Through the gloom of night the dead men flew, raining down upon the city streets. The riper corpses would fall to pieces in the air, and burst when they came smashing down onto the bricks, scattering worms and maggots and worse things. Others would bounce against the sides of pyramids and towers, leaving smears of blood and gore to mark the places where they'd struck.   
  
Huge as they were, the Yunkish trebuchets did not have the range to throw their grisly burdens deep into the city. Most of the dead were landing just inside the walls, or slamming off barbicans, parapets, and defensive towers. With the six sisters arrayed in a rough crescent around Meereen, every part of the city was being struck, save only" "the river districts to the north. No trebuchet could throw across the width of the Skahazadhan.   
  
*A small mercy, that*, thought Barristan Selmy, as he rode into the market square inside Meereen's great western gate. When Daenerys had taken the city, they had broken through that same gate with the huge battering ram called Joso's Cock, made from the mast of a ship. The Great Masters and their slave soldiers had met the attackers here, and the fighting had raged through the surrounding streets for hours. By the time the city finally fell, hundreds of dead and dying had littered the square.   
  
Now once again the market was a scene of carnage, though these dead came riding the pale mare. By day Meereen's brick streets showed half a hundred hues, but night turned them into patchworks of black and white and grey. Torchlight shimmered in the puddles left by the recent rains, and painted lines of fire on the helms and greaves and breastplates of the men.   
  
Ser Barristan Selmy rode past them slowly. The old knight wore the armor his queen had given him—a suit of white enameled steel, inlaid and chased with gold. The cloak that streamed from his shoulders was as white as winter snow, as was the shield slung from his saddle. Beneath him was the queen's own mount, the silver mare Khal Drogo had given her upon their wedding day. That was presumptous, he knew, but if Daenerys herself could not be with them in their hour of peril, Ser Barristan hoped the sight of her silver in the fray might give heart to her warriors, reminding them of who and what they fought for. Besides, the silver had been years in the company of the queen's dragons, and had grown accustomed to the sight and scent of them. That was not something that could be said for the horses of their foes.   
  
With him rode three of his lads. Tumco Lho carried the three-headed dragon banner of House Targaryen, red on black. Larraq the Lash bore the white forked standard of the Kingsguard: seven silver swords encircling a golden crown. To the Red Lamb Selmy had given a great silver-banded warhorn, to sound commands across the battlefield. His other boys remained at the Great Pyramid. They would fight another day, or not at all. Not every squire was meant to be a knight.   
  
***It was the hour of the wolf. The longest, darkest hour of the night.*** For many of the men who had assembled in the market square, it would be the last night of their lives. Beneath the towering brick facade of Meereen's ancient Slave Exchange, five thousand Unsullied were drawn up in ten long lines. They stood as still as if they had been carved of stone, each with his three spears, short sword, and shield. Torchlight winked off the spikes of their bronze helmets, and bathed the smooth-cheeked faces beneath. When a body came spinning down amongst them, the eunuchs simply stepped aside, taking just as many steps as were required, then closing ranks again. They were all afoot, even their officers: Grey Worm first and foremost, marked by the three spikes on his helm."   
  
The Stormcrows had assembled beneath the merchant's arcade fronting on the southern side of the square, where the arches gave them some protection from the dead men. Jokin's archers were fitting strings to their bows as Ser Barristan rode by. The Widower sat grim-faced astride a gaunt grey horse, with his shield upon his arm and his spiked battle-axe in hand. A fan of black feathers sprouted from one temple of his iron halfhelm. The boy beside him" "was clutching the company's banner: a dozen ragged black streamers on a tall staff, topped by a carved wooden crow.   
  
The horselords had come as well. Aggo and Rakharo had taken most of the queen's small khalasar across the Skahazadhan, but the old half-crippled jaqqa rhan Rommo had scraped together twenty riders from those left behind. Some were as old as he was, many marked by some old wound or deformity. The rest were beardless boys, striplings seeking their first bell and the right to braid their hair. They milled about near the weathered bronze statue of the Chainmaker, anxious to be off, dancing their horses aside whenever a corpse came spinning down from above.   
  
