursts, all his fastenings were gilded, and the red steel was burnished to such a high sheen that it shone like fire in the light of the rising sun.

Tyrion could hear the rumble of the foemen's drums now. He remembered Robb Stark as he had last seen him, in his father's high seat in the Great Hall of Winterfell, a sword naked and shining in his hands. He remembered how the direwolves had come at him out of the shadows, and suddenly he could see them again, snarling and snapping, teeth bared in his face. Would the boy bring his wolves to war with him? The thought made him uneasy.

The northerners would be exhausted after their long sleepless march. Tyrion wondered what the boy had been thinking. Did he think to take them unawares while they slept? Small chance of that; whatever else might be said of him, Tywin Lannister was no man's fool.

The van was massing on the left. He saw the standard first, three black dogs on a yellow field. Ser Gregor sat beneath it, mounted on the biggest horse Tyrion had ever seen. Bronn took one look at him and grinned. "Always follow a big man into battle."

Tyrion threw him a hard look. "And why is that?"

“They make such splendid targets. That one, he’ll draw the eyes of every bowman on the field.”

Laughing, Tyrion regarded the Mountain with fresh eyes. “I confess, I had not considered it in that light.”

Clegane had no splendor about him; his armor was steel plate, dull grey, scarred by hard use and showing neither sigil nor ornament. He was pointing men into position with his blade, a two-handed greatsword that Ser Gregor waved about with one hand as a lesser man might wave a dagger. “Any man runs, I’ll cut him down myself,” he was roaring when he caught sight of Tyrion. “Imp! Take the left. Hold the river. If you can.”

The left of the left. To turn their flank, the Starks would need horses that could run on water. Tyrion led his men toward the riverbank. “Look,” he shouted, pointing with his axe. “The river.” A blanket of pale mist still clung to the surface of the water, the murky green current swirling past underneath. The shallows were muddy and choked with reeds. “That river is ours. Whatever happens, keep close to the water. Never lose sight of it. Let no enemy come between us and our river. If they dirty our waters, hack off their cocks and feed them to the fishes.”

Shagga had an axe in either hand. He smashed them together and made them ring. “*Halfman!*” he shouted. Other Stone Crows picked up the cry, and the Black Ears and Moon Brothers as well. The Burned Men did not shout, but they rattled their swords and spears. “*Halfman! Halfman! Halfman!*”

Tyrion turned his courser in a circle to look over the field. The ground was rolling and uneven here; soft and muddy near the river, rising in a gentle slope toward the kingsroad, stony and broken beyond it, to the east. A few trees spotted the hillsides, but most of the land had been cleared and planted. His heart pounded in his chest in time to the drums, and under his layers of leather and steel his brow was cold with sweat. He watched Ser Gregor as the Mountain rode up and down the line, shouting and gesticulating. This wing too was all cavalry, but where the right was a mailed fist of knights and heavy lancers, the vanguard was made up of the sweepings of the west: mounted archers in leather jerkins, a swarming mass

of undisciplined freeriders and sellswords, fieldhands on plow horses armed with scythes and their fathers' rusted swords, half-trained boys from the stews of Lannisport... and Tyrion and his mountain clansmen.

"Crow food," Bronn muttered beside him, giving voice to what Tyrion had left unsaid. He could only nod. Had his lord father taken leave of his senses? No pikes, too few bowmen, a bare handful of knights, the ill-armed and unarmored, commanded by an unthinking brute who led with his rage... how could his father expect this travesty of a battle to hold his left?

He had no time to think about it. The drums were so near that the beat crept under his skin and set his hands to twitching. Bronn drew his longsword, and suddenly the enemy was there before them, boiling over the tops of the hills, advancing with measured tread behind a wall of shields and pikes.

Gods be damned, look at them all, Tyrion thought, though he knew his father had more men on the field. Their captains led them on armored warhorses, standard-bearers riding alongside with their banners. He glimpsed the bull moose of the Hornwoods, the Karstark sunburst, Lord Cerwyn's battle-axe, and the mailed fist of the Glovers... *and* the twin towers of Frey, blue on grey. So much for his father's certainty that Lord Walder would not bestir himself. The white of House Stark was seen everywhere, the grey direwolves seeming to run and leap as the banners swirled and streamed from the high staffs. *Where is the boy?* Tyrion wondered.

