

TYRION

Motionless as a gargoyle, Tyrion Lannister hunched on one knee atop a merlon. Beyond the Mud Gate and the desolation that had once been the fishmarket and wharves, the river itself seemed to have taken fire. Half of Stannis's fleet was ablaze, along with most of Joffrey's. The kiss of wildfire turned proud ships into funeral pyres and men into living torches. The air was full of smoke and arrows and screams.

Downstream, commoners and highborn captains alike could see the hot green death swirling toward their rafts and carracks and ferries, borne on the current of the Blackwater. The long white oars of the Myrish galleys flashed like the legs of maddened centipedes as they fought to come about, but it was no good. The centipedes had no place to run.

A dozen great fires raged under the city walls, where casks of burning pitch had exploded, but the wildfire reduced them to no more than candles in a burning house, their orange and scarlet pennons fluttering insignificantly against the jade holocaust. The low clouds caught the color of the burning river and roofed the sky in shades of shifting green, eerily beautiful. *A terrible beauty. Like dragonfire.* Tyrion wondered if Aegon the Conqueror had felt like this as he flew above his Field of Fire.

The furnace wind lifted his crimson cloak and beat at his bare face, yet he could not turn away. He was dimly aware of the gold cloaks cheering from the hoardings. He had no voice to join them. It was a half victory. *It will not be enough.*

He saw another of the hulks he'd stuffed full of King Aerys's fickle fruits engulfed by the hungry flames. A fountain of burning jade rose from the river the blast so bright he had to shield his eyes. Plumes of fire thirty and forty feet high danced upon the waters, crackling and hissing. For a few moments they washed out the screams. There were hundreds in the water, drowning or burning or doing a little of both.

Do you hear them shrieking, Stannis? Do you see them burning? This is your work as much as mine. Somewhere in that seething mass of men south of the Blackwater, Stannis was watching too, Tyrion knew. He'd never had his brother Robert's thirst for battle. He would command from the rear, from the reserve, much as Lord Tywin Lannister was wont to do. Like as not, he was sitting a warhorse right now, clad in bright armor, his crown upon his head. *A crown of red gold, Varys says, its points fashioned in the shapes of flames.*

"My ships." Joffrey's voice cracked as he shouted up from the wallwalk, where he huddled with his guards behind the ramparts. The golden circlet of kingship adorned his battle helm. "My *Kingslander's* burning, *Queen Cersei, Loyal Man*. Look, that's *Seaflower*, there." He pointed with his new sword, out to where the green flames were licking at *Seaflower's* golden hull and creeping up her oars. Her captain had turned her upriver, but not quickly enough to evade the wildfire.

She was doomed, Tyrion knew. *There was no other way. If we had not come forth to meet them, Stannis would have sensed the trap.* An arrow could be aimed, and a spear, even the stone from a catapult, but wildfire had a will of its own. Once loosed, it was beyond the control of mere men. "It could not be helped," he told his nephew. "Our fleet was doomed in any case."

Even from atop the merlon—he had been too short to see over the ramparts, so he'd had them boost him up—the flames and smoke and chaos of battle made it impossible for Tyrion to see what was happening downriver under the castle, but he had seen it a thousand times in his mind's eye. Bronn would have whipped the oxen into motion the moment Stannis's flagship passed under the Red Keep; the chain was ponderous heavy, and the great winches turned but slowly, creaking and rumbling. The whole of the usurper's fleet would have passed by the time the first glimmer of metal could be seen beneath the water. The links would emerge dripping wet, some glistening with mud, link by link by link, until the whole great chain stretched taut. King Stannis had rowed his fleet up the Blackwater, but he would not row out again.

Even so, some were getting away. A river's current was a tricky thing, and the wildfire was not spreading as evenly as he had hoped. The main channel was all aflame, but a good many of the Myrmen had made for the south bank and looked to escape unscathed, and at least eight ships had landed under the city walls. *Landed or wrecked, but it comes to the same thing, they've put men ashore.* Worse, a good part of the south wing of the enemy's first two battle lines had been well upstream of the inferno when the hulks went up. Stannis would be left with thirty or forty galleys, at a guess; more than enough to bring his whole host across, once they had regained their courage.

That might take a bit of time; even the bravest would be dismayed after watching a thousand or so of his fellows consumed by wildfire. Hallyne said that sometimes the substance burned so hot that flesh melted like tallow. Yet even so...

Tyrion had no illusions where his own men were concerned. *If the battle looks to be going sour they'll break, and they'll break bad,* Jacelyn Bywater had warned him, so the only way to win was to make certain the battle stayed sweet, start to finish.

He could see dark shapes moving through the charred ruins of the riverfront wharfs. *Time for another sortie,* he thought. Men were never so vulnerable as when they first staggered ashore. He must not give the foe time to form up on the north bank.

He scrambled down off the merlon. "Tell Lord Jacelyn we've got enemy on the riverfront," he said to one of the runners Bywater had assigned him. To another he said, "Bring my compliments to Ser Arneld and ask him to swing the Whores thirty degrees west." The angle would allow them to throw farther, if not as far out into the water.

"Mother promised I could have the Whores," Joffrey said. Tyrion was annoyed to see that the king had lifted the visor of his helm again. Doubtless the boy was cooking inside all that heavy steel... but the last thing he needed was some stray arrow punching through his nephew's eye.

