

Jon Arryn sighed feeling the weight of his age pressing down on him. He felt as if he was ready to keel over and die any moment thanks to the demands of his position as the Hand. The weeks following the royal family's relocation from King's Landing were utterly chaotic. No matter how they tried they could not keep a lid on the royal family's movement from the Red Keep. In hindsight, he should've listened to Varys' advice to shift the servants of the Red Keep first before the royal family. On the other hand, priority was given to safeguarding the royal family as soon as possible thanks to the Wildfire caches beneath the Red Keep. The consequence of that decision was the word got spread of the King and his family making their escape from the city. All sorts of rumours cropped up just as Varys had warned him. Some believed the Baratheons are changing the capital to the Stormlands. It was not particularly a harmful rumour but those that followed were not harmless in any sense. Some claimed the King set the Sept of Baelor on fire in a drunken stupor. Some other rumours claimed the King was taken over by the ghost of the Mad King and was planning to burn the whole city to ashes. Some more farfetched rumours would have everyone believe that Lord Tywin was attacking King's Landing for some reason.

Rightly or wrongly the blame was being pushed into the heads of House Baratheon and Lannister. There was hardly anything he could do about it to change the perception of the smallfolk. He had already tried to dispel the rumours but the death counts thanks to the giant wave that laid waste to the outskirts of the city and the destruction of the Great Sept of Baelor has made the people unreasonable. The Targaryens have been gone from Westeros for nearly a decade and the smallfolk remembered the Lannister army's actions in the capital rather than the cruelty of the Mad King.

To make matters worse the city's economy was now gutted beyond repair if he was to trust the words of Lord Baelish. The wave not just washed away the lives of thousands but also the livelihood of tens of thousands in the city. The port facilities were damaged to an extent that no ship was ever going to moor on the shores of the city anytime soon. The damage to fishing boats and loss of life in the fishing community has also created acute food shortages in the city. The fishing communities that managed to survive have become jobless thanks to the devastation the sea brought upon them. There was the loss of harvests along the fields near Blackwater to consider as a lot of salt water had flown inland rendering the fields useless. There were many water-logged areas all around the banks of Blackwater and the damages sustained by the city walls were also going to be an issue in the coming years.

In short, the Crown required a gigantic sum of coin and a lot of luck to ever even recover from the damage that has been inflicted on the capital. The rapid migration of the smallfolk was also becoming a problem. He was sure the recovery would also be affected by the fleeing smallfolk in the future.

The sound of the door to his office slowly swinging open garnered his attention. The smell of perfume let him know it was Varys long before the eunuch showed his face.

"Lord Hand. Is this a good time?" Varys asked.

"Please come in." he invited the Master of whispers inside his temporary office in the capital city.

"There is a matter that needs your attention, my lord."

"What is it now? Are the Crownland lords making more ruckus because of the refugees?" Jon asked tiredly.

Ever since the smallfolk were leaving the city in droves his office has been flooding with complaints from the neighbouring lords about the influx of refugees. Their lands were being overrun by the

staggering number of people fleeing the city. Most of the smallfolk were looking to start anew while others were simply running away because of fear. Rumours have spread that the city was cursed by the gods and people were running away. Whispers of Doom were on many lips giving him and those who stayed behind a nightmarish job of keeping some sort of law and order in the city.

“There is that my lord. But this is another matter. The Alchemists have somehow escaped the city.” Varys reported gravely.

For a moment, Jon sat there stunned gaping at the Master of Whispers as if the man spoke gibberish.

“What! What do you mean?” Jon thundered, standing up in alarm.

“It’s as I said, my lord. I became aware when I noticed the guards assigned to keeping the Alchemists inside their guild halls were not responding. I sent my little birds and found the guards were sleeping soundly with no trace of the Alchemists.”

“That’s impossible. I have my most loyal men and the best of knights of the Vale guarding the Alchemists.”

“I’m inclined to agree my lord but the Alchemists have escaped their guild halls.”

