

The city was slumbering under the veil of darkness provided by the advent of night. There were distant rumbles in the sky announcing the chance of a rainy night. Deep beneath the Red Keep a man shrouded in darkness walked through the secret tunnels with nary a footstep in the deafening silence of the night except for the burning candle that was held in the man's hand. The man came to a halt as he reached a gate and he tapped it three times the sound carrying into the dark tunnel ahead. The candlelight flickered as a gust of wind glided into the tunnel before it abruptly cut off. Another light flickered into being in the distance and soon a set of footsteps echoed in the otherwise silent part of the Red Keep. The two candlelight drew ever closer and soon they were inside a chamber filled with smooth white bones of great creatures of power.

Both men took stock of the giant snarling visages of the Targaryen dragons of old. "Magnificent, aren't they?" asked Varys, throwing his hood back marvelling at the giant skulls that adorned the chamber.

"Sure. But I beseech you my oldest friend to dispense with the theatrics. It's in poor taste given the situation." said Illyrio Mopatis, throwing his hood down the back of his neck and taking a deep breath.

"Theatrics is a part of who I am. A good street juggler is a master of theatrics."

"You are hardly one nowadays. You're the Master of Whispers serving in the Small Council of King Robert Baratheon the First of his name."

"I do a different sort of juggling but juggling nonetheless. Besides, the city has been awfully dull lately. Some theatrics among friends is warranted in times like these." Varys tittered.

A placid silence fell between the two old friends as they quietly enjoyed the relics of House Targaryen's power in a bygone era.

"The Narrow Sea is ripe with hearsay. The stag and the lion..."

"...are at war. You did not fall prey to hearsay of fools and sailors." Varys swiftly finished to Illyrio's displeasure.

"Why? Why would you let this happen? You know we were nowhere ready for a war." said Illyrio, setting his candle beneath the behemoth skull of a dragon.

"You assume I have a hold over the lords of Westeros to stop them from making stupid mistakes. You think too highly of my abilities my friend." Varys shook his head.

"On the contrary, I know exactly what you are capable of old friend." Illyrio scoffed. "Come now. You are the greatest juggler of all. You managed to make Aerys dance and jump through hooves. Don't tell me you are unable to handle a measly stag."

"Aerys was half mad. I need only to leave enough breadcrumbs for the man to turn against his own flesh and blood. Robert Baratheon is not like that. Besides, it is already out of my hands. Cersei Lannister made the mistake of not keeping her bastard by her side." Varys sighed disappointedly knowing that years of planning have now gone to waste.

"You nor I could've foreseen the emergence of the Black Wolf and through him the ever-soaring fortunes of House Stark and the North. I believe that we must rethink our strategy if we are to pursue the restoration of the dragons on the Iron Throne."

"Hmm." Illyrio looked into the vacant eyes of the dragon skull before him in deep thought.

"What're you thinking?" asked Varys.

"I'm thinking we need more allies than we previously thought. I'm thinking we need to tie the North to our cause."

Varys raised an eyebrow at the suggestion.

"Your suggestion has merit but words are wind. House Stark remains one of the staunchest supporters of House Baratheon. How exactly do you intend to shift their loyalty to our Young Griff?" Varys asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Not directly. We'll need to bring the Martells into the fold for my plan to work."

"The Martells?" Varys looked incredulous at the very notion.

"Yes. Aegon must be revealed to them as well." said Illyrio, looking thoughtfully while rubbing his stubble.

"You do realize a secret remains a secret only when fewer people are in the know. I'm not the only one to hold spies in Dorne. All it would take is a single mistake and we'll lose our advantage."

"Then we'll have to make sure there are no mistakes." Illyrio said firmly.

Varys stared at his old friend for a long while but the Pentosi Magister didn't change his mind.

"I suppose I can make certain arrangements to shield Sunspear from spies for Aegon's arrival." Varys said reluctantly. "However, that still leaves the issue of binding House Stark to our plans. How exactly do you suppose the Starks can be enticed to support Aegon?"

"Marriage. Our Aegon is most suitable to marry a Stark of Winterfell is he not? I believe Lord Stark has a daughter who could become a good queen for Aegon or a marriage between House Martell and Stark should do the deed."