Not far from them, about the ghastly monument the Great Masters called the Spire of Skulls, several hundred pit fighters had gathered. Selmy saw the Spotted Cat amongst them. Beside him stood Fearless Ithoke, and elsewhere Senerra SheSnake, Camarron of the Count, the Brindled Butcher, Togosh, Marrigo, Orlos the Catamite. Even Goghor the Giant was there, towering above the others like a man amongst boys. Freedom means something to them after all, it would seem. The pit fighters had more love for Hizdahr than they had ever shown Daenerys, but Selmy was glad to have them all the same. Some are even wearing armor, he observed. Perhaps his defeat of Khrazz had taught them something.   
  
Above, the gatehouse battlements were crowded with men in patchwork cloaks and brazen masks: the Shavepate had sent his Brazen Beasts onto the city walls, to free up the Unsullied to take the field. Should the battle be lost, it would be up to Skahaz and his men to hold Meereen against the Yunkai'i … until such time as Queen Daenerys could return.   
  
If indeed she ever does.  
  
 Across the city at other gates others forces had assembled. Tal Toraq and his Stalwart Shields had gathered by the eastern gate, sometimes called the hill gate or the Khyzai gate, since travelers bound for Lhazar via the Khyzai Pass always left that way. Marselen and the Mother's Men had massed beside the south gate, the Yellow Gate. The Free Brothers and Symon Stripeback had drawn the north gate, fronting on the river. They would have the easiest egress, with no foe before them but a few ships. The Yunkishmen had placed two Ghiscari legions to the north, but they were camped across the Skahazadhan, with the whole width of the river between them and the walls of Meereen.   
  
The main Yunkish camp lay to the west, between the walls of Meereen and the warm green waters of Slaver's Bay. Two of the trebuchets had risen there, one beside the river, the second opposite Meereen's main gates, defended by two dozen of Yunkai's Wise Masters, each with his own slave soldiers. Between the great siege engines were the fortified encampments of two Ghiscari legions. The Company of the Cat had its camp between the city and the sea. The foe had Tolosi slingers too, and somewhere out in the night were three hundred Elyrian crossbowmen.   
  
Too many foes, Ser Barristan brooded. Their numbers must surely tell against us. This attack went against all of the old knight's instincts. Meereen's walls were thick and strong. Inside those walls, the defenders enjoyed every advantage. Yet he had no choice but to lead his men into the teeth of the Yunkish siege lines, against foes of vastly greater strength.   
  
The White Bull would have called it folly. He would have warned Barristan against trusting sellswords too. This is what it has come to, my queen, Ser Barristan thought. Our fates hinge upon a sellsword's greed. Camarron, Goghor, and the Spotted Cat for the pit fighters." "You know our plan of attack," the white knight said, when the captains Your city, your people, our lives … the Tattered Prince holds us all in his bloodstained hands.   
  
Even if their best hope proved to be forlorn hope, Selmy knew that he had no other choice. He might have held Meereen for years against the Yunkai'i, but he could not hold it for even a moon's turn with the pale mare galloping through its streets.  
  
 A hush fell across the market square as the old knight and his banner bearers rode toward the gatehouse. Selmy could hear the murmur of countless voices, the sound of horses blowing, whickering, and scraping iron-shod hooves over crumbling brick, the faint clatter of sword and shield. All of it seemed muffled and far away. It was not a silence, just a quiet, the indrawn breath that comes before the shout. Torches smoked and crackled, filling the darkness with shifting orange light.   
  
Thousands turned as one to watch as the old knight wheeled his horse around in the shadow of the great iron-banded gates. Barristan Selmy could feel their eyes upon him. The captains and commanders advanced to meet him. Jokin and the Widower for the Stormcrows, ringmail clinking under faded cloaks; Grey Worm, Sure Spear, and Dogkiller for the Unsullied, in spiked bronze caps and quilted armor; Rommo for the Dothraki; Camarron, Goghor, and the Spotted Cat for the pit fighters.   
  
