

Doran supposed there was ample reason to celebrate, considering the war between the stags and the lions was reaching its precipice. The last he heard from his neighbours, the Reach was getting the same treatment the Riverlands had been enjoying since the Andal invasions. The Riverlands had always been the battlefield whenever a major war was waged in Westeros. But now, battles were being waged all over the Reach, turning the fertile farmlands of one of the most prosperous kingdoms of Westeros into burned-out wastelands. He supposed he should be overjoyed at the Lannister action, but that joy was only short-lived. Even as he watched his people dance and drink to their heart's content because of the war, he didn't feel much happiness in his mind. He smiled and acted merry while facing the lords and ladies of Dorne because it was expected of him.

It was Tywin Lannister and his dogs he wanted to suffer for the crimes against his dear sister and her children. He certainly did not enjoy the fact that the Lannister army was cutting a bloody swath through the Reach. The war just happened to pit some of his strongest rivals against each other. The one good thing he looked forward to in this war was the weakening of the Baratheon dynasty. He felt like this was the turning point in the short reign of Robert Baratheon.

'Perhaps, it's time to reach out to Viserys.' Doran thought. 'It'd not do if the young prince forgets his duty and what is owed to House Martell.'

"My Prince."

Doran kept his musings to a corner of his mind as he smiled at Lord Franklin Fowler, Anders Yornwood and Lady Delonne Allyrion.

"My lords, my lady. Please, come and sit." Doran welcomed them cordially while Aeron Hotah, his trusted guard, pulled up the seats for his fellow Dornish nobility to join him.

"This is a lavish ball the likes of which Dorne has not seen in a decade." said Lady Delonne, while servants brought bowls of peeled red oranges for his guests to enjoy.

"When enemies weaken themselves out of their violation, there is cause for celebration, isn't that so, my prince?" Anders Yornwood laughed.

Doran grinned and merely nodded at Lord Yornwood.

"Speaking of which, what are your plans, my prince? Indeed, this is a unique opportunity to exact Dorne's vengeance on the lions." Lord Franklin said.

"Involving ourselves now will only make us useful fodder for Robert Baratheon's armies. He'll throw us at the lions and use us for his benefit." said Doran in a calm and even tone.

He could see the disappointment on the faces of his fellow Dornishmen as clear as day.

"However, that doesn't mean we'll stay put in this war. As Lord Franklin rightly said, this is a unique opportunity to exact Dorne's vengeance on the lions." Doran added, brightening up the faces of his fellow Dornishmen.

"So, you have a plan. How can we aid our prince?" Lord Franklin Fowler asked eagerly.

"Muster your strengths, my lords, as I gather our fleet to our shores. While the stags and lions burn the lands in their war, we shall deliver the killing blow at the lions' lair." Doran calmly said.

"Lannisport." Lord Anders breathed out with wide eyes. "You mean to strike at Lannisport!"

"I mean to strike at the Lannister where it'll hurt them the most." said Doran,

“That’s a bold tactic, my prince.” Lord Franklin observed.

“Fortune favours the bold, or so I’m told.” Doran commented.

“You’ll have our full support, my prince. Princess Elia was dear to many of us. She’ll be avenged.” Lady Delonne said fiercely, her onyx eyes firm and shining with resolve.

A sudden commotion in his feast hall made Doran look up. His eyes immediately searched for his daughter, as Arianne was usually the culprit for most of the troubles in Sunspear. To his surprise, he found her in the company of one Ser Daemon Sand dancing on the floor, far removed from any trouble. Then his eyes fell on his brother, briefly widening Doran’s eyes.

‘What’s he doing here? He is supposed to be in Tyrosh.’ Doran thought.

He watched his younger brother wade through the merry guests greeting old friends and acquaintances. Ellaria Sand joined at his brother’s hip until she met her father, Lord Harmen Uller, among the guests. Oberyne alone came towards him, leaving Ellaria with her father. Doran merely raised an eyebrow questioningly when his brother just smiled at him in greeting.

“My lords, my lady. I’m afraid I’ll have to steal my brother away for a few moments. It was a long journey from Essos, and I’m afraid we siblings have quite some stories to share.” said Oberyne, an easy smile on his face.

