**Tyrion**

Somewhere off in the far distance, a dying man was screaming for his mother. "To horse!" a man was yelling in Ghiscari, in the next camp to the north of the Second Sons. "To horse! To horse!" High and shrill, his voice carried a long way in the morning air, far beyond his own encampment. Tyrion knew just enough Ghiscari to understand the words, but the fear in his voice would have been plain in any tongue.  
 I know how he feels.   
  
It was time to find his own horse, he knew. Time to don some dead boy's armor, buckle on a sword and dagger, slip his dinted greathelm down over his head. Dawn had broken, and a sliver of the rising sun was visible behind the city's walls and towers, blindingly bright. To the west the stars were fading, one by one.   
Trumpets were blowing along the Skahazadhan,

warhorns answering from the walls of Meereen. A ship was sinking in the river mouth, afire. Dead men and dragons were moving through the sky, whilst warships crashed and clashed on Slaver's Bay. Tyrion could not see them from here, but he could hear the sounds: the crash of hull against hull as ships slammed together, the deep-throated warhorns of the ironborn and queer high whistles of Qarth, the splintering of oars, the shouts and battle cries, the crash of axe on armor, sword on shield, all mingled with the shrieks of wounded men. Many of the ships were still far out in the bay, so the sounds they made seemed faint and far away, but he knew them all the same. The music of slaughter.  
  
 Three hundred yards from where he stood rose the Wicked Sister, her long arm swinging up with a clutch of corpses— chunk-THUMP—and there they flew, naked and swollen, pale dead birds tumbling boneless through the air. The siege camps shimmered in a gaudy haze of rose and gold, but the famous stepped pyramids of Meereen hulked black against the glare. Something was moving atop one of them, he saw. A dragon, but which one? At this distance, it could as easily have been an eagle. A very big eagle.  
  
 After days spent hidden inside musty tents of the Second Sons, the outside air smelled fresh and clear. Though he could not see the bay from where he stood, the tang of salt told him it was near. Tyrion filled his lungs with it. A fine day for a battle. From the east the sound of drumming rolled across the parched plain. A column of mounted men flashed past the Harridan, flying the blue banners of the Windblown.   
  
A younger man might have found it all exhilarating. A stupider man might have thought it grand and glorious, right up to the moment when some arse-ugly Yunkish slave soldier with rings in his nipples planted an axe between his eyes.

Tyrion Lannister knew better. The gods did not fashion me to wield a sword, he thought, so why do they keep putting me in the midst of battles?   
  
No one heard. No one answered. No one cared.  
  
 Tyrion found himself thinking back on his first battle. Shae had been the first to stir, woken by his father's trumpets. The sweet strumpet who'd pleasured him for half the night had trembled naked in his arms, a frightened child. Or was all that a lie as well, a ploy she used to make me feel brave and brilliant? What a mummer she might have been. When Tyrion had shouted out for Podrick Payne to help him with his armor, he'd found the boy asleep and snoring. Not the quickest lad I've ever known, but a decent squire in the end. I hope he found a better man to serve.   
  
It was queer, but Tyrion remembered the Green Fork much better than the Blackwater. It was my first. You never forget your first. He remembered the fog drifting off the river, wending through the reeds like pale white fingers. And the beauty of that sunrise, he remembered that as well: stars strewn across a purple sky, the grass glittering like glass with the morning dew, red splendor in the east. He remembered the touch of Shae's fingers as she helped Pod with Tyrion's mismatched armor. That bloody helm. Like a bucket with a spike. That spike had saved him, though, had won him his first victory, but Groat and Penny had never looked half as silly as he musthave looked that day. Shae had called him "fearsome" when she saw him in his steel, mind you.  
 How could I have been so blind, so deaf, so stupid? I should have known better than to do my thinking with my cock.   
  
The Second Sons were saddling their horses. They went about it calmly, unhurriedly, efficiently; it was nothing they had not done a hundred times before. A few of them were passing a skin from hand to hand though whether it was wine or water he could not say. Bokkoko was kissing his lover shamelessly, kneading the boy's buttocks with one huge hand, the other tangled in his hair. Behind them, Ser Garibald was brushing out the mane of his big gelding. Kem sat on a rock, gazing at the ground… remembering his dead brother, perhaps, or dreaming of that friend back in King's Landing. Hammer and Nail moved from man to man, checking spears and swords, adjusting armor, putting an edge on any blade that needed it. Snatch chewed his sourleaf, making japes and scratching at his balls with his hook hand. Something about his manner reminded Tyrion of Bronn. Ser Bronn of the Blackwater now, unless my sister's killed him. That might not be quite so simple as she thinks. He wondered how many battles these Second Sons had fought. How many skirmishes, how many raids? How many cities have they stormed, how many brothers have they buried or left behind to rot? Compared to them, Tyrion was a green boy, still untested,though he had counted more years than half the company.   
  