"You know our plan of attack," the white knight said when the captains were gathered around him. "We will hit them first with our horse, as oon as the gate is opened. Ride hard and fast, straight at the slave soldiers. When the legions form up, sweep around them. Take them from behind or from the flan, but do not try their spears. Remember your objectives."  
  
 "The trebuchet," said the Widower. "The one the Yunkai'i call Harridan. Take it, topple it, or burn it."  
  
 Jokin nodded. "Feather as many of their nobles as we can. And burn their tents, the big ones, the pavilions."   
  
"Kill many man," said Rommo. "Take no slaves."   
  
Ser Barristan turned in the saddle. "Cat, Goghor, Camarron, your men will follow afoot. You are known as fearsome fighters. Frighten them. Scream and shout. By the time you reach the Yunkish lines, our horsemen should have broken through. Follow them into the breach, and do as much slaughter as you can. Where you can, spare the slaves and cut down their masters, the noblemen and officers. Fall back before you are surrounded." Goghor smashed a fist against his chest.   
  
"Goghor not fall back. Never."   
  
Then Goghor die, the old knight thought, soon. But this was not the time nor place for that argument. He let it pass, and said, "These attacks should distract the Yunkai'i long ld rise or fall, he knew. If the Yunkish commanders had any sense, they would send their horse thundering down on the eunuchs before they could form ranks, when they were most vulnerable. His own cavalry would have to prevent that long enough for the Unsullied to lock shields and raise their wall of spears. "At the sound of my horn, Grey Worm will advance in line and roll up the slavers and their soldiers. It may be that one or more Ghiscari legions will march out to meet them, shield to shield and spear to spear. That battle we shall surely win."   
  
"This one hears," said Grey Worm. "It shall be as you say."   
  
"Listen for my horn," Ser Barristan told them. "If you hear the retreat, fall back. Our walls stand behind us, packed with Brazen Beasts. Our foes dare not come too close, or they will find themselves in crossbow range. If you hear the horn sound advance, advance at once. Make for my standard for the queen's." He pointed at the banners in the hands of Tumco Lho and Larraq.   
  
The Widower's horse sidled to his left. "And if your horn falls silent, ser knight? If you and these green boys of yours are cut down?"   
  
It was a fair question. Ser Barristan meant to be the first through the Yunkish lines. He might well be the first to die. It often worked that way. "If I fall, command is yours. After you, Jokin. Then Grey Worm." Should all of us be killed, the day is lost, he might have added, but they all knew that, surely, and none of them would want to hear it said aloud. Never speak of defeat before a battle, Lord Commander Hightower had told him once, when the world was young, for the gods may be listening.   
  
And if we come upon the captain?" asked the Widower.   
  
Daario Naharis. "Give him a sword and follow him." Though Barristan Selmy had little love and less trust for the queen's paramour, he did not doubt his courage, nor his skill at arms. And if he should die heroically in battle, so much the better. "If there are no further questions, go back to your men and say a prayer to whatever god you believe in. Dawn will be on us soon."   
  
"A red dawn," said Jokin of the Stormcrows.   
  
A dragon dawn, thought Ser Barristan.   
  
He had done his own praying earlier, as his squires helped him don his armor. His gods were far away across the sea in Westeros, but if the septons told it true, the Seven watched over their children wherever they might wander. Ser Barristan had said a prayer to the Crone, beseeching her to grant him a little of her wisdom, so that he might lead his men to victory. To his old friend the Warrior he prayed for strength. He asked the Mother for her mercy, should he fall. The Father he entreated to watch over his lads, these half-trained squires who were the closest things to sons that he would ever know. Finally he had bowed his head to the Stranger. "You come for all men in the end," he had prayed, "but if it please you, spare me and mine today, and gather up the spirits of our foes instead."   
  
Out beyond the city walls, the distant thump of a trebuchet releasing could be heard. Dead men and body parts came spinning down out of the night. One crashed amongst the pit fighters, showering them with bits of bone and brain and flesh. Another bounced off the Chainmaker's weathered bronze head and tumbled down his arm to land with a wet splat at his feet. A swollen leg splashed in a puddle not three yards from where Selmy sat waiting on his queen's horse.   
  