“How?” Jon whispered.

“I’m endeavouring to find out the exact details, my lord. My guess however is that the Alchemists made their escape disguising themselves as fleeing smallfolk.” Varys said gravely. “If we are to capture these unpleasant fellows, we need to act fast.”

Jon shook his head and took a deep breath. He could not afford to lose his temper, especially in this poor situation.

“They’ll most likely attempt to make their escape to Essos. We need to check the roads leading to Duskendale.”

“I’ve sent word to the City Watch to search every man leaving the city for any possession of scrolls or books.”

“Good thinking Lord Varys.” Jon nodded appreciatively. “Come we have work to do.”

By the time the sun was setting, all he had to show after the search for the fleeing Alchemists was a few burned books, scrolls and pans in the Alchemist guild. It was as if the entire gang of Alchemists had vanished without leaving a trace. No one saw them leaving and no one saw anyone entering the guild. The guards and knights charged to watch over the Alchemists were no help either. All they remember was a strange fog enveloping the guild halls before they fell asleep.

Somehow the Alchemists managed to put the guards to sleep, burn away all the evidence of their nefarious works over the years and make their way out of the city in quick order.

“Someone definitely helped them escape the city.” Jon muttered, looking dejectedly at the half-burnt guild hall of the Alchemists.

“There is no doubt my lord. I suspect Lord Varys. I’d suspect the loyalty of a eunuch who served the Mad King.” said Lord Baelish.

Jon didn't want to revisit the argument that happened in the last Small Council meeting. While he was also wary of the Essosi he'd not proclaim the Master of Whispers a traitor. The major reason was the man has no reason to be loyal to the Targaryens. Aerys might've brought Varys into court but that was the extent of the Mad King's generosity. There were no great boons granted to Varys by House Targaryen to retain the loyalty of the man even to this day.

"No. Varys is not involved." Jon said confidently.

After all, Varys had worked tirelessly to find the Alchemists. Jon had watched the man work and he could find no fault in Varys' methods or dedication.

"My lord Hand. Lord Baelish." Varys called out to them as the eunuch arrived in their midst.

"Has there been any luck?" Jon asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid not my lord. I have sent word to my little birds across the Crownlands to watch for our fleeing prisoners. As per your order, Grandmaester Pycelle is sending ravens to all the Crownland lords and riders have been dispatched along the Kingsroad to hunt them down." Varys reported dutifully.

Jon could only sigh in disappointment.

"There is not an ounce of good news in this place is there?" Jon bemoaned.

"Actually, my Lord Arryn. I do have a piece of good news to share." said Baelish, a sharp smile on his thin face. "Our Braavosi friends have responded to our request. I'm told the Iron Bank is most happy to loan us the gold we need to restore the city."

"That's indeed a piece of good news." Jon smiled, clapping the shoulder of his fellow Valeman appreciatively.

However, he was not overtly moved by the news. Getting the gold to restore the city was only the beginning. The real work would depend on how effectively the gold can be spent to restore the city. He had travelled the many parts of the city and many squares were empty save for stone and wood. Otherwise, everything was stripped bare as the smallfolk made their escape. There was a lot of work to be done and it was not helped by the knowledge that traitors are running free in the city.

"May the Seven save us all." Jon whispered out a prayer.

"My lord there is another matter that begs your attention." said Varys, eyeing Baelish with distrust. "It is a matter you asked me to look into discreetly."

"Oh! Come then." Jon walked away with Varys out of the earshot of Baelish. "What is the matter?"

"It's about Lady Oleanna's interest in the Starks." said Varys.

"You found out what she is after?" Jon asked hopefully.

"Yes, my lord. It's hard to keep track of Lady Oleanna but not so much when it comes to the maesters she has employed from the Citadel. It seems Lady Oleanna is interested in the lineage of House Stark. More specifically she wanted to find a blood relation to House Targaryen in our Northern allies."

Now, Jon was flummoxed.