This would be his third battle. Seasoned and blooded, stamped and sealed, a proven warrior, that's me. I've killed some men and wounded others, taken wounds myself and lived to tell of them. I've led charges, heard men scream my name, cut down bigger men and better, even had a few small tastes of glory… and wasn't that a fine rich wine for heroes, and wouldn't I like another taste? Yet with all he'd done and all he'd seen, the prospect of another battle made his blood run cold. He had traveled across half the world by way of palanquin, poleboat, and pig, sailed in slave ships and trading galleys, mounted whores and horses, all the time telling himself that he did not care whether he lived or died… only to find that he cared quite a lot after all.   
  
The Stranger had mounted his pale mare and was riding toward them with his sword in hand, but Tyrion Lannister did not care to meet with him again. Not now. Not yet. Not this day. What a fraud you are, Imp. You let a hundred guardsmen rape your wife, shot your father through the belly with a quarrel, twisted a golden chain around your lover's throat until her face turned black, yet somehow you still think that you deserve to live.   
  
Penny was already in her armor when Tyrion slipped back inside the tent they shared. She had been strapping herself into wooden plate for years in service to her mummery; real plate and mail were not so different once you mastered all the clasps and buckles. And if the company steel was dinted here and rusted there, scratched and stained and discolored, no matter. It should still be good enough to stop a sword.  
  
 The only piece she had not donned was her helm. When he entered, she looked up. "You're not armored. What's happening?"  
  
 "The usual things. Mud and blood and heroism, killing and dying. There's one battle being fought out on the bay, another one beneath the city walls. Whichever way the Yunkish turn, they have a foe behind them. The closest fighting's a good league off still, but we'll be in it soon." On one side or the other. The Second Sons were ripe for another change of masters, Tyrion was almost certain of that… though there was a great abyss between "certain" and "almost certain." If I have misjudged my man, all of us are lost. "Put on your helm and make sure the clasps are closed. I took mine off once to keep from drowning, and it cost me a nose." Tyrion picked at his scar.   
  
"We need to get you into your armor first."  
  
 "If you wish. The jerkin first. The boiled leather, with the iron studs. Ringmail over that, then the gorget." He glanced about the tent. "Is there wine?"   
  
"No."  
  
 "We had half a flagon left from supper."

"A quarter of a flagon, and you drank it." He sighed.   
  
"I would sell my sister for a cup of wine."   
  
"You would sell your sister for a cup of horse piss.  
  
" That was so unexpected that it made him laugh aloud. "Is my taste for horse piss so well-known or have you met my sister?"   
  
"I only saw her that one time, when we jousted for the boy king. Groat thought she was beautiful."  
  
 Groat was a stunted little lickspittle with a stupid name. "Only a fool rides into battle sober. Plumm will have some wine. What if he dies in the battle? It would be a crime to waste it."  
  
 "Hold your tongue. I need to lace this jerkin up."  
  
 Tyrion did try, but it seemed to him that the sounds of slaughter were growing louder, and his tongue would not be held. "Pudding Face wants to use the company to throw the ironmen back into the sea," he heard himself telling Penny, as she dressed him. "What he should have done was send all his horse at the eunuchs, full charge, before they got ten feet from their gates. Send the Cats at them from the left, us and the Windblown from the right, rip apart their flanks from both ends. Man to man, the Unsullied are no better or worse than any other spearmen. It's their discipline that makes them dangerous, but if they cannot form up into a spear wall…"   
  
"Lift your arms," said Penny. "There, that's better. Maybe you should command the Yunkishmen."

"They use slave soldiers, why not slave commanders? That would ruin the contest, though. This is just a cyvasse game to the Wise Masters. We're the pieces." Tyrion canted his head to one side, considering. "They have that in common with my lord father, these slavers." "Your father? What do you mean?"