Varys scoffed loudly.

"You're so terribly misinformed of Westerosi matters my friend. Lord Eddard won't make any move that threatens his friend's position in the south." Varys said with a certainty that made Illyrio frown.

"Then Lord Stark shall be removed quietly. Who knows? The Lannisters might end up doing us a favour should the war claim the honourable Lord Stark."

Varys opened his mouth to refute his friend but he paused as the scenario laid out by Illyrio was plausible. If Lord Eddard met his end in this war there was a small possibility that the Starks can be brought into the fold. For sure, he was aware Lord Stark's early passing would mean a regency for young Robb Stark. He doubted the

Northern lords would accept the rule of a southerner like Lady Catelyn at the helm of Winterfell. If his memory served him right no woman had ever ruled Winterfell. Even if the Tullys put pressure on the Iron Throne for a regency under Lady Catelyn he could see the Northern lords taking matters into their own hands.

The possibilities were endless but there were too many unknown elements at work making the whole plot unattractive to him. On the other hand, the Starks were already well acquainted with Oberynt Martell. The Red Viper had even lived with the Starks for a year and taught Harrion Stark in the yard.

"I'll have to give this much thought my friend. I cannot make decisions like this on the spur of a moment." Varys eventually said.

"I'd say you should hurry in deciding Varys. We are not the only ones with dragon pieces on the board. There are strange rumblings from Myr surrounding the Beggar King."

"Viserys is a spiteful idiot with no sense of tact. Trust me, I'm keeping the two dragons under watch." Varys waved away Illyrio's concern.

"I should hope so. Meanwhile, I shall make necessary arrangements to bring word to Connington. I think it's time the Young Griff learns of his destiny."

Varys just nodded wiping away a stray sweat that built up right above his brow. They discussed several other matters like the war in the Reach and the developments in Myr surrounding the last Targaryens in some detail before cutting their conversation short just shy of the hour of the wolf.

Varys retraced his footsteps along the secret passages beneath the Red Keep with many thoughts swirling around in his head. He was aware one wrong step would undo everything and put his position in court in jeopardy. To this day he was able to keep his head thanks to King Robert. The stag king was disinterested in ruling and the king often tends to wield the power of the Iron Throne sparingly. Lord Arryn was also a mild-mannered ruler perfectly suited for peacetime which allowed him to function rather smoothly.

But he was aware this was no longer peacetime and Stannis Baratheon has amassed near absolute control of King's Landing. The younger brother of the king was a dangerous man.

'There was nothing more terrible than a truly just man.' Varys thought, shivering at the very thought of the cold dispassionate judging eyes of Stannis Baratheon.

The capital was very dangerous for men like him and he knew Stannis was all the more dangerous, especially considering some of the whispers he was hearing from Dragonstone. He had never taken Stannis Baratheon to be a godly man but Dragonstone was fast becoming a ripe ground for religious fanaticism. The only reason he had kept such whispers from reaching the ears of the Small Council was that he saw an opportunity in sowing discord among the Baratheon brothers. If he played the long game, he could orchestrate a confrontation between the Baratheon dynasty and the Faith of the Seven. It was a distant possibility but one he was not willing to discard so easily either.

When he finally reached his quarters, he was met with two of his little birds waiting in a dark corner.

“Come now. Don’t be shy. What new songs have you heard?” Varys tittered behind his sleeve.

The spry little informants of his passed him a roll of parchment before scurrying away quietly into the dark. Varys chuckled amusedly at their antics. Opening the scroll, he began reading the contents of the parchment which wiped his smile right away and, in its place, a thoughtful frown adorned his face.

‘This does not look good for Robert Baratheon. Jon Arryn needs to be informed.’ Varys thought grimly.

XXXXXXX

Jon Arryn was quite happy at the moment. He knew it won’t last for long but he was fortunate enough to see Stannis Baratheon smile. He silently conveyed his thanks to the Seven knowing that the news brought forward by Ser Davos Seaworth was not just a cause for celebration for Stannis but for the whole realm.

“Please accept my heartfelt compliments, my prince. A son of yours by Lady Selyse in these trying times is surely a good sign from the gods Old and New.” Jon congratulated the young man.