After greeting and engaging in small talk with Lords Fowler, Yornwood and Lady Allyrion, Oberyne took charge of his wheelchair and moved Doran out of the ballroom.

“Tell me, brother, why have you abandoned your post in Tyrosh? I thought you were preparing to buy passage into the Free City of Myr.” Doran asked once they were safely inside his solar, away from prying eyes.

“While I was in Tyrosh, I was approached by a child carrying a message from the Master of Whispers of Robert Baratheon.” said Oberyne.

“Varys!” Doran said, sitting up straight in his wheelchair, now far more interested as he realised Oberyne was not visiting Sunspear on a whim. “What did he have to say?”

“He gave me a location of a small house on the city’s outskirts and asked me to meet a man who goes by the name of Griff and his son, the Young Griff.”

Doran was now flummoxed as he had never heard of this Griff or Young Griff. For a moment, he wondered whether Robert Baratheon’s Master of Whispers went mad after years of serving the Mad King and the chaos unfolding in the capital. From all the news that had filtered into Dorne, King’s Landing was now a cursed city, and everyone was fleeing it like their lives depended on it.

“What did you find, brother?” Doran asked.

“The future, brother. Our sister didn’t depart this world without leaving something behind. Her legacy endures.” Oberyne said softly, walking back and opening the door of his solar and whispering something to the guard stationed outside.

“I don’t understand, Oberyne. What’re you talking about?” Doran asked, frowning at his younger sibling.

“I believe we might have to re-evaluate our plans with Viserys Targaryen.” said Oberyne.

Doran could only stare at his brother in utter bewilderment. His brother was the only person who knew and supported the plan he built around Viserys Targaryen as the centrepiece. If Oberyn believed the plan had to be rethought, he was left with nothing to confront the Baratheon dynasty. While the Lannister blood in the Baratheon dynasty was all but cut off thanks to recent events, he was not going to suspend the plan to unseat Robert Baratheon from the Iron Throne. The man still stepped over the bloodied corpses of his dear sister and her children. He'd never forgive the usurper for spitting on his sister and her children and then went about marrying Tywin's daughter. So long as he lived, he'd never allow a Baratheon to hold on to the Iron Throne.

"You don't need to look worried, brother. I'm not suggesting that we should accept Robert Baratheon's reign."

"Then what are you saying, brother?" Doran asked.

"I'm saying Arianne necessarily does not need to become Queen to place Martell blood on the Iron Throne."

Doran was confused but didn't get to question his brother further as someone knocked on the door. He watched confusedly as Oberyn opened the door and invited a strange man with blue hair, a blue beard, and a child of valyrian descent into his solar.

"Oberyn, is this one of your secret paramours from Essos?" Doaran asked with some healthy amount of dread.

Even if Dorne was tolerant of many sexual deviancies, the nobles of Dorne tended to have a poor outlook on their princes taking foreign lovers into Sunspear. He had known it first-hand with his wife, but at least Mellario was his lawful wedded wife. This... colourful man was unacceptable in Dorne, even if his brother was well known for his 'tastes.'

"No, brother." said Oberyn, laughing heartily while the blue-haired man looked repulsed.

Doran calmed a little bit upon seeing this.

"Then who's this?" asked Doran, looking at the strange man and the silver-haired child near the man who looked more confused than anyone in the room.

"I'd not fault you for not recognising me, Prince Doran. Often, I myself find it hard to accept that I'm the same man who became the Hand of the King."

Doran eyed the man more closely, and that was when he saw the similarity but could not twist his mind around the fact.

"Jon Connington! But how? You were dead!"

"A ruse concocted by the Spider to keep the Usurper's attention away so that I may raise Rhaegar's son safely in the Free Cities." said the former lord of Griffin's Roost.

"Rhaegar's son?" Doran froze, looking at both men inquisitively.

"Yes, brother. As I said, Elia's legacy endures. She endures through her son." Said Oberyn, moving to the side and pushing the silver-haired boy close to his desk and thereby Doran getting a good look at the boy.

It was as if he was looking at young Rhaegar except for the eyes. The boy's eyes looked more blue than purple, but that could've been the light in the room playing tricks.

