



## TYRION

A horse whickered impatiently behind him, from amidst the ranks of gold cloaks drawn up across the road. Tyrion could hear Lord Gyles coughing as well. He had not asked for Gyles, no more than he'd asked for Ser Addam or Jalabhar Xho or any of the rest, but his lord father felt Doran Martell might take it ill if only a dwarf came out to escort him across the Blackwater.

*Joffrey should have met the Dornishmen himself*, he reflected as he sat waiting, *but he would have mucked it up, no doubt*. Of late the king had been repeating little jests about the Dornish that he'd picked up from Mace Tyrell's men-at-arms. *How many Dornishmen does it take to shoe a horse? Nine. One to do the shoeing, and eight to lift the horse up*. Somehow Tyrion did not think Doran Martell would find that amusing.

He could see their banners flying as the riders emerged from the green of the living wood in a long dusty column. From here to the river, only bare black trees remained, a legacy of his battle. *Too many banners*, he thought sourly, as he watched the ashes kick up under the hooves of the approaching horses, as they had beneath the hooves of the Tyrell van as it smashed Stannis in the flank. *Martell's brought half the lords of Dorne, by the look of it*. He tried to think of some good that might come of that, and failed. "How many banners do you count?" he asked Bronn.

The sellsword knight shaded his eyes. "Eight . . . no, nine."

Tyrion turned in his saddle. “Pod, come up here. Describe the arms you see, and tell me which houses they represent.”

Podrick Payne edged his gelding closer. He was carrying the royal standard, Joffrey’s great stag-and-lion, and struggling with its weight. Bronn bore Tyrion’s own banner, the lion of Lannister gold on crimson.

*He’s getting taller*, Tyrion realized as Pod stood in his stirrups for a better look. *He’ll soon tower over me like all the rest*. The lad had been making a diligent study of Dornish heraldry, at Tyrion’s command, but as ever he was nervous. “I can’t see. The wind is flapping them.”

“Bronn, tell the boy what you see.”

Bronn looked very much the knight today, in his new doublet and cloak, the flaming chain across his chest. “A red sun on orange,” he called, “with a spear through its back.”

“Martell,” Podrick Payne said at once, visibly relieved. “House Martell of Sunspear, my lord. The Prince of Dorne.”

“My horse would have known that one,” said Tyrion dryly. “Give him another, Bronn.”

“There’s a purple flag with yellow balls.”

“Lemons?” Pod said hopefully. “A purple field strewn with lemons? For House Dalt? Of, of Lemonwood.”

“Might be. Next’s a big black bird on yellow. Something pink or white in its claws, hard to say with the banner flapping.”

“The vulture of Blackmont grasps a baby in its talons,” said Pod. “House Blackmont of Blackmont, ser.”

Bronn laughed. “Reading books again? Books will ruin your sword eye, boy. I see a skull too. A black banner.”

“The crowned skull of House Manwoody, bone and gold on black.” Pod sounded more confident with every correct answer. “The Manwoodys of Kingsgrave.”

“Three black spiders?”

“They’re scorpions, ser. House Qorgyle of Sandstone, three scorpions black on red.”

“Red and yellow, a jagged line between.”

“The flames of Hellholt. House Uller.”

Tyrion was impressed. *The boy's not half stupid, once he gets his tongue untied.* “Go on, Pod,” he urged. “If you get them all, I’ll make you a gift.”

“A pie with red and black slices,” said Bronn. “There’s a gold hand in the middle.”

“House Allyrion of Godsgrace.”

“A red chicken eating a snake, looks like.”

“The Gargalens of Salt Shore. A cockatrice. Ser. Pardon. Not a chicken. Red, with a black snake in its beak.”

“Very good!” exclaimed Tyrion. “One more, lad.”

Bronn scanned the ranks of the approaching Dornishmen. “The last’s a golden feather on green checks.”

“A golden quill, ser. Jordayne of the Tor.”

Tyrion laughed. “Nine, and well done. I could not have named them all myself.” That was a lie, but it would give the boy some pride, and that he badly needed.

