

The book cover features a central illustration of a dragon with its wings spread, perched atop a warrior in ornate, dark armor. The warrior is holding a sword aloft, and the scene is set against a background of dark, swirling, storm-like patterns. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and browns, with highlights of gold and red. The text is overlaid on the image in a classic serif font.

WILLIAM KING

WARHAMMER

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AENARION

A TYRION & TECLIS NOVEL

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AENARION

An audio drama

BLOOD OF AENARION

William King

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William King's short stories have appeared in The Year's Best SF, Zenith, Interzone and White Dwarf. He is the creator of the Gotrek & Felix novels and the author of four Space Wolf novels starring Ragnar Blackmane. He lives in Prague.

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THEY RODE THROUGH the north gate of the city and along the Sea Road, pushing through the late arriving drovers and early arriving travellers as they moved towards Lothern. Korhien took the left-hand path up the Watch Hill. It was traditional that the other protagonist would arrive by the right-hand one. Idly Tyrion wondered who would be first to arrive. Some people made a lot of that. Some chose to arrive early to show they were not afraid, some to come late to unsettle their opponent. For him, it did not matter. The fight was the thing. He was looking forward to it.

They rode to the hilltop and he could see his opponent and his two seconds were already there along with the thirty warriors of his part of the circle. They stood ready, looking at Tyrion with contempt graven on their faces. Tyrion smiled at them with the same friendliness he had shown everyone else this morning. The two seconds looked away. Larien shook his head as if Tyrion had committed some kind of faux pas.

Tyrion turned to look down from Watch Hill. He had a fine view of the Inner Sea approach and the Northern Walls of Lothern. It was not as impressive as the view of the Great Harbour coming in from the ocean but it was still striking. From the hill, you could see over the walls and notice the slate roofs of the buildings, the layout of the streets, the size of the largest statues. The waters of the Inner Sea were a calm mirror.

The sun had fully risen now and the morning was already warm. The sky was a very clear blue overhead. Gulls cawed. In the distance tiny figures made their way along the road. It was curious that they still had everyday business. Down there in the city, merchants bought and sold, lovers held hands, families were sitting down to breakfast. Up here two elves prepared to settle a matter of life and death.

It was the way the world worked. Always somewhere someone would be going about their daily routine while elsewhere mortals fought for their lives.

He rolled his shoulders and stretched his muscles and became aware that the others were looking at him curiously, as if they could not quite understand how he could be so calm. He knew they thought he was young and inexperienced and he supposed they expected him to show nerves. He did not feel any. He was enjoying himself. In a way he even took pleasure in being the centre of attention here. He would have smiled again, but this was a serious business now and deserving of a serious response.

He focused his attention on Larien. His opponent did not look so relaxed. He looked tense but not in a way that would be bad for a fighter. His movements crackled with nervous energy. His pupils seemed very large. All of his attention was focused on Tyrion. When their gazes met, he turned his head and spat, sending a gob of spittle to land at Tyrion's feet. It was a very grave insult.

Tyrion merely shrugged. This was all posturing, an attempt at intimidation, to unsettle Tyrion and put him in a frame of mind where he would make a mistake. Tyrion looked at Korhien who nodded, and Iltharis who was studying him closely in the way a gambler might study a horse before a race. Tyrion wondered if Iltharis had made a bet with someone and whether it would be for or against him.

It would have to be a bet for me, Tyrion decided. The odds against me would not make risking gold worthwhile. You could get good odds on me winning. That was the decision he himself would have made at least.

'For or against?' he asked. Iltharis seemed to understand at once what he meant. He smiled ruefully.

'For,' he responded.

'How much?'

'Ten gold dragons.'

Tyrion whistled. It was a hefty sum.

'Your confidence is inspiring,' Tyrion said.

'I got excellent odds.'

'I thought you would. What were they?'

'You sure you want to know?' Tyrion understood the question. It might damage his confidence if he knew how little was expected of him.

'Absolutely.'

'Fifty to one.'

'I wish I had known. I would have asked you to put something on for me. It would be a good bet. If I win, I get to spend the winnings. If I lose, I don't care.'

'You will not lose,' said Korhien. He did not sound entirely confident of that, but it was heartening that he cared.

'You are right,' Tyrion said, with sudden absolute confidence. 'I will not.'

Iltharis said, 'Larien has a tricky feint. He will mount a strong attack high and right and then will stab for the stomach. He will try to get you into the rhythm of defending against the flurry and then switch when you think you see an opening yourself.'

'I will bear that in mind,' Tyrion said. He would too, but he would not put too much faith in it. He preferred to study his opponent for himself and work on his own observations.

'He will use the early parts of the fight to feel you out,' said Korhien. 'He will pretend to be slower than he is, so he can take you off guard with the killing strike.'

Tyrion smiled at them both. 'I thank you for your advice.'

'But you have had enough of it,' Iltharis said. 'I recognise that tone.'

'I will win this for myself.'

'Never refuse any advantage you might get in a fight,' Korhien said. 'It can make the difference between life and death.'

'Even if it's dishonourable?' Tyrion asked.

'Especially if it's dishonourable,' Iltharis said with a grin. Korhien shot him a warning look. The other seconds were coming forward now. The duel was about to begin. All sixty warriors were forming in a circle, presenting their blades, points towards the centre. The duel would take place within a ring of sharp steel. The warriors would strike down any contestant who tried to flee from the battle.