“This is our nephew?” he asked in disbelief, staring at his brother to see whether it was a jest.

But Oberyn just smiled at him and nodded.

“Aegon?” he whispered, reaching out with trembling hands and touching the young lad’s cheek.

The young boy just grinned, and for a moment, he was taken aback by his childhood and saw his smiling sister in the boy’s place. But the memory was fleeting, and it passed just as it came. A stray tear fell from his eyes as he had nearly forgotten his sister’s smile.

“Elia’s son is alive?” he whispered confusedly, overcome with emotions he couldn’t quickly grasp or control.

“Yes, Prince Doran. Young Aegon was smuggled away from King’s Landing by Varys, who switched young Aegon with a tanner’s son. Tywin’s brute never realised the switch and smashed the babe’s head on his master’s orders. Lord Varys kept young Aegon safe with a friend of his and later entrusted him to me so that young Aegon receives proper training to reclaim his birthright.”

“Elia’s son is alive.” Doran breathed out, hardly believing this miracle.

“Aye, he is. And with him, the Targaryen dynasty lives on. Long live Aegon the Sixth of his name, the King of Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men.” Jon Connington proclaimed.

Doran looked at his brother, and Oberyn nodded at him. Their plans had to be changed. Arianne need not marry Viserys with Aegon alive and ready to reclaim the Iron Throne. But first, he had to be sure the boy was Elia’s son, not a mummer’s farce concocted by the Spider and Connington to trick Dorne into fighting the Usurper. And for that, he needed to know what happened during the sack of King’s Landing. He looked at his brother again, and an idea slowly formed in his mind.

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Jon Arryn could only let out a frustrated groan as he set aside the message he received from Riverrun. Hoster Tully was again playing them all and keeping the Riverlands in an advantageous position. The man wanted something from the crown, and the elder Tully knew this was the best time to get what he wanted.

This time around, he was not going to accommodate the whims of Hoster Tully’s ego. Robert was now the rightful king of the seven kingdoms. If the Tullys refused to answer the call of their king, then they’ll be dealt with just like any traitorous house, depending on the nature of their involvement in this war. Besides, he did not need Hoster Tully to rally the Riverlands to Robert’s side. His eyes strayed to the two other parchments on his table. One was from his trusted Valemen, and the other was from the loyal Northmen. The Knights of the Vale had crossed the Bloody Gate and crossed into the Riverlands. At best, it would be a day or two before they reach the Crossroads Inn.

The Northern army, on the other hand, was still crossing into the Riverlands through the Neck. A good portion of their host had already crossed over, thanks to Ned’s foresight to expand the Kingsroad that stretches north of the Neck last year. The Neck, on the other hand, remains a difficult terrain for supply carts to traverse, and therefore he could understand the time it was taking for the Northern host to cross over into the Riverlands proper. But Ned had already reached out to him,

saying that he had sent a force of five thousand men ahead under Lord Ryswell's command into the Riverlands to gather the Riverlords in Robert's name.

Jon was sure that Houses Blackwood, Bracken, Piper, Vance and Mooton had pledged support when he reached out to them. He was quite surprised to learn that Bracken and Blackwood were on the same side in this situation which would've amused him if the situation wasn't this precarious. The fact that Tywin chose to invade the Reach and break out in open rebellion against the Iron Throne would diminish the throne's power in the coming days. Even if Robert wins the war, the seven kingdoms will have an enormous power imbalance. Without Tywin's backing, the stability of the Baratheon dynasty would be in jeopardy, directly leading to more rebellions and challenges to the Iron Throne's power.

He was not ignorant of the threats hiding in plain sight. The complete silence from Dorne bothered him more than the grumblings the Master of Whispers brought to him from the Crownland lords. It was one of the primary reasons he didn't dismiss Stannis' idea of leading the Crownland lords against the Lannister army. Rather than let the Crownland lords sit back and plot, he felt it was better if their energies were better spent against the Lannisters. Perhaps, there was room for some minor lordships and land grants in the Westerlands once the rebelling Lannisters were put down for good. He was prepared to buy it out for stability if loyalty could not be enforced through oaths and honour. If the price of having no conflict was some land grants, few knighthoods and lordships, then he was all too willing to pay that price.