*Martell brings some formidable companions, it would seem.* Not one of the houses Pod had named was small or insignificant. Nine of the greatest lords of Dorne were coming up the kingsroad, them or their heirs, and somehow Tyrion did not think they had come all this way just to see the dancing bear. There was a message here. *And not one I like.* He wondered if it had been a mistake to ship Myrcella down to Sunspear.

“My lord,” Pod said, a little timidly, “there’s no litter.”

Tyrion turned his head sharply. The boy was right.

“Doran Martell always travels in a litter,” the boy said. “A carved litter with silk hangings, and suns on the drapes.”

Tyrion had heard the same talk. Prince Doran was past fifty, and gouty. *He may have wanted to make faster time, he told himself. He may have feared his litter would make too tempting a target for brigands, or that it would prove too cumbersome in the high passes of the Boneway. Perhaps his gout is better.*

So why did he have such a bad feeling about this?

This waiting was intolerable. “Banners forward,” he snapped. “We’ll meet them.” He kicked his horse. Bronn and Pod followed, one to either side. When the Dornishmen saw them coming, they spurred their own mounts, banners rippling as they rode. From their ornate saddles were slung the round metal shields they favored, and many carried bundles of short throwing spears, or the double-curved Dornish bows they used so well from horseback.

There were three sorts of Dornishmen, the first King Daeron had observed. There were the salty Dornishmen who lived along the coasts, the sandy Dornishmen of the deserts and long river valleys, and the stony Dornishmen who made their fastnesses in the passes and heights of the Red Mountains. The salty Dornishmen had the most Rhoynish blood, the stony Dornishmen the least.

All three sorts seemed well represented in Doran’s retinue. The salty Dornishmen were lithe and dark, with smooth olive skin and long black hair streaming in the wind. The sandy Dornishmen were even darker, their faces burned brown by the hot Dornish sun. They wound long bright scarfs around their helms to ward off sunstroke. The stony Dornishmen were biggest and fairest, sons of the Andals and the First Men, brown-haired or blond, with faces that freckled or burned in the sun instead of browning.

The lords wore silk and satin robes with jeweled belts and flowing sleeves. Their armor was heavily enameled and inlaid with burnished copper, shining silver, and soft red gold. They came astride red horses and golden ones and a few as pale as snow, all slim and swift, with long necks and narrow beautiful heads. The fabled sand steeds of Dorne were smaller than proper warhorses and could not bear such weight of armor, but it was said that they could run for a day and night and another day, and never tire.

The Dornish leader forked a stallion black as sin with a mane and tail the color of fire. He sat his saddle as if he’d been born there, tall, slim, graceful. A cloak of pale red silk fluttered from his shoulders, and his shirt was armored with overlapping rows of copper disks that glittered like a thousand bright new pennies as he rode. His high gilded helm displayed a

copper sun on its brow, and the round shield slung behind him bore the sun-and-spear of House Martell on its polished metal surface.

*A Martell sun, but ten years too young*, Tyrion thought as he reined up, *too fit as well, and far too fierce*. He knew what he must deal with by then. *How many Dornishmen does it take to start a war?* he asked himself. *Only one*. Yet he had no choice but to smile. “Well met, my lords. We had word of your approach, and His Grace King Joffrey bid me ride out to welcome you in his name. My lord father the King’s Hand sends his greetings as well.” He feigned an amiable confusion. “Which of you is Prince Doran?”

“My brother’s health requires he remain at Sunspear.” The princeling removed his helm. Beneath, his face was lined and saturnine, with thin arched brows above large eyes as black and shiny as pools of coal oil. Only a few streaks of silver marred the lustrous black hair that receded from his brow in a widow’s peak as sharply pointed as his nose. *A salty Dornishmen for certain*. “Prince Doran has sent me to join King Joffrey’s council in his stead, as it please His Grace.”

“His Grace will be most honored to have the counsel of a warrior as renowned as Prince Oberyn of Dorne,” said Tyrion, thinking, *This will mean blood in the gutters*. “And your noble companions are most welcome as well.”