"I don't understand. What does she hope to find there? It's common knowledge that House Targaryen never married into any Northern houses." said Jon, finding it strange that Lady Olenna would obsess over something easily well-known in the Seven kingdoms.

"Ah, you forget my lord about the pact of Ice and Fire made between House Targaryen and Stark when dragons danced in Westeros." Varys reminded, hiding a tittering smile behind his sleeve.

"We all know that the pact never came close to completion." Jon scoffed dismissively. "Since when have the Targaryens ever kept to their oaths or promises?"

"True but Lady Olenna seem to have found out enough evidence to suggest that the Starks gained Targaryen blood, especially from the heir of the Black Queen."

"What?" Jon stared at the Master of Whispers with wide eyes. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that Lady Olenna seems to think the Starks have a blood right to the Iron Throne because they carry the blood of Jacaerys Velaryon."

"That's preposterous!" Jon sputtered.

"I agree, my lord. I'm just saying what I found from my little birds."

Jon was in shock as his mind struggled to come up with a reasonable explanation for the Tyrells getting obsessed with blood ties the Starks supposedly have with the Targaryens.

'Is there a larger plan afoot?' Jon thought worriedly.

The sudden appearance of the Red Viper in the North and the Tyrells sending Garlan Tyrell to foster in Winterfell under Eddard's care cannot be a coincidence as he originally imagined. Both the Martells and Tyrells are there in Winterfell and he feared what those two former Targaryen loyalists were plotting. Reading more deeply into the disappearance of the Alchemists he was sure there was a powerful enemy with a huge reservoir of resources to facilitate their escape.

'Did the Tyrells and Martells form a secret pact? Are they trying to break House Stark from the alliance that saw the crowning of Robert Baratheon? To what end are their plans progressing? Are they looking to restore Viserys Targaryen to the Iron Throne or are they merely hoping to cause chaos among the allied Great Houses?'

These were the questions that took root in his mind and he suspected there were no easy answers. He suddenly cast a curious look at the Master of Whispers hoping to get another perspective.

"What do you think about this Lord Varys?" he suddenly asked, surprising the Essosi eunuch going by the raised eyebrows.

"I suspect either Lady Olenna is under the assumption that Harrion Stark's magic must come from this supposed blood relation to Jacaerys Velaryon or..."

"Or?" Jon looked at the Master of Whispers with renewed interest.

"Or it is a ploy to make us act rashly. I mean who cares whether the Starks carry the blood of Lucerys Velaryon or not? The Dance happened more than a century ago. What difference will it make my lord?" Varys asked, shrugging dismissively.

Jon was reminded of the fact that Varys remains an Essosi man through and through. Perhaps in Essos, blood matters very little but in Westeros, blood ties matter a lot to the lords of Westeros. After all, the Lords of Westeros were not known for their impeccable reasoning and common sense.

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“My lord we are ever grateful for our rescue. You’ve not just saved our lives but the order of Alchemists from a most assured end at the tip of the executioner’s blade. We are forever in your debt.” Grandmaster Hallyne bowed his head with his forehead touching the floor in reverence, his balding head shining under the light of the lit torch.

“So long as we live, we’ll not forget this day and what you did for us, my lord. You are indeed a blessing from the gods.” said Wisdom Pollitor.

Harry had to strain his ears to make sense of what wisdom Pollitor was saying as the man was an old fossil with no teeth to speak of. Poaching a few Alchemists has always been a plan he was nursing in his mind. The rapidly deteriorating situation in the capital however forced his hand and Marwyn was the one who helped him realize the Alchemists are a treasure. He had assumed the Alchemists were just better-informed Chemists who manipulated different substances to yield almost magical results. But Marwyn firmly disagreed as the Archmaester had apparently kept extensive contact with the Alchemist guild and holds them in high regard. According to Marwyn, the Alchemists were extremely well-learned when it comes to elements but they were also gifted in magical spells. The Archmaester believes the Alchemists are remnants of the Valyrian Freehold, much diminished in their capabilities since the Doom and the fall of the dragons but still very much a part of Valyria’s might.