What he didn’t say aloud was that his relief and happiness stemmed in part from the fact that the Baratheon succession was now secure. With Robert declaring Joffrey and Myrcella as bastards the Prince of Dragonstone became the natural heir of the king. With Stannis having a son the succession was secured for two generations in the absence of any heirs born of Robert’s body.

“Thank you, Lord Arryn.” Stannis nodded gracefully.

“Lady Selyse laboured for many hours and Maester Cressen was rightly worried as she went into labour two months early. But Lady Selyse was brave and I suppose the healing water from the healing springs of the Old Gods also helped.” Ser Davos said making Jon frown.

“Healing springs?” he asked curiously.

He saw Ser Davos looked stricken for a moment and looked at Stannis hesitantly. Seeing the Lord of Dragonstone was not showing any protest Ser Davos elaborated.

“Aye, my lord. Lord Harrion Stark made them on his visit to the island. The waters have been blessed by the old Gods and the young lord’s magic. All ailments disappear when people drink the water from the springs.”

Jon was a little surprised to hear this as he had not heard any such rumours from Dragonstone. For a moment, he went into deep thought. He could not help but think of his own wife and the succession of his seat the Eyrie. He was bereft of an heir of his blood. All his immediate blood relations were taken by the Stranger before their time. Sure, he had some relatives in Gulltown and young Harrold was his kin. But his thoughts went to his young wife and the many miscarriages she suffered.

'Perhaps, I should consider paying a visit to this healing water.' Jon thought.

He had seen the power of the Old Gods with his own eyes and he had never been so scared in his life. The Seven were stubbornly silent despite years of prayers and at one point he had stopped bothering after seeing the passing of his family. He had come to realise that the gods were mysterious and cared not for the perils of lesser men. Therefore, he had learned to live with silent uncaring gods for decades.

But he saw with his own eyes the Old Gods act against the Septons who tried to burn their abode. Deep inside him, he realized a part of him hoped there was a divine power that was just, righteous, and loving. He yearned for such a divine power and submit his worries, hopes and dreams at the altar of faith. He wished he could do that for a long while but he had always known the gods would meet him with more silence.

The door of the small council chambers swung open making Jon jolt out of his thoughts. It was none other than Lord Varys and Jon immediately tried to regain his composure.

"I was not aware there was a small council meeting my lords." said the Spider.

"There wasn't." he replied. "I was just having a small conversation with Prince Stannis and offering my best wishes for his newborn son."

"Ah! My best wishes for the young one my lord. I hope you convey my good wishes to Lady Selyse as well." Varys said, bowing his head low to the waist.

"Thank you, Lord Varys. I assume you have some other reason for your presence." Stannis observed.

"I'm afraid so my prince." Said Varys, but kept his silence while looking pointedly at Ser Davos Seaworth.

"Ah, my apologies. My lords, my prince." the Onion Knight made a quick retreat from the chamber.

"I've heard songs from my little birds in the Reach. Tumbleton and Bitterbridge have fallen to the lions." Varys declared the moment the door shut behind the Onion Knight.

"What!" Jon was shocked.

"Aye my lord Hand. I'm afraid Lord Tywin was purposefully distracting his grace to march his way to Highgarden and then to Old Oak." Varys said a tad grimly.

"How? How could we have missed this?" Jon asked with disbelief.

"Lord Tywin's army was brutal. They killed everything that moved in their path. According to my little birds, Ser Kevan led a host against Tumbleton while Ser Addam Marbrand led another host against Bitterbridge. Ser Amory Lorch and Sandor Clegane were unleashed on the unsuspecting Reachmen. Their brutality and speed ensured word did not spread far of their movements."

The silence that prevailed in the small council chambers was thick. Jon rightly understood Stannis was most upset because the crown had charged Lord Gyles Rosby to watch the Gold Road.

“Lord Rosby has failed his task. Either he is an incompetent idiot or a traitor to the crown.” Stannis said coldly gritting his teeth.

“We’ll not be accusing anyone of treason without evidence.” Jon admonished the younger Baratheon who just grunted noncommittally. “Now, I’ll make the arrangements to inform his grace about another army riding towards him.”