"I was just recalling my first battle. The Green Fork. We fought between a river and a road. When I saw my father's host deploy, I remember thinking how beautiful it was. Like a flower opening its petals to the sun. A crimson rose with iron thorns. And my father, ah, he had never looked so resplendent. He wore crimson armor, with this huge greatcloak made of cloth-of-gold. A pair of golden lions on his shoulders, another on his helm. His stallion was magnificent. His lordship watched the whole battle from atop that horse and never got within a hundred yards of any foe. He never moved, never smiled, never broke a sweat, whilst thousands died below him. Picture me perched on a camp stool, gazing down upon a cyvasse board. We could almost be twins… if I had a horse, some crimson armor, and a greatcloak sewn from cloth-of-gold. He was taller too. I have more hair."

Penny kissed him.

She moved so fast that he had no time to think. She darted in, quick as a bird, and pressed her lips to his. Just as quickly it was over. What was that for? he almost said, but he knew what it was for. Thank you, he might have said, but she might take that as leave to do it again. Child, I have no wish to hurt you, he could have tried, but Penny was no child, and his wishes would not blunt the cut. For the first time for longer than he cared to think, Tyrion Lannister was at a loss for words.

She looks so young, he thought. A girl, that's all she is. A girl, and almost pretty if you can forget that she's a dwarf. Her hair was a warm brown, thick and curly, and her eyes were large and trusting. Too trusting.

"Do you hear that sound?" said Tyrion. She listened.  
  
 "What is it?" she said as she was strapping a pair of mismatched greaves onto his stunted legs.   
  
"War. On either side of us and not a league away. That's slaughter, Penny. That's men stumbling through the mud with their entrails hanging out. That's severed limbs and broken bones and pools of blood. You know how the worms come out after a hard rain? I hear they do the same after a big battle if enough blood soaks into the ground. That's the Stranger coming, Penny. The Black Goat, the Pale Child, Him of Many Faces, call him what you will. That's death."  
  
 "You're scaring me.

“Am I? Good. You should be scared. We have ironborn swarming ashore and Ser Barristan and his Unsullied pouring out the city gates, with us between them, fighting on the wrong bloody side. I am terrified myself."  
   
"You say that, but you still make japes."   
  
"Japes are one way to keep the fear away. Wine's another." "You're brave. Little people can be brave."  
 My giant of Lannister, he heard. She is mocking me. He almost slapped her again. His head was pounding.  
  
 "I never meant to make you angry," Penny said "Forgive me. I'm frightened, is all." She touched his hand. Tyrion wrenched away from her. "I'm frightened." Those were the same words Shae had used. Her eyes were big as eggs, and I swallowed every bit of it. I knew what she was. I told Bronn to find a woman for me and he brought me Shae. His hands curled into fists, and Shae's face swam before him, grinning. Then the chain was tightening about her throat, the golden hands digging deep into her flesh as her own hands fluttered against his face with all the force of butterflies. If he'd had a chain to hand… if he'd had a crossbow, a dagger, anything, he would have… he might have… he…   
  
It was only then that Tyrion heard the shouts. He was lost in a black rage, drowning in a sea of memory, but the shouting brought the world back in a rush. He opened his hands, took a breath, turned away from Penny. "Something's happening."   
He went outside to discover what it was.  
  
 Dragons.  
  
 The green beast was circling above the bay, banking and turning as longships and galleys clashed and burned below him, but it was the white dragon the sellswords were gawking at. Three hundred yards away the Wicked Sister swung her arm, chunk-THUMP, and six fresh corpses went dancing through the sky. Up they rose, and up, and up. Then two burst into flame.

The dragon caught one burning body just as it began to fall, crunching it between his jaws as pale fires ran across his teeth. White wings cracked against the morning air, and the beast began to climb again. The second corpse caromed off an outstretched claw and plunged straight down, to land amongst some Yunkish horsemen. Some of them caught fire too. One horse reared up and threw his rider. The others ran, trying to outrace the flames and fanning them instead. Tyrion Lannister could almost taste the panic as it rippled out across the camps.   
  
The sharp, familiar scent of urine filled the air. The dwarf glanced about and was relieved to see that it was Inkpots who had pissed himself, not him. "You had best go change your breeches," Tyrion told him. "And whilst you are about it, turn your cloak." The paymaster blanched but did not move.

He was still standing there, staring as the dragon snatched corpses from the air, when the messenger came pounding up. A bloody officer, Tyrion saw at once. He was clad in golden armor and mounted on a golden horse. Loudly he announced that he had come from the supreme commander of the Yunkai'i, the noble and puissant Gorzhak zo Eraz. "Lord Gorzhak sends his compliments to Captain Plumm and requests that he bring his company to the bay shore. Our ships are under attack."