A warhorn blew. *Haroooooooooooooooooooooooooooo*, it cried, its voice as long and low and chilling as a cold wind from the north. The Lannister trumpets answered, *da-DA da-DA da-DAAAAAAAAAA*, brazen and defiant, yet it seemed to Tyrion that they sounded somehow smaller, more anxious. He could feel a fluttering in his bowels, a queasy liquid feeling; he hoped he was not going to die sick.

As the horns died away, a hissing filled the air; a vast flight of arrows arched up from his right, where the archers stood flanking the road. The northerners broke into a run, shouting as they came, but the Lannister arrows fell on them like hail, hundreds of arrows, thousands, and shouts

turned to screams as men stumbled and went down. By then a second flight was in the air, and the archers were fitting a third arrow to their bowstrings.

The trumpets blared again, *da-DAAA da-DAAA da-DA da-DA da-DAAAAAAA*. Ser Gregor waved his huge sword and bellowed a command, and a thousand other voices screamed back at him. Tyrion put his spurs to his horse and added one more voice to the cacophony, and the van surged forward. “The river!” he shouted at his clansmen as they rode. “Remember, hew to the river.” He was still leading when they broke a canter, until Chella gave a bloodcurdling shriek and galloped past him, and Shagga howled and followed. The clansmen charged after them, leaving Tyrion in their dust.

A crescent of enemy spearmen had formed ahead, a double hedgehog bristling with steel, waiting behind tall oaken shields marked with the sunburst of Karstark. Gregor Clegane was the first to reach them, leading a wedge of armored veterans. Half the horses shied at the last second, breaking their charge before the row of spears. The others died, sharp steel points ripping through their chests. Tyrion saw a dozen men go down. The Mountain’s stallion reared, lashing out with iron-shod hooves as a barbed spearhead raked across his neck. Maddened, the beast lunged into the ranks. Spears thrust at him from every side, but the shield wall broke beneath his weight. The northerners stumbled away from the animal’s death throes. As his horse fell, snorting blood and biting with his last red breath, the Mountain rose untouched, laying about him with his two-handed greatsword.

Shagga went bursting through the gap before the shields could close, other Stone Crows hard behind him. Tyrion shouted, “Burned Men! Moon Brothers! After me!” but most of them were *ahead* of him. He glimpsed Timett son of Timett vault free as his mount died under him in full stride, saw a Moon Brother impaled on a Karstark spear, watched Conn’s horse shatter a man’s ribs with a kick. A flight of arrows descended on them; where they came from he could not say, but they fell on Stark and Lannister alike, rattling off armor or finding flesh. Tyrion lifted his shield and hid beneath it.

The hedgehog was crumbling, the northerners reeling back under the impact of the mounted assault. Tyrion saw Shagga catch a spearman full in the chest as the fool came on at a run, saw his axe shear through mail and leather and muscle and lungs. The man was dead on his feet, the axehead lodged in his breast, yet Shagga rode on, cleaving a shield in two with his left-hand battle-axe while the corpse was bouncing and stumbling bonelessly along on his right. Finally the dead man slid off. Shagga smashed the two axes together and roared.

By then the enemy was on him, and Tyrion's battle shrunk to the few feet of ground around his horse. A man-at-arms thrust at his chest and his axe lashed out, knocking the spear aside. The man danced back for another try, but Tyrion spurred his horse and rode right over him. Bronn was surrounded by three foes, but he lopped the head off the first spear that came at him, and raked his blade across a second man's face on his backslash.

A thrown spear came hurtling at Tyrion from the left and lodged in his shield with a woody *chunk*. He wheeled and raced after the thrower, but the man raised his own shield over his head. Tyrion circled around him, raining axe blows down on the wood. Chips of oak went flying, until the northerner lost his feet and slipped, failing flat on his back with his shield on top of him. He was below the reach of Tyrion's axe and it was too much bother to dismount, so he left him there and rode after another man, taking him from behind with a sweeping downcut that sent a jolt of impact up his arm. That won him a moment's respite. Reining up, he looked for the river. There it was, off to the right. Somehow he had gotten turned around.