“What else can you tell us about this host Lord Varys? I assume you have some information about the disposition of this army.” Jon looked imploringly at the Master of Whispers and the man didn’t disappoint.

“Both Ser Kevan’s host and Ser Addam Marbrand’s host are filled with mounted men. They have very few spearmen and archers in their hosts. They have a combined strength of nine thousand at most and eight thousand at the least. Banners of Lannister, Banefort, Lydden, Marbrand, Plumm, Estren, and Greenfield were sighted among the two hosts.” Varys reported diligently.

“We’ll have to respond to this aggression. The Westermen cannot be allowed to do as they please in the Reach.” Jon said resolutely.

“On the contrary Lord Arryn. I believe they must be left alone and we must turn our sights on Westerlands.” Stannis said after a moment of thought. “No doubt Ser Kevan hopes to draw out our armies from the city and fight them in a place of their choosing. I’m less inclined to act as the Lannisters expect of me.”

“What’re you suggesting Prince Stannis?” Jon asked, as he was aware his fighting days were over. He could hardly put on his armour much less fight on a battlefield in his old age.

“I believe we must consider an invasion into the heart of the Westerlands through the Gold Road and put pressure on Casterly Rock. If the Riverlanders also comply and invade through Lion’s Tooth...”

Jon couldn’t help but chuckle at Stannis’ grand plan. He was reminded of Robert’s bull-headed nature in this instance.

‘It’d seem the Baratheon brothers are not so different as they believe.’ He thought amusedly.

“You disagree Lord Arryn?” Stannis frowned in displeasure.

“Invading the Westerlands through the Gold Road is a sordid affair, my prince. The passes are narrow and hilly. Not to mention no one in centuries has invaded the Westerlands with a large army through the Gold Road. We will be leading our army into the lion’s den with no foreknowledge of the terrain. We’ll be at a huge disadvantage.”

“Then what do you suggest Lord Hand?” Stannis asked with gritted teeth.

"We reinforce the city and focus on invading through the Riverlands. The Riverlords fought many battles against the Westermen in the past. They know the passes well and we could start by taking Golden Tooth. I've already sent for Ser Brynden Tully to take command of some knights and chart a strategy to invade Lord Tywin's territory." said Jon.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news but my little birds tell me that Gerion Lannister is travelling to Riverrun to negotiate peace with the Tullys. It seems Lord Tywin wants desperately to keep the Riverlands out of the war." said Varys, a simpering smile on his face when Stannis looked at the Spider sharply.

"And you could not have told known this earlier?" Stannis looked coldly at the Master of Whispers.

"My lord I'm but a man, not a sorcerer. I cannot promise you miracles. It takes time for word to travel from Westerlands and the war will only delay it further." Varys defended himself.

"Lord Varys is right. We must rather focus on the Riverlands and foiling Gerion Lannister's overtures for peace or neutrality with the Riverlords." said Jon.

"How exactly are we to do that?" asked Stannis with a raised eyebrow.

"I'll have to go and meet the Riverlords. It'll also help me to gather the Knights of the Vale to my side as they march down the Bloody Gate."

"I suppose that seems to be a reasonable proposition. What about the North? Have there been any word from Lord Stark?" asked Stannis.

"The North seem to be going through an internal turmoil of sorts and it involves House Hightower and House Mormont. It'd seem Lord Jorah Mormont mismanaged his house's wealth in a bid to accommodate his Hightower wife's lavish spending. He turned to engage in the slave trade to cover his spending which put him at odds with the rest of the North. Last I heard, Lord Stark had ridden out from Winterfell to put Lord Mormont's head on a spike."

"I see." Stannis looked unimpressed.

"On a lighter note, banners have gathered at Winterfell faster as a result of this affair. Lady Stark is also said to be hosting the lords of the North as they arrive at Winterfell." Varys reported which was not something Jon was ignorant about.

Winterfell had long ago conveyed the troubles in the North and Jon would not begrudge Eddard for taking necessary action against Mormont even if it delays the Northern army from marching south.