“Permit me to acquaint you with them, my lord of Lannister. Ser Deziel Dalt, of Lemonwood. Lord Tremond Gargalen. Lord Harmen Uller and his brother Ser Ulwyck. Ser Ryon Allyrion and his natural son Ser Daemon Sand, the Bastard of Godsgrace. Lord Dagos Manwoody, his brother Ser Myles, his sons Mors and Dickon. Ser Arron Qorgyle. And never let it be thought that I would neglect the ladies. Myria Jordayne, heir to the Tor. Lady Larra Blackmont, her daughter Jynessa, her son Perros.” He raised a slender hand toward a black-haired woman to the rear, beckoning her forward. “And this is Ellaria Sand, mine own paramour.”

Tyrion swallowed a groan. *His paramour, and bastard-born, Cersei will pitch a holy fit if he wants her at the wedding*. If she consigned the woman to some dark corner below the salt, his sister would risk the Red Viper’s wrath. Seat her beside him at the high table, and every other lady on the dais was like to take offense. *Did Prince Doran mean to provoke a quarrel?*

Prince Oberyn wheeled his horse about to face his fellow Dornishmen. “Ellaria, lords and ladies, sers, see how well King Joffrey loves us. His Grace has been so kind as to send his own Uncle Imp to bring us to his court.”

Bronn snorted back laughter, and Tyrion perforce must feign amusement as well. “Not alone, my lords. That would be too enormous a task for a little man like me.” His own party had come up on them, so it was his turn to name the names. “Let me present Ser Flement Brax, heir to Hornvale. Lord Gyles of Rosby. Ser Addam Marbrand, Lord Commander of the City Watch. Jalabhar Xho, Prince of the Red Flower Vale. Ser Harys Swyft, my uncle Kevan’s good father by marriage. Ser Merlon Crakehall. Ser Philip Foote and Ser Bronn of the Blackwater, two heroes of our recent battle against the rebel Stannis Baratheon. And mine own squire, young Podrick of House Payne.” The names had a nice ringing sound as Tyrion reeled them off, but the bearers were nowise near as distinguished nor formidable a company as those who accompanied Prince Oberyn, as both of them knew full well.

“My lord of Lannister,” said Lady Blackmont, “we have come a long dusty way, and rest and refreshment would be most welcome. Might we continue on to the city?”

“At once, my lady.” Tyrion turned his horse’s head, and called to Ser Addam Marbrand. The mounted gold cloaks who formed the greatest part of his honor guard turned their horses crisply at Ser Addam’s command, and the column set off for the river and King’s Landing beyond.

*Oberyn Nymeros Martell*, Tyrion muttered under his breath as he fell in beside the man. *The Red Viper of Dorne. And what in the seven hells am I supposed to do with him?*

He knew the man only by reputation, to be sure . . . but the reputation was fearsome. When he was no more than sixteen, Prince Oberyn had been found abed with the paramour of old Lord Yronwood, a huge man of fierce repute and short temper. A duel ensued, though in view of the prince’s youth and high birth, it was only to first blood. Both men took cuts, and honor was satisfied. Yet Prince Oberyn soon recovered, while Lord Yronwood’s wounds festered and killed him. Afterward men whispered that

Oberyn had fought with a poisoned sword, and ever thereafter friends and foes alike called him the Red Viper.

That was many years ago, to be sure. The boy of sixteen was a man past forty now, and his legend had grown a deal darker. He had traveled in the Free Cities, learning the poisoner's trade and perhaps arts darker still, if rumors could be believed. He had studied at the Citadel, going so far as to forge six links of a maester's chain before he grew bored. He had soldiered in the Disputed Lands across the narrow sea, riding with the Second Sons for a time before forming his own company. His tourneys, his battles, his duels, his horses, his carnality . . . it was said that he bedded men and women both, and had begotten bastard girls all over Dorne. The *sand snakes*, men called his daughters. So far as Tyrion had heard, Prince Oberyn had never fathered a son.

And of course, he had crippled the heir to Highgarden.