Shaking his head, Jon leaned back and sighed. In some ways, he was grateful Robert's hammer revealed the crimes of Cersei this early. If Tywin's daughter had managed to pull the wool over their eyes for many years to come, then who knows what could've happened. Jon was more than aware that he was getting old day after day. He was not long for this world; should he perish, he knew Eddard would be the most likely candidate to replace him. He doubted Robert would name Stannis as Hand of the King even though the younger Baratheon was more than ready to shoulder the responsibilities the office demands. Should Eddard accept, then the Iron Throne would no doubt become far more powerful, with the strength of House Stark binding the Baratheon dynasty to the Iron Throne.

He sat up straight at the thought. A Stark and a Baratheon union would quell all thoughts of rebellion as the Iron Throne would gain a powerful ally.

"But Eddard is already a trusted friend and an ally to Robert. The realm needs to see the binding of the friendship through blood." Jon muttered.

The only problem was that Robert lacked any male heirs for any marriage to bind the two houses through blood. However, the idea still had its merits. It's not as if Robert could not marry and have heirs in the future. There was also the possibility that Renly could marry Sansa Stark in a few years after Eddard's daughter reached a marriable age.

The thoughts of marriage inevitably led Jon to the troublesome prospect of finding a queen for Robert. The sad fact was that he couldn't find anyone with the same prospects as Cersei Lannister offered to the fledging Baratheon dynasty. With Cersei came the entire Westerlands, the gold and the power of House Lannister. There was no other woman that could offer Robert so much. The only possible match that could come close right now would be Arianne Martell, but a Dornish queen would also bring many problems with her. Not to mention, it was most likely impossible to forge such a union. He doubted Prince Doran and Oberyn Martell would accept the match, and if they did, he'd be extremely suspicious.

A sudden knock on the door brought him out of his musings.

“My lord. Lord Varys is here to see you.” Hugh, his trusted squire, said, putting his head inside the room.

“Send him through, Hugh.” Jon said, placing a book over the many parchments he received from Maester Olivar, who took charge of the ravens with Pycelle languishing in the Black Cells.

“My Lord Hand. I bring songs from Old Oak.” said Varys, making Jon sit up straight in interest.

“Is it favourable?” he asked eagerly.

“It’s my lord. Lord Oakheart repelled the Lannister army each time they tried to breach his walls. Then the King arrived at the helm of the Royal army and smashed the Lannister army, sieging Old Oak. Tygett Lannister met his end at the end of his grace’s hammer, and so did Ser Gregor Clegane.” Varys reported diligently.

Jon let out a relieved sigh at the news. It was as if a weight was lifted off his shoulders.

“Very good. This is excellent news, Lord Varys.” Jon said with palpable relief.

“Of course, my lord. Perhaps, it might be to our advantage that we spread the word of Ser Gregor’s demise at the hands of his grace.” Varys suggested, smiling thinly. “Dorne might start to engage with us more openly after the recent events.”

Jon nodded thoughtfully, thinking of another letter he would draft and send to Sunspear after this meeting. Like the Crownlanders, he hoped the ire of Dorne could be redirected at the Lannisters and hopefully reconcile the bad blood between the southernmost kingdom and the Baratheon dynasty. He held no notions that Dorne would ever be a friend of the Baratheon dynasty right away, but he hoped this was the beginning of that journey. A Baratheon princess marrying into House Martell could be a more stable rapprochement in the future.

The door to his office chambers opened again; this time, it was Maester Olivar.

“Lord Hand. A raven came from Sunspear.” said the young maester who was twenty namesdays junior of Pycelle.

He immediately broke House Martell's seal and read the message's contents.

“It’d seem Prince Doran is sending his younger brother as an emissary of Dorne to King’s Landing.” Jon said aloud, setting aside the parchment on his table.

The frown on the faces of the two men standing in his office spoke volumes of what they thought of the matter.

“That seems odd.” Varys slowly said. “Perhaps, Prince Doran is hoping to glean the particulars of the war aims of his grace.”

“Perhaps...” Jon trailed off but didn’t share his thoughts on the matter.

“Shall I make the arrangements for Prince Oberyn’s arrival, Lord Hand?” asked Maester Olivar.