The formalities were already gone through. Larien was not willing to retract the insult. Tyrion felt that honour must be satisfied. The seconds had done their best to make sure the quarrel had been settled amicably. Duty was done. The fight could begin. Both participants stripped to the waist and took up their weapons.

'I shall kill you slowly and painfully,' said Larien, as they walked down into the depression and took their places in the flat space below.

'The way you think,' said Tyrion and smiled brightly.

Larien looked hard at him.

'Slowly and painfully,' Tyrion said, to make sure Larien got the point.

Things were obviously not going the way he expected. Tyrion's nonchalance had evidently surprised him. He had come expecting to kill a nervous boy. He had found someone more self-possessed than he was. Tyrion decided that in part this fight was to be won in the mind. He suspected that most individual combats were. It was as much about the attitude of the fighters as it was about skill.

'I am of the Blood of Aenarion,' said Tyrion, simply, as if he were explaining something to

someone slow of mind. It was an attack designed to increase Larien's unease and make him less sure of himself.

'I will soon see what that looks like,' said Larien. 'I am guessing it is the same colour as anyone else's.'

It was a good response and Tyrion smiled at it as if hearing a joke he enjoyed particularly.

'Shall we begin?' he asked, looking from Korhien to Larien's chief second. The two of them nodded. They stepped back to take their places on the edge of the ring. They too presented their blades. There was no way out of the circle now. All of the gaps were closed. Anyone trying to get out would be impaled upon a blade.

Larien sprang forward as lithe as a tiger. Tyrion parried easily enough and stepped forward. Blade strokes blurred between the two of them for the moment. Tyrion kept his guard up and made a few ripostes. He was content simply to ride out the fury of the initial attack and take the measure of his opponent.

Larien was quick and he was strong and his technique was excellent. Tyrion did not need Korhien's training to know this. Something in his mind was aware of it, in the same way as he was aware of the strength and weakness of a chess position. He doubted Larien had the same quickness of reflex as he himself possessed but he decided not to act on that assumption until he had more proof of it. Larien could, after all, easily be faking it, hoping to make him overconfident.

A few more passes of the blades told him this was not so. The elf's personality was reflected in his blade work. His swordplay was intricate and deceptive but the deception was in the technique. Larien relied on that and his natural strength to overcome his opponents. He was much better with a sword than most elves ever would be. He smiled at Tyrion, teeth gritted.

'I see what you mean about killing me slowly,' said Tyrion as they stepped apart. 'Are you trying to lull me to sleep?'

'No,' said Larien, springing forward. His blade was aimed high. An elf less quick than Tyrion might have had his head split. As it was Tyrion merely stepped backwards, parrying as he went, noticing that the rain of blows Larien had unleashed did indeed have a rhythm, and one most likely intended to lull the opponent into parrying the pattern of it.

He found himself falling into the pattern almost automatically, as an elf might sometimes find himself tapping his fingers in time to a drumbeat. He could see the danger of what Iltharis had predicted happening. It came as no surprise when suddenly the blade was not where it should have been according to the pattern of strokes. Tyrion had already predicted where it would be and parried it. He brought his left fist crashing into Larien's face.

Cartilage broke under the impact. Larien went reeling back, blinded by pain and tears. Tyrion leaned forward to full extension, ramming his sword into Larien's stomach. He felt the impact all the way up his arm. There was a scraping sensation as his sword hit bone. Larien screamed like an animal being pole-axed. Blood gouted forth, covering Tyrion's sword and hands, spraying onto his naked chest. Some of it got in his mouth. He caught the coppery taste.

Part of his mind was aware that this should be horrific. It was certainly not beautiful or glorious. There was a stink of blood and entrails, of things that should normally be inside an elf's body but now were not.

He did not mind it, just as he did not mind the screaming, or the sight of the light dying in another elf's eyes. The main thing was that, at some point, the sword had left Larien's hand and was now lying on the ground. His own life was no longer in danger. He had wiped out an insult to his family's honour and he had forestalled an attack on his clan by their enemies.

He felt a twinge of sympathy for Larien's pain. Korhien had been right in one way. It was hard to watch another elf die, but that too was a problem easily solved. He struck again, aiming for the heart, and silenced Larien's screams forever. He looked around at the other elves present. They stared at him in wonder and something else; it might have been horror.

'Unorthodox and inelegant,' said Iltharis. 'But effective.'

Korhien nodded. 'The main thing is that you are alive.'

He stepped forward and hoisted Tyrion into the air, laughing. He seemed more relieved than Tyrion felt and suddenly it struck him why. Korhien had not been looking forward to explaining to Prince Arathion how he had led his son to his death. Tyrion looked down at the corpse of Larien. Already it looked different. The face looked stark and all animating spirit had left it. The eyes were glazed.

Larien's two seconds were covering his corpse with a cloak. Tyrion contemplated the shrouded form for a moment, only too aware that it might so easily have been his own. He felt no rush of reaction, no urge to scream or shout or sing with joy. He was keenly aware of his triumph, that he was alive and he had proven the victor and that was enough for him. He had a sense of satisfaction and pleasure though.

'By all the gods,' Iltharis said. 'You are a cool one.'