‘It’d be a crime to let them rot in a cell or get executed when they could contribute a lot to my goals.’ Harry thought.

“Your appreciation is noted Grandmaster Hallyne. However, I also bear bad news regarding your order. You’re now fugitives running from the Crown. A return to your old posts is almost impossible as things stand.” said Harry, noting that there were no surprised faces among the wisdoms of the order.

“We know my lord. If we had stayed, we’d have been judged harshly for the actions of our long-dead members. The Iron throne cannot assign blame to anyone else and the likes of Grandmaester Pycelle would love to see our heads on spikes.” Grandmaster Hallyne admitted with a pained look in his brown eyes.

“I’ve come to know from Archmaester Marwyn that you and your fellow wisdoms are a treasure trove of knowledge when it comes to elements and their interactions. He thinks highly of your order and your abilities when it comes to pyromancy. After speaking in length with Archmaester Marwyn I find myself intrigued by your magical affinity. It is my hope that we can learn from each other and pursue the long mysterious path of discovery in magic and alchemy.”

“We’d be honoured to be part of this great journey my lord.” Grandmaester Hallyne said happily.

A few minutes later Harry watched as the last of the Alchemists settle in the quarters of his castle without disturbing the castle’s inhabitants. The whole poaching mission was now a complete success and he only had to worry about keeping a lid on the fact that the Alchemists were under his

protection. But he didn't think it was going to be a difficult task. He had allocated an entire tower for the Alchemists to settle and he was going to ward it away from the eyes of any curious parties namely his Dornish guests. Not that he'd have to worry on that front for long. Prince Oberyn had already informed him of his need to leave for Essos on some business. That should lead the Alchemists to go about their business more openly. Besides, he didn't have much use for the Alchemists in the immediate future. They could spend the coming weeks in their tower arranging their records and books as well as integrate themselves into the Alchemy department he was planning to incorporate into his wizarding school.

He shook those thoughts away when Marwyn returned after settling the affairs of the Alchemists.

"They're very impressed by your magic. Wisdom Pollitor was singing praises of your magic about how you hid the airship with an invisibility spell. I think you just replaced House Targaryen's position in their minds." said Marwyn, an amused smile on his face.

"It was so simple to break them out. The only difficult part was the disillusion charm to hide the airship and having to explain the plan and convince the Alchemists to come along." Harry shrugged.

"Now that we have the Alchemists we need to pick up the pace with the plans to find children with magical affinity."

"I do believe I have got an idea on how we should proceed on that front." said Harry, looking thoughtfully at the raven sitting inconspicuously on the window side.

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A golden stag stood with a visible miniature storm surrounding its antlers over a defeated and bleeding golden lion with its hooves pressed down on its throat. The lion let out a pitiful groan before it breathed its last succumbing to its fate.

Another groan attracted the eyes of the victorious stag and found a wounded crown stag not far away from the lion. There was a wolf howling in the distance and a falcon flying in the sky letting out a mournful cry at the state of the wounded stag. The crown fell off its antlers and rolled on the ground until it came to a stop before the golden stag with a miniature storm around its antlers.

The falcon suddenly landed and bowed its head before the golden stag. Many more creatures emerged from land, sky and water, all bowing before the golden stag. The golden stag suddenly smacked the crown with its legs making the piece of gold ornament fly up and fall on the stag's antlers.

All the creatures began chorusing as one. "King Stannis! King Stannis! King Stannis!"

Stannis woke up with a gasp in his bed. He could hear the turbulent sound of the waves outside smacking into the shores of Storm's End. He let out a relieved sigh before he sat up in his bed.

'The same dream again.' Stannis thought with a frown, his ears still ringing with the chants hailing him as king.

The crown is yours Storm King, the winds whispered in his ears startling him.