Your ships are sinking, burning, fleeing, thought Tyrion. Your ships are being taken, your men put to the sword. He was a Lannister of Casterly Rock, close by the Iron Islands; ironborn reavers were no strangers to their shores. Over the centuries they had burned Lannisport at least thrice and raided it two dozen times. Westermen knew what savagery the ironborn were capable of; these slavers were just learning.   
  
"Captain's not here just now," Inkpots told the messenger. "He's gone to see the Girl General."  
  
 The rider pointed at the sun. "Lady Malazza's command ended with the rising of the sun. Do as Lord Gorzhak instructs you."

"Attack the squid ships, you mean? The ones out there in the  
water?" The paymaster frowned. "I don't see how, myself, but  
when Brown Ben gets back I'll tell him what your Gorzhak wants.”

"I gave you a command. You will act upon it now."   
"We take commands from our captain," Inkpots said in his usual mild tone.   
  
"He's not here. I told you."  
  
 The messenger had lost his patience, Tyrion could see. "Battle is joined. Your commander should be with you."   
  
"Might be, but he's not. The girl sent for him. He went." The messenger went purple. "You must carry out your order!"   
  
Snatch spat a wad of well-chewed sourleaf out of the left side of his mouth. "Begging your pardon," he told the Yunkish rider, "but we're all horsemen here, same as m'lord. Now, a good trained warhorse, he'll charge a wall o' spears. Some will leap a fire ditch. But I never once seen any horse could run on water."   
  
"The ships are landing men," screamed the Yunkish lordling. "They've blocked the mouth of the Skahazadhan with a fireship, and every moment you stand here talking another hundred swords come splashing through the shallows. Assemble your men and drive them back into the sea! At once! Gorzhak commands it!"   
  
"Which one is Gorzhak?" asked Kem. "Is he the Rabbit?" "Pudding Face," said Inkpots. "The Rabbit's not fool enough to send light horse against longships."

The rider had heard enough. "I shall inform Gorzhak zo Eraz that you refuse to carry out his order," he said stiffly. Then he wheeled his golden horse around and galloped back the way he'd come, chased by a gale of sellsword laughter.   
  
Inkpots was the first to let his smile die. "Enough," he said, suddenly solemn. "Back to it. Get those horses saddled, I want every man of you ready to ride when Ben gets back here with some proper orders. And put that cookfire out. You can break your fasts after the fighting's done if you live that long." His gaze fell on Tyrion. "What are you grinning at? You look a little fool in that armor, Halfman."   
  
"Better to look a fool than to be one," the dwarf replied. "We are on the losing side."   
  
"The Halfman's right," said Jorah Mormont. "We do not want to be fighting for the slavers when Daenerys returns… and she will, make no mistake. Strike now and strike hard, and the queen will not forget it. Find her hostages and free them. And I will swear on the honor of my house and home that this was Brown Ben's plan from the beginning."  
  
 Out on the waters of Slaver's Bay, another of the Qartheen galleys went up in a sudden whooosh of flame. Tyrion could hear elephants trumpeting to the east. The arms of the six sisters rose and fell, throwing corpses. Shield slammed against shield as two spear walls came together beneath the walls of Meereen.  
 Dragons wheeled overhead, their shadows sweeping across the upturned faces of friend and foe alike.   
  
Inkpots threw up his hands. "I keep the books. I guard our gold. I draw up our agreements, collect our wages, make certain that we have sufficient coin to buy provisions. I do not decide who we fight or when. That is for Brown Ben to say. Take it up with him when he returns."   
  
By the time Plumm and his companions came galloping back from the camp of the Girl General, the white dragon had flown back to its lair above Meereen. The green still prowled, soaring in wide circles above the city and the bay on great green wings.   
  
Brown Ben Plumm wore plate and mail over boiled leather. The silk cloak flowing from his shoulders was his only concession to vanity: it rippled when he moved, the color changing from pale violet to deep purple. He swung down from his horse and gave her over to a groom, then told Snatch to summon his captains. "Tell them to make haste," added Kasporio the Cunning.   
  
Tyrion was not even a serjeant, but their cyvasse games had made him a familiar sight in Brown Ben's tent, and no one tried to stop him when he entered with the rest. Besides Kasporio and Inkpots, Uhlan and Bokkoko were amongst those summoned. The dwarf was surprised to see Ser Jorah Mormont there as well.  
  
 "We are commanded to defend the Wicked Sister," Brown Ben informed them. The other men exchanged uneasy glances. No one seemed to want to speak until Ser Jorah asked, "On whose authority?"   
  