He clanged the visor shut. "Keep that closed, Your Grace; your sweet person is precious to us all." *And you don't want to spoil that pretty face,*

either. “The Whores are yours.” It was as good a time as any; flinging more firepots down onto burning ships seemed pointless. Joff had the Antler Men trussed up naked in the square below, antlers nailed to their heads. When they’d been brought before the Iron Throne for justice, he had promised to send them to Stannis. A man was not as heavy as a boulder or a cask of burning pitch, and could be thrown a deal farther. Some of the gold cloaks had been wagering on whether the traitors would fly all the way across the Blackwater. “Be quick about it, Your Grace,” he told Joffrey. “We’ll want the trebuchets throwing stones again soon enough. Even wildfire does not burn forever.”

Joffrey hurried off happy, escorted by Ser Meryn, but Tyrion caught Ser Osmund by the wrist before he could follow. “Whatever happens, keep him safe and *keep him there*, is that understood?”

“As you command.” Ser Osmund smiled amiably.

Tyrion had warned Trant and Kettleblack what would happen to them should any harm come to the king. And Joffrey had a dozen veteran gold cloaks waiting at the foot of the steps. *I’m protecting your wretched bastard as well as I can, Cersei*, he thought bitterly. *See you do the same for Alayaya*.

No sooner was Joff off than a runner came panting up the steps. “My lord, hurry!” He threw himself to one knee. “They’ve landed men on the tourney grounds, hundreds! They’re bringing a ram up to the King’s Gate.”

Tyrion cursed and made for the steps with a rolling waddle. Podrick Payne waited below with their horses. They galloped off down River Row, Pod and Ser Mandon Moore coming hard behind him. The shuttered houses were steeped in green shadow, but there was no traffic to get in their way; Tyrion had commanded that the street be kept clear, so the defenders could move quickly from one gate to the next. Even so, by the time they reached the King’s Gate, he could hear a booming crash of wood on wood that told him the battering ram had been brought into play. The groaning of the great hinges sounded like the moans of a dying giant. The gatehouse square was littered with the wounded, but he saw lines of horses as well, not all of them hurt, and sellswords and gold cloaks enough to form a strong column.

“Form up,” he shouted as he leapt to the ground. The gate moved under the impact of another blow. “Who commands here? You’re going out.”

“No.” A shadow detached itself from the shadow of the wall, to become a tall man in dark grey armor. Sandor Clegane wrenched off his helm with both hands and let it fall to the ground. The steel was scorched and dented, the left ear of the snarling hound sheared off. A gash above one eye had sent a wash of blood down across the Hound’s old burn scars, masking half his face.

“Yes.” Tyrion faced him.

Clegane’s breath came ragged. “Bugger that. And you.”

A sellsword stepped up beside him. “We been out. Three times. Half our men are killed or hurt. Wildfire bursting all around us, horses screaming like men and men like horses—”

“Did you think we hired you to fight in a tourney? Shall I bring you a nice iced milk and a bowl of raspberries? No? Then get on your fucking horse. You too, dog.”

The blood on Clegane’s face glistened red, but his eyes showed white. He drew his longsword.

He is afraid, Tyrion realized, shocked. *The Hound is frightened*. He tried to explain their need. “They’ve taken a ram to the gate, you can hear them, we need to disperse them—”

“Open the gates. When they rush inside, surround them and kill them.” The Hound thrust the point of his longsword into the ground and leaned upon the pommel, swaying. “I’ve lost half my men. Horse as well. I’m not taking more into that fire.”

Ser Mandon Moore moved to Tyrion’s side, immaculate in his enameled white plate. “The King’s Hand commands you.”

“Bugger the King’s Hand.” Where the Hound’s face was not sticky with blood, it was pale as milk. “Someone bring me a drink.” A gold cloak officer handed him a cup. Clegane took a swallow, spit it out, flung the cup away. “Water? Fuck your water. Bring me wine.”

He is dead on his feet. Tyrion could see it now. *The wound, the fire... he's done, I need to find someone else, but who? Ser Mandon?* He looked at the men and knew it would not do. Clegane's fear had shaken them. Without a leader, they would refuse as well, and Ser Mandon... a dangerous man, Jaime said, yes, but not a man other men would follow.

In the distance Tyrion heard another great crash. Above the walls, the darkening sky was awash with sheets of green and orange light. How long could the gate hold?

This is madness, he thought, *but sooner madness than defeat. Defeat is death and shame.* "Very well, I'll lead the sortie."

If he thought that would shame the Hound back to valor, he was wrong. Clegane only laughed. "You?"

Tyrion could see the disbelief on their faces. "Me. Ser Mandon, you'll bear the king's banner. Pod, my helm." The boy ran to obey. The Hound leaned on that notched and blood-streaked sword and looked at him with those wide white eyes. Ser Mandon helped Tyrion mount up again. "*Form up!*" he shouted.

His big red stallion wore crinet and chamfron. Crimson silk draped his hindquarters, over a coat of mail. The high saddle was gilded. Podrik Payne handed up helm and shield, heavy oak emblazoned with a golden hand on red, surrounded by small golden lions. He walked his horse in a circle, looking at the little force of men. Only a handful had responded to his command, no more than twenty. They sat their horses with eyes as white as the Hound's. He looked contemptuously at the others, the knights and sellswords who had ridden with Clegane. "They say I'm half a man," he said. "What does that make the lot of you?"

That shamed them well enough. A knight mounted, helmetless, and rode to join the others. A pair of sellswords followed. Then more. The King's Gate shuddered again. In a few moments the size of Tyrion's command had doubled. He had them trapped. *If I fight, they must do the same, or they are less than dwarfs.*

"You won't hear me shout out Joffrey's name," he told them. "You won't hear me yell for Casterly Rock either. This is your city Stannis means

to sack, and that's your gate he's bringing down. So come with me and kill the son of a bitch!" Tyrion unsheathed his axe, wheeled the stallion around, and trotted toward the sally port. He *thought* they were following, but never dared to look.