"The pale mare," murmured Tumco Lho. His voice was thick, his dark eyes shiny in his black face. Then he said something in the tongue of the Basilisk Isles that might have been a prayer.  
  
 He fears the pale mare more than he fears our foes, Ser Barristan realized. His other lads were frightened too. Brave as they might be, not one was blooded yet.  
 He wheeled his silver mare about. "Gather round me, men." When they edged their horses closer, he said, "I know what you are feeling. I have felt the same myself, a hundred times. Your breath is coming faster than it should. In your belly a knot of fear coils like a cold black worm. You feel as though you need to empty your bladder, maybe move your bowels. Your mouth is dry as the sands of Dorne. What if you shame yourself out there, you wonder? What if you forget all your training? You yearn to be a hero, but deep down inside you fear you might be craven."  
  
 "Every boy feels the same way on the eve of battle. Aye, and grown men as well. Those Stormcrows over there are feeling the same thing. So are the Dothraki. There is no shame in fear, unless you let it master you. We all taste terror in our time."   
  
"I am not afraid." The Red Lamb's voice was loud, almost to the point of shouting. "Should I die, I will go before the Great Shepherd of Lhazar, break his crook across my knee, and say to him, ‘Why did you make your people lambs, when the world is full of wolves?' Then I will spit into his eye."   
  
Ser Barristan smiled. "Well said … but take care that you do not seek death out there, or you will surely find it. The Stranger comes for all of us, but we need not rush into his arms."

"Whatever might befall us on the battlefield, remember, it has happened before, and to better men than you. I am an old man, an old knight, and I have seen more battles than most of you have years. Nothing is more terrible upon this earth, nothing more glorious, nothing more absurd. You may retch. You will not be the first. You may drop your sword, your shield, your lance. Others have done the same. Pick it up and go on fighting. You may foul your breeches. I did, in my first battle. No one will care. All battlefields smell of shit. You may cry out for your mother, pray to gods you thought you had forgotten, howl obscenities that you never dreamed could pass your lips. All this has happened too.   
  
"Some men die in every battle. More survive. East or west, in every inn and wine sink, you will find greybeards endlessly refighting the wars of their youth. They survived their battles. So may you. This you can be certain of: the foe you see before you is just another man, and like as not he is as frightened as you. Hate him if you must, love him if you can, but lift your sword and bring it down, then ride on. Above all else, keep moving. We are too few to win the battle. We ride to make chaos, to buy the Unsullied time enough to make their spear wall, we—"   
  
"Ser?" Larraq pointed with the Kingsguard banner, even as a wordless murmur went up from a thousand pairs of lips.   
  
Far across the city, where the shadowed steps of Meereen's Great Pyramid shouldered eight hundred feet into a starless sky, a fire had awoken where once the harpy stood. A yellow spark at the apex of the pyramid, it glimmered and was gone again, and for half a heartbeat Ser Barristan was afraid the wind had blown it out. Then it returned, brighter, fiercer, the flames swirling, now yellow, now red, now orange, reaching up, clawing at the dark.   
  
Away to the east, dawn was breaking behind the hills. Another thousand voices were exclaiming now. Another thousand men were looking, pointing, donning their helms, reaching for their swords and axes. Ser Barristan heard the rattle of chains. That was the portcullis coming up. Next would come the groan of the gate's huge iron hinges. It was time.   
  
The Red Lamb handed him his winged helm. Barristan Selmy slipped it down over his head, fastened it to his gorget, pulled up his shield, slipped his arm inside the straps. The air tasted strangely sweet. There was nothing like the prospect of death to make a man feel alive.   
  
"May the Warrior protect us all," he told his lads. "Sound the attack."   
  
"May the Warrior protect us all… Sound the attack."   
  
"They are on our side!" The sellswords did not come to meet his charge because they were already preoccupied with the ironborn! "It's like Baelor Breakspear and Prince Maekar, the hammer and the anvil. We have them! We have them!"