The Old Gods had shown him a vision where he sits on the Iron Throne at Dragonstone. He had seen the destruction of the Great Sept of Baelor in his dreams long before he came to know about its destruction from the raven. It was per their instruction that he planted the weirwood sapling in the godswood of the Red Keep. But the dreams of the fallen golden stag... that was new. It all started when he came to Storm's End and met that boy.

He climbed out of his bed and dressed in clothes befitting his station before he stepped out of his room. He walked the halls of his ancestors deep in thought. He didn't know what the Old Gods were showing him. Oh, he understood there was going to be a battle between a stag and a lion. It could mean his brother having a fight with his lady wife which was nothing new. After all, it was a common occurrence in the Red Keep and nothing has changed in that daily routine since moving to Storm's End. But it could also mean House Lannister and House Baratheon could end up fighting a war. He was not sure of the exact reason for something like that to happen. The Old Gods were not clear on the visions. Their whispers were faint as if a faint echo in a howling storm.

'Their power is greatly diminished far away from the island of Dragonstone.' Stannis thought grimly. 'But not for long.'

"My lord." A guard came toward him and quietly whispered the message in his ears making him smile.

He nodded at the guard before he changed his course to the shoreline. There a small boat was waiting for him carrying Ser Davos Seaworth.

"Ser Davos. You have what I need?"

"I do my lord." Davos nodded, taking out a clay pot with a sapling of the Weirwood tree. "Watered it with clean drinking water just as you ordered. Not a leaf fell in the voyage."

"Good. Come, Ser Davos. You must see the godswood of Storm's End. It is perhpoas much older than the castle of my ancestors."

"I'm not much of a man of the gods, my lord." Davos muttered.

"I assure you the Old Gods don't care. Come. The gods look favourably upon those who aid them in their time of need." Stannis insisted.

The godswood of Storm's End was old as Westeros. But it lacked a Heart Tree just like in all Andal dominated lands. Stannis had heard the stories a thousand times. The Durrandons who ruled the Storm Lands before Aegon's Conquest were First men. They repelled the Andals and their armies with their mighty armies. Seven times the Andals attacked and seven times their armies broke before the Storm King. The eighth time they came as guests offering gifts and marriages. The Storm Kings turned their backs on their gods for gold and whores. The Heart Tree that stood tall for thousands of years in this godsood was cut downm and with it the roots of First Men was cut away from the Stormlands.

'Not anymore. Let the new roots seep in deep into the ground and the Old Gods shall rise again. And with the old Gods the kingdom of First Men shall be reborn with a new king.' Stannis thought as he planted the sapling.

The air suddenly changed as he poured water around the sapling. The whispers came to him from the wind. He turned around sharply startling Davos who stood beside him. His eyes widened as he came to see Edric Storm standing some five feet away from him.

The whispers carried by the wind became ever clearer.

“The key... the boy is the key. The boy is the key.”

“The boy is the key? Key for what?” Stannis muttered as he looked at the boy who reminded him so much of a younger Robert with clear blue eyes and hair as black as night.

“Lions walk in the garb of stags.” the winds whispered to him and he suddenly saw what the Old Gods were trying to show him all this time.

Everything fell into place as his eyes widened in realization.

“My lord? Lord Stannis?”

Stannis shook himself out of the stupor to find Davos shaking him by the shoulder.

“My lord. Are you all right?” Ser Davos asked worriedly.

“I’m perfectly all right Ser Davos. I want you to go to Dragonstone and gather men, loyal men. Tell Ser Axell to gather the best of knights and to prepare Dragonstone for war. When the raven arrives from Storm’s End, I want those men in King’s Landing. I want the Royal Fleet to take full control of the Gullet. Ravens must be sent to my bannermen. Have them gather at Dragonstone.” Stannis issued order after order while an increasingly confused and scared Davos watched everything with an open mouth.

“My lord. Are you sure?” Davos asked hesitantly.

“Yes, Ser Davos. I’ve never been more certain in my life. War is coming and I intend to win it.” Stannis said, his eyes shining with steely resolve and every word oozing with conviction.