"I'm interested in knowing whether Lord Stark intends to take Harrion Stark along when he marches his army south. The Stark boy's magic will be a boon and not to mention that airship of his can come in handy in the war." Stannis commented.

Jon was also curious to know. After all, Harrion Stark was now eleven namesdays old. The boy could serve as a page in the camp and that strange flying contraption Stannis was talking about sounded like something quite useful for moving troops anonymously. He hoped Eddard brought his second son with him. This whole mess

started because of the boy's magic. It might as well do some good in ending this useless war far sooner and with less bloodshed.

"There is another delicate matter that needs your attention, my lords. It concerns the new patrons of Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen."

Jon barely held back a groan upon hearing that. He had all but forgotten about the Targaryen children.

"What about them?" Stannis asked in a reserved manner.

"They're being hosted and entertained by some of the more prominent Magisters of Myr. It's also worth mentioning that recently Myr had sent cutthroats after Harrion Stark."

XXXXXXXXXX

"Ow! Stop that, Bran. Ow! Stop it, I say." Harry tried his best to keep his hair out of the reach of his little brother who was committed to pulling it right out of his scalp.

Bran just giggled and continued his assault on his hair showing no mercy.

"You know, you should've listened to me and given me what I wanted." Sansa said, sticking out her tongue at him as she walked towards the door carrying a bundle of fresh clothes in her hand.

"You asked me for Fenris so that you can use him to intimidate some poor girls in Wintertown." Harry said blandly.

"Since you didn't, you get to watch Bran while I and Jane enjoy some lemon cakes." said Sansa, snottily turning up her nose and making her exit in quick order.

"You should discipline her." said Harry looking at his mother who was down with a cold lying in her bed under a pile of warm blankets.

"You are one to talk about discipline Harrion." Catelyn whispered from under the blankets.

Harry opened his mouth to argue but then thought better of it at the last moment. He looked thoughtful for a moment before eyeing his mother curiously.

"Is that why you don't want me to go with father south?" he asked curiously.

He was quite surprised to learn that Robb, Theon and Garlan were allowed to go south with his father for the war. To be fair, Robb was going to be his father's cupbearer, Theon was going to be a page and Garlan was going as a squire for Ser Jory Cassel. He was quite happy to be left out of going south and engaging in some stupid war that did not interest him. Sure, he was rooting for King Robert to win but not enough to directly contribute to the war. He had his fair share of war and he was quite happy to let others fight in the field.

Besides, his energy and resources were better spent in the North preparing for the Long Night.

But that doesn't mean he was a bit annoyed when the Lord of Winterfell called him before the whole court of Winterfell and assigned him the 'prestigious' position of the Stark of Winterfell.

"The Stark of Winterfell! What does that even mean?" Harry asked aloud while simultaneously letting out an annoyed sigh.

He could even see a sliver of a smile on his mother's face at his annoyance.

"This is not a matter of joking mother. What does my position exactly entail? Can I order the servants to my whim?"

"You already do that." Catelyn pointed out.

"Well, can I order around the guards to my whim?"

"I challenge you to show me any guard that disobeys the Black Wolf."

Harry was now scowling.

"Well, can I make decisions that pertain to the castle's defences and such?"

Catelyn only looked at him pointedly.

"I guess I've already done that before when I rebuilt the Astronomy tower on a whim," Harry muttered.

"The Stark of Winterfell is the heir to the castle Harrion. Your father and brother are going to war and you are his chosen heir. If the North find itself in peril the lords of the North would look upon you to protect them and lead them as a Stark. That is what it means to be a Stark of Winterfell." Catelyn explained slowly, her hands reaching out and pinching her son's cheek. "It is a position of great responsibility. Now, keep an eye on your siblings and let your mother get some rest."

"I suppose I should...Ow!"

Bran once again tugged his hair sharply.

"I think it's time that you and I have a serious talk about boundaries, little brother." Harry growled but Bran just looked at him with an innocent look.

As he took Bran out of his mother's chambers, he wondered whether his father managed to capture Jorah Mormont. He had offered his airship for his father but his father rather took a contingent of soldiers along with Robb, Theon and Garlan with him on the trip to Bear Island. It was a shame though. He so wanted to visit the island.

'Perhaps, some other time.' he thought.