*There is no man in the Seven Kingdoms who will be less welcome at a Tyrell wedding*, thought Tyrion. To send Prince Oberyn to King's Landing while the city still hosted Lord Mace Tyrell, two of his sons, and thousands of their men-at-arms was a provocation as dangerous as Prince Oberyn himself. *A wrong word, an ill-timed jest, a look, that's all it will take, and our noble allies will be at one another's throats.*

"We have met before," the Dornish prince said lightly to Tyrion as they rode side by side along the kingsroad, past ashen fields and the skeletons of trees. "I would not expect you to remember, though. You were even smaller than you are now."

There was a mocking edge to his voice that Tyrion misliked, but he was not about to let the Dornishman provoke him. "When was this, my lord?" he asked in tones of polite interest.

"Oh, many and many a year ago, when my mother ruled in Dorne and your lord father was Hand to a different king."

*Not so different as you might think*, reflected Tyrion.

"It was when I visited Casterly Rock with my mother, her consort, and my sister Elia. I was, oh, fourteen, fifteen, thereabouts, Elia a year older. Your brother and sister were eight or nine, as I recall, and you had just been born."

*A queer time to come visiting.* His mother had died giving him birth, so the Martells would have found the Rock deep in mourning. His father especially. Lord Tywin seldom spoke of his wife, but Tyrion had heard his uncles talk of the love between them. In those days, his father had been Aerys's Hand, and many people said that Lord Tywin Lannister ruled the Seven Kingdoms, but Lady Joanna ruled Lord Tywin. "He was not the same man after she died, Imp," his Uncle Gery told him once. "The best part of him died with her." Gerion had been the youngest of Lord Tytos Lannister's four sons, and the uncle Tyrion liked best.

But he was gone now, lost beyond the seas, and Tyrion himself had put Lady Joanna in her grave. "Did you find Casterly Rock to your liking, my lord?"

"Scarcely. Your father ignored us the whole time we were there, after commanding Ser Kevan to see to our entertainment. The cell they gave me had a featherbed to sleep in and Myrish carpets on the floor, but it was dark and windowless, much like a dungeon when you come down to it, as I told Elia at the time. Your skies were too grey, your wines too sweet, your women too chaste, your food too bland . . . and you yourself were the greatest disappointment of all."

"I had just been born. What did you expect of me?"

"*Enormity*," the black-haired prince replied. "You were small, but far-famed. We were in Oldtown at your birth, and all the city talked of was the monster that had been born to the King's Hand, and what such an omen might foretell for the realm."

"Famine, plague, and war, no doubt." Tyrion gave a sour smile. "It's always famine, plague, and war. Oh, and winter, and the long night that never ends."

"All that," said Prince Oberyn, "and your father's fall as well. Lord Tywin had made himself greater than King Aerys, I heard one begging brother preach, but only a god is meant to stand above a king. You were his curse, a punishment sent by the gods to teach him that he was no better than any other man."

"I try, but he refuses to learn." Tyrion gave a sigh. "But do go on, I pray you. I love a good tale."



“And well you might, since you were said to have one, a stiff curly tail like a swine’s. Your head was monstrous huge, we heard, half again the size of your body, and you had been born with thick black hair and a beard besides, an evil eye, and lion’s claws. Your teeth were so long you could not close your mouth, and between your legs were a girl’s privates as well as a boy’s.”

“Life would be much simpler if men could fuck themselves, don’t you agree? And I can think of a few times when claws and teeth might have proved useful. Even so, I begin to see the nature of your complaint.”

Bronn gave out with a chuckle, but Oberyn only smiled. “We might never have seen you at all but for your sweet sister. You were never seen at table or hall, though sometimes at night we could hear a baby howling down in the depths of the Rock. You did have a monstrous great voice, I must grant you that. You would wail for hours, and nothing would quiet you but a woman’s teat.”

“Still true, as it happens.”

This time Prince Oberyn did laugh. “A taste we share. Lord Gargalen once told me he hoped to die with a sword in his hand, to which I replied that I would sooner go with a breast in mine.”