“Please do.” Jon said, dismissing the young maester.

Once the door closed and left Jon alone with the Master of Whispers, his face became grave.

“This is not good. Prince Oberyne is not known for his levelheadedness in the seven kingdoms. He’ll be looking to exact vengeance on House Lannister and anyone who had a part in his sister’s murder.” said Jon, looking a bit green at the very thought.

“I could convey what happened and blame it all on Ser Amory Lorch and Ser Gregor Clegane.” Varys offered.

“No. It’s obvious that the Martells hold Lord Tywin responsible. I’d have you speak the truth but take care not to antagonise the prince, my lord. Greater men have fallen prey to the bite of the Red Viper.” Jon warned.

“Perhaps the Red Viper would make an exception and spare the messenger.” Varys tittered, hiding his face behind a long sleeve.

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Harry threw a piece of meat high in the air, and it was snatched right off before it could hit the ground by Fenris. The black wolf let out a low growl that made the guards in the training yard jump as his trusted companion noisily gorged himself on the tasty flesh of a wild bull. He watched Fenris finish the meat in a few seconds and eye him most eagerly, with his tail wagging impatiently.

“I suppose you’ve earned the full bucket, you big bad wolf.” Harry petted his familiar by rubbing Fenris’ head before presenting the bucket full of meat.

Fenris let out a pleased howl before eagerly putting his head into the bucket and enjoying the rare meat to his heart’s content. Harry chuckled, seeing the happiness of his wolf. His eyes went to the small burned patch of fur on Fenris’ shoulder, where the fire dragon snorted out a stream of fire. For some reason, the fire dragon had taken up a liking to Fenris even if the dragon refused to let Harry anywhere near him. He supposed the fire dragon liked to sleep on Fenris’ back because of the warm fur. Or, it was because the fire dragon was a big softie and wanted to cuddle into the natural warmth provided by Fenris.

For this reason, he had taken to calling the fire dragon Cuddles. By the angry looks and the many attempts to turn him into a burned crisp, Harry knew the fire dragon did not like that name. But that was not going to stop him from calling the dragon Cuddles. Despite that, he was happy Cuddles managed to form a friendship of sorts with Fenris. Though, how long that’d last was a curious case. Cuddles would only grow bigger, and the fire dragon was already as big as a cat.

Now, the ice dragon, on the other hand, was far more accepting of his attempts to befriend it. To his surprise, the ice dragon even responded cordially so far to the name he assigned, Winter.

“Harry, are you going to join me anytime soon?” Jon shouted at him from the archery range.

‘This kid. He got nothing but training in his mind.’ Harry shook his head at the thought.

“I’m coming.” He shouted back.

He pushed a sliver of magical energy into his power ring, and his hands were squeaky clean. He was about to pick up a bow when Maester Luwin came down into the training yard.

“Harrion. A company of men and women approaches Hunter’s gate. They fly the banners of the black bear.” said Maester Luwin.

“House Mormont?” Harry frowned. “Why are they here?”

“Possibly for a petition to suspend Lord Eddard’s verdict regarding the reparation owed to the families of the victims affected by Ser Jorah’s actions.” Maester Luwin mused aloud.

“That’d be highly irregular, isn’t that so, Maester?” Harry asked.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Hmm.” Harry looked thoughtfully off into the distance.

If he got the gist of the situation right, House Mormont was ordered to pay a significant sum of reparations to the survivors his men fished out from the sea and the families of the victims who were unfortunately not with them in the Bear Islands. Ser Jorah’s actions had seen to it that either those poachers and thieves were sold off in Essos as slaves or they jumped ships and died in the sea. He’d have attained the lands and the castle of House Mormont for sheer incompetence if it were up to him.

Instead, his father had shown mercy and allowed Ser Jorah’s aunt and her daughters to inherit Mormont keep. Maegh Mormont now ruled the Iron Islands, and by Maester Luwin’s and his Mother’s word, the woman was a right sort. But that doesn’t excuse her ignorance of a crime of this scale.

“Allow them entry. I’ll hear them out.” Harry eventually said.

He hoped Lady Maegh Mormont was not about to waste his time.