A Burned Man rode past, slumped against his horse. A spear had entered his belly and come out through his back. He was past any help, but when Tyrion saw one of the northerners run up and make a grab for his reins, he charged.

His quarry met him sword in hand. He was tall and spare, wearing a long chainmail hauberk and gauntlets of lobstered steel, but he'd lost his helm and blood ran down into his eyes from a gash across his forehead. Tyrion aimed a swipe at his face, but the tall man slammed it aside.

“Dwarf,” he screamed. “Die.” He turned in a circle as Tyrion rode around him, hacking at his head and shoulders. Steel rang on steel, and Tyrion soon realized that the tall man was quicker and stronger than he was. Where in the seven hells was Bronn? “Die,” the man grunted, chopping at him savagely. Tyrion barely got his shield up in time, and the wood seemed to explode inward under the force of the blow. The shattered pieces fell away from his arm. “*Die!*” the swordsman bellowed, shoving in close and whanging Tyrion across the temple so hard his head rang. The blade made a hideous scraping sound as he drew it back over the steel. The tall man grinned... until Tyrion’s destrier bit, quick as a snake, laying his cheek bare to the bone. Then he screamed. Tyrion buried his axe in his head. “*You die,*” he told him, and he did.

As he wrenched the blade free, he heard a shout. ‘*Eddard!*’ a voice rang out. “*For Eddard and Winterfell!*” The knight came thundering down on him, swinging the spiked ball of a morningstar around his head. Their warhorses slammed together before Tyrion could so much as open his mouth to shout for Bronn. His right elbow exploded with pain as the spikes punched through the thin metal around the joint. His axe was gone, as fast as that. He clawed for his sword, but the morningstar was circling again, coming at his face. A sickening *crunch*, and he was falling. He did not recall hitting the ground, but when he looked up there was only sky above him. He rolled onto his side and tried to find his feet, but pain shuddered through him and the world throbbed. The knight who had felled him drew up above him. “Tyrion the Imp,” he boomed down. “You are mine. Do you yield, Lannister?”

Yes, Tyrion thought, but the word caught in his throat. He made a croaking sound and fought his way to his knees, fumbling for a weapon. His sword, his dirk, anything...

“Do you yield?” The knight loomed overhead on his armored warhorse. Man and horse both seemed immense. The spiked ball swung in a lazy circle. Tyrion’s hands were numb, his vision blurred, his scabbard empty. “Yield or die,” the knight declared, his flail whirling faster and faster.

Tyrion lurched to his feet, driving his head into the horse's belly. The animal gave a hideous scream and reared. It tried to twist away from the agony, a shower of blood and viscera poured down over Tyrion's face, and the horse fell like an avalanche. The next he knew, his visor was packed with mud and something was crushing his foot. He wriggled free, his throat so tight he could scarce talk. "...yield..." he managed to croak faintly.

"Yes," a voice moaned, thick with pain.

Tyrion scraped the mud off his helm so he could see again. The horse had fallen away from him, onto its rider. The knight's leg was trapped, the arm he'd used to break his fall twisted at a grotesque angle. "Yield," he repeated. Fumbling at his belt with his good hand, he drew a sword and flung it at Tyrion's feet. "I yield, my lord."

Dazed, the dwarf knelt and lifted the blade. Pain hammered through his elbow when he moved his arm. The battle seemed to have moved beyond him. No one remained on his part of the field save a large number of corpses. Ravens were already circling and landing to feed. He saw that Ser Kevan had brought up his center in support of the van; his huge mass of pikemen had pushed the northerners back against the hills. They were struggling on the slopes, pikes thrusting against another wall of shields, these oval and reinforced with iron studs. As he watched, the air filled with arrows again, and the men behind the oak wall crumbled beneath the murderous fire. "I believe you are losing, ser," he told the knight under the horse. The man made no reply.

The sound of hooves coming up behind him made him whirl, though he could scarcely lift the sword he held for the agony in his elbow. Brorm reined up and looked down on him.

"Small use you turned out to be," Tyrion told him.