Tyrion had to grin. “You were speaking of my sister?”

“Cersei promised Elia to show you to us. The day before we were to sail, whilst my mother and your father were closeted together, she and Jaime took us down to your nursery. Your wet nurse tried to send us off, but your sister was having none of that. ‘He’s mine,’ she said, ‘and you’re just a milk cow, you can’t tell me what to do. Be quiet or I’ll have my father cut your tongue out. A cow doesn’t need a tongue, only udders.’”

“Her Grace learned charm at an early age,” said Tyrion, amused by the notion of his sister claiming him as hers. “She’s never been in any rush to claim me since, the gods know.

“Cersei even undid your swaddling clothes to give us a better look,” the Dornish prince continued. “You did have one evil eye, and some black fuzz on your scalp. Perhaps your head was larger than most . . . but there was no tail, no beard, neither teeth nor claws, and nothing between your legs but a tiny pink cock. After all the wonderful whispers, Lord Tywin’s Doom

turned out to be just a hideous red infant with stunted legs. Elia even made the noise that young girls make at the sight of infants, I'm sure you've heard it. The same noise they make over cute kittens and playful puppies. I believe she wanted to nurse you herself, ugly as you were. When I commented that you seemed a poor sort of monster, your sister said, 'He killed my mother,' and twisted your little cock so hard I thought she was like to pull it off. You shrieked, but it was only when your brother Jaime said, 'Leave him be, you're hurting him,' that Cersei let go of you. 'It doesn't matter,' she told us. 'Everyone says he's like to die soon. He shouldn't even have lived this long.'"

The sun was shining bright above them, and the day was pleasantly warm for autumn, but Tyrion Lannister went cold all over when he heard that. *My sweet sister*. He scratched at the scar of his nose and gave the Dornishman a taste of his "evil eye." *Now why would he tell such a tale? Is he testing me, or simply twisting my cock as Cersei did, so he can hear me scream?* "Be sure and tell that story to my father. It will delight him as much as it did me. The part about my tail, especially. I did have one, but he had it lopped off."

Prince Oberynd had a chuckle. "You've grown more amusing since last we met."

"Yes, but I *meant* to grow taller."

"While we are speaking of amusement, I heard a curious tale from Lord Buckler's steward. He claimed that you had put a tax on women's privy purses."

"It is a tax on whoring," said Tyrion, irritated all over again. *And it was my bloody father's notion*. "Only a penny for each, ah . . . act. The King's Hand felt it might help improve the morals of the city." *And pay for Joffrey's wedding besides*. Needless to say, as master of coin, Tyrion had gotten all the blame for it. Bronn said they were calling it *the dwarf's penny* in the streets. "Spread your legs for the Halfman, now," they were shouting in the brothels and wine sinks, if the sellsword could be believed.

"I will make certain to keep my pouch full of pennies. Even a prince must pay his taxes."

"Why should you need to go whoring?" He glanced back to where Ellaria Sand rode among the other women. "Did you tire of your paramour on the

road?”

“Never. We share too much.” Prince Oberyn shrugged. “We have never shared a beautiful blonde woman, however, and Ellaria is curious. Do you know of such a creature?”

“I am a man wedded.” *Though not yet bedded.* “I no longer frequent whores.” *Unless I want to see them hanged.*

Oberyn abruptly changed the subject. “It’s said there are to be seventy-seven dishes served at the king’s wedding feast.”

“Are you hungry, my prince?”

“I have hungered for a long time. Though not for food. Pray tell me, when will the *justice* be served?”

“Justice.” *Yes, that is why he’s here, I should have seen that at once.* “You were close to your sister?”

“As children Elia and I were inseparable, much like your own brother and sister.”