"The girl's. Ser Grandfather is making for the Harridan, but she's afraid he'll turn toward Wicked Sister next. The Ghost is already down. Marselen's freedmen broke the Long Lances like a rotten stick and dragged it over with chains. The girl figures Selmy means to bring down all the trebuchets."  
  
 "It's what I'd do in his place," Ser Jorah said. "Only I would have done it sooner." "Why is the girl still giving orders?" Inkpots sounded baffled. "Dawn has come and gone. Can she not see the sun? She is behaving as if she were still the supreme commander." "If you were her and knew that Pudding Face were about to assume command, you might keep giving orders too," said Mormont.   
  
"One is no better than the other," Kasporio insisted.   
  
"True," said Tyrion, "but Malazza has the nicer teats."   
  
"Crossbows is how you hold the Wicked Sister," Inkpots said. "Scorpions. Mangonels. That's what's needed. You do not use mounted men to defend a fixed position. Does the girl mean for us to dismount? If so, why not use her spears or slingers?"

Kem stuck his pale blond head inside the tent. "Sorry to disturb, m'lords, but another rider's come. Says he has new orders from the supreme commander."   
  
Brown Ben glanced at Tyrion, then shrugged. "Send him in."   
  
"In here?" Kem asked, confused.   
  
"Here is where I seem to be," Plumm said, with a trace of irritation. "If he goes somewhere else, he will not find me."   
  
Out went Kem. When he returned, he held the tent flap open for a Yunkish nobleman in a cloak of yellow silk and matching pantaloons. The man's oily black hair had been tortured, twisted, and lacquered to make it seem as if a hundred tiny roses were sprouting from his head. On his breastplate was a scene of such delightful depravity that Tyrion sensed a kindred spirit.   
  
"The Unsullied are advancing toward the Harpy's Daughter," the messenger announced. "Bloodbeard and two Ghiscari legions stand against them. Whilst they hold the line, you are to sweep around behind the eunuchs and take them in the rear, sparing none. This by the command of the most noble and puissant Morghar zo Zherzyn, supreme commander of the Yunkai'i."   
  
"Morghar?" Kasporio frowned. "No, Gorzhak commands today."  
  
 "Gorzhak zo Eraz lies slain, cut down by Pentoshi treachery.

The turncloak who names himself the Prince of Tatters shall die screaming for this infamy, the noble Morghar swears." Brown Ben scratched at his beard.   
"The Windblown have gone over, have they?" he said, in a tone of mild interest.   
  
Tyrion chortled. "And we've traded Pudding Face for the Drunken Conquerer. It's a wonder he was able to crawl out of the flagon long enough to give a halfway-sensible command."  
  
 The Yunkishman glared at the dwarf. "Hold your tongue, you verminous little—" His retort withered. "This insolent dwarf is an escaped slave," he declared, shocked. "He is the property of the noble Yezzan zo Qaggaz of hallowed memory."  
  
 "You are mistaken. He is my brother-in-arms. A free man, and a Second Son. Yezzan's slaves wear golden collars." Brown Ben smiled his most amiable smile. "Golden collars, with little bells. Do you hear bells? I hear no bells."   
  
"Collars can be removed. I demand that the dwarf be surrended for punishment at once."   
  
"That seems harsh. Jorah, what do you think?"   
  
"This." Mormont's longsword was in his hand. As the rider turned, Ser Jorah thrust it through his throat. The point came out the back of the Yunkishman's neck, red and wet. Blood bubbled from his lips and down his chin. The man took two wobbly steps and fell across the cyvasse board, scattering the wooden armies everywhere. He twitched a few more times, grasping the blade of Mormont's sword with one hand as the other clawed feebly at the overturned table. Only then did the Yunkishman seem to realize he was dead. He lay facedown on the carpet in a welter of red blood and oily black roses. Ser Jorah wrenched his sword free of the dead man's neck. Blood ran down its fullers.   
  
The white cyvasse dragon ended up at Tyrion's feet. He scooped it off the carpet and wiped it on his sleeve, but some of the Yunkish blood had collected in the fine grooves of the carving, so the pale wood seemed veined with red. "All hail our beloved queen, Daenerys." Be she alive or be she dead. He tossed the bloody dragon in the air, caught it, grinned.   
  
"We have always been the queen's men," announced Brown Ben Plumm. "Rejoining the Yunkai'i was just a plot."   
  
"And what a clever ploy it was." Tyrion gave the dead man a shove with his boot. "If that breastplate fits, I want it."