"It would seem you did well enough on your own," Bronn answered. "You've lost the spike off your helm, though."

Tyrion groped at the top of the greathelm. The spike had snapped off clean. "I haven't lost it. I know just where it is. Do you see my horse?"

By the time they found it, the trumpets had sounded again and Lord Tywin's reserve came sweeping up along the river. Tyrion watched his father fly past, the crimson-and-gold banner of Lannister rippling over his head as he thundered across the field. Five hundred knights surrounded him, sunlight flashing off the points of their lances. The remnants of the Stark lines shattered like glass beneath the hammer of their charge.

With his elbow swollen and throbbing inside his armor, Tyrion made no attempt to join the slaughter. He and Bronn went looking for his men. Many he found among the dead. Ulf son of Umar lay in a pool of congealing blood, his arm gone at the elbow, a dozen of his Moon Brothers sprawled around him. Shagga was slumped beneath a tree, riddled with arrows, Conn's head in his lap. Tyrion thought they were both dead, but as he dismounted, Shagga opened his eyes and said, "They have killed Conn son of Coratt." Handsome Conn had no mark but for the red stain over his breast, where the spear thrust had killed him. When Bronn pulled Shagga to his feet, the big man seemed to notice the arrows for the first time. He plucked them out one by one, cursing the holes they had made in his layers of mail and leather, and yowling like a babe at the few that had buried themselves in his flesh. Chella daughter of Cheyk rode up as they were yanking arrows out of Shagga, and showed them four ears she had taken. Timett they discovered looting the bodies of the slain with his Burned Men. Of the three hundred clansmen who had ridden to battle behind Tyrion Lannister, perhaps half had survived.

He left the living to look after the dead, sent Bronn to take charge of his captive knight, and went alone in search of his father. Lord Tywin was seated by the river, sipping wine from a jeweled cup as his squire undid the fastenings on his breastplate. "A fine victory," Ser Kevan said when he saw Tyrion. "Your wild men fought well."

His father's eyes were on him, pale green flecked with gold, so cool they gave Tyrion a chill. "Did that surprise you, Father?" he asked. "Did it upset your plans? We were supposed to be butchered, were we not?"

Lord Tywin drained his cup, his face expressionless. "I put the least disciplined men on the left, yes. I anticipated that they would break. Robb

Stark is a green boy, more like to be brave than wise. I'd hoped that if he saw our left collapse, he might plunge into the gap, eager for a rout. Once he was fully committed, Ser Kevan's pikes would wheel and take him in the flank, driving him into the river while I brought up the reserve."

"And you thought it best to place me in the midst of this carnage, yet keep me ignorant of your plans."

"A feigned rout is less convincing," his father said, "and I am not inclined to trust my plans to a man who consorts with sellswords and savages."

"A pity my savages ruined your dance." Tyrion pulled off his steel gauntlet and let it fall to the ground, wincing at the pain that stabbed up his arm.

"The Stark boy proved more cautious than I expected for one of his years," Lord Tywin admitted, "but a victory is a victory. You appear to be wounded."

Tyrion's right arm was soaked with blood. "Good of you to notice, Father," he said through clenched teeth. "Might I trouble you to send for your maesters? Unless you relish the notion of having a *one-armed* dwarf for a son..."

An urgent shout of "*Lord Tywin!*" turned his father's head before he could reply. Tywin Lannister rose to his feet as Ser Addam Marbrand leapt down off his courser. The horse was lathered and bleeding from the mouth. Ser Addam dropped to one knee, a rangy man with dark copper hair that fell to his shoulders, armored in burnished bronzed steel with the fiery tree of his House etched black on his breastplate. "My liege, we have taken some of their commanders. Lord Cerwyn, Ser Wylis Manderly, Harrion Karstark, four Freys. Lord Hornwood is dead, and I fear Roose Bolton has escaped us."

"And the boy?" Lord Tywin asked.

Ser Addam hesitated. "The Stark boy was not with them, my lord. They say he crossed at the Twins with the great part of his horse, riding hard for Riverrun."

A green boy, Tyrion remembered, *more like to be brave than wise*. He would have laughed, if he hadn't hurt so much.