*Gods, I hope not.* “Wars and weddings have kept us well occupied, Prince Oberyn. I fear no one has yet had the time to look into murders sixteen years stale, dreadful as they were. We shall, of course, just as soon as we may. Any help that Dorne might be able to provide to restore the king’s peace would only hasten the beginning of my lord father’s inquiry —”

“Dwarf,” said the Red Viper, in a tone grown markedly less cordial, “spare me your Lannister lies. Is it sheep you take us for, or fools? My brother is not a bloodthirsty man, but neither has he been asleep for sixteen years. Jon Arryn came to Sunspear the year after Robert took the throne, and you can be sure that he was questioned closely. Him, and a hundred more. I did not come for some mummer’s show of an *inquiry*. I came for justice for Elia and her children, and I will have it. Starting with this lummox Gregor Clegane . . . but not, I think, ending there. Before he dies, the Enormity That Rides will tell me whence came his orders, please assure your lord father of that.” He smiled. “An old septon once claimed I was living proof of the goodness of the gods. Do you know why that is, Imp?”

“No,” Tyrion admitted warily.

“Why, if the gods were cruel, they would have made me my mother’s firstborn, and Doran her third. I *am* a bloodthirsty man, you see. And it is me you must contend with now, not my patient, prudent, and gouty brother.”

Tyrian could see the sun shining on the Blackwater Rush half a mile ahead, and on the walls and towers and hills of King’s Landing beyond. He glanced over his shoulder, at the glittering column following them up the kingsroad. “You speak like a man with a great host at his back,” he said, “yet all I see are three hundred. Do you spy that city there, north of the river?”

“The midden heap you call King’s Landing?”

“That’s the very one.”

“Not only do I see it, I believe I smell it now.”

“Then take a good sniff, my lord. Fill up your nose. Half a million people stink more than three hundred, you’ll find. Do you smell the gold cloaks? There are near five thousand of them. My father’s own sworn swords must account for another twenty thousand. And then there are the roses. Roses smell so sweet, don’t they? Especially when there are so *many* of them. Fifty, sixty, seventy thousand roses, in the city or camped outside it, I can’t really say how many are left, but there’s more than I care to count, anyway.”

Martell gave a shrug. “In Dorne of old before we married Daeron, it was said that all flowers bow before the sun. Should the roses seek to hinder me I’ll gladly trample them underfoot.”

“As you trampled Willas Tyrell?”

The Dornishman did not react as expected. “I had a letter from Willas not half a year past. We share an interest in fine horseflesh. He has never borne me any ill will for what happened in the lists. I struck his breastplate clean, but his foot caught in a stirrup as he fell and his horse came down on top of him. I sent a maester to him afterward, but it was all he could do to save the boy’s leg. The knee was far past mending. If any were to blame, it was his fool of a father. Willas Tyrell was green as his surcoat and had no business riding in such company. The Fat Flower thrust him into tourneys at too

tender an age, just as he did with the other two. He wanted another Leo Longthorn, and made himself a cripple.”

“There are those who say Ser Loras is better than Leo Longthorn ever was,” said Tyrion.

“Renly’s little rose? I doubt that.”

“Doubt it all you wish,” said Tyrion, “but Ser Loras has defeated many good knights, including my brother Jaime.”

“By *defeated*, you mean *unhorsed*, in tourney. Tell me who he’s slain in battle if you mean to frighten me.”

“Ser Robar Royce and Ser Emmon Cuy, for two. And men say he performed prodigious feats of valor on the Blackwater, fighting beside Lord Renly’s ghost.”

“So these same men who saw the prodigious feats saw the ghost as well, yes?” The Dornishman laughed lightly.

Tyrion gave him a long look. “Chataya’s on the Street of Silk has several girls who might suit your needs. Dancy has hair the color of honey. Marie’s is pale white-gold. I would advise you to keep one or the other by your side at all times, my lord.”

“At all times?” Prince Oberyn lifted a thin black eyebrow. “And why is that, my good Imp?”

“You want to die with a breast in hand, you said.” Tyrion cantered on ahead to where the ferry barges waited on the south bank of the Blackwater. He had suffered all he meant to suffer of what passed for Dornish wit. *Father should have sent Joffrey after all. He could have asked Prince Oberyn if he knew how a Dornishman differed from a cowflop.* That made him grin despite himself. He would have to make a point of being on hand when the Red Viper was presented to the king.