

It had taken so much planning and manoeuvring on Varys' part to get where he was now. His plot with little Aegon was the most dangerous trick he had ever played, and he was yet to see the fruits of that labour. In truth, he was not beholden to the Targaryens to see them sit on the Iron Throne in perpetuity. That was not the reason why he saved little Aegon from a gruesome fate. Neither did he feel any sort of sympathy for the little babe or his frail mother, the Princess of Dorne.

Elia Martell was a lovable woman, but to Varys, she was just like any other millions of women inhabiting this strange land called Westeros. And yet, he had saved her son just as he promised when the Lannister army was outside the gates of the Red Keep. He could have hidden out in the tunnels by his lonesome and waited out Lord Tywin's butchery, but he had taken away the young Prince Aegon with him to the tunnels. Together, he and the young babe survived the butchery of lions.

To this day, he does not know what truly came over him to save the child. It was a random act from his side which was illogical and dangerous. At that moment, he realized that his fate was intrinsically and irrevocably tied to this foreign land called the Seven Kingdoms. While the blood of the innocent was being spilt in the city, he was holding the future of the Seven Kingdoms in his hand. There was a choice before him that night. He could drop the child, and the fate of Westeros would have been so predictable. Robert Baratheon would reign with no one to contest his claim save for the Targaryens in Dragonstone. But he made a choice to hold the child close to his heart, and for the first time in many years, he cried and laughed that night. He cried because he understood that a former street urchin was holding the fate of an entire continent in his hands. He laughed because of the absurdity of it all.

When the night passed, and dawn came come morning, Varys was committed to restoring dragon banners to the Red Keep. He had made the decision to stay in Westeros and die in this strange land that became his home, all thanks to House Targaryen. He thought it was only right that the king to sit on the Iron Throne be a worthy one. So began his plans to raise Aegon far away in Essos, where the young child could grow into a worthy king. He only became certain of his decision to restore the crown to Aegon Targaryen after watching the disaster that was Robert Baratheon up close. Even the Mad King was far better than the loathsome drunkard of a king Westeros was saddled with. At least, the Mad King's proclivities were confined to the Red Keep. Robert Baratheon's lacklustre attitude to ruling the kingdoms was not only creating irreparable fissures in the foundations of the Seven Kingdoms but also weakening the Iron Throne in ways unseen.

In his opinion, Robert Baratheon managed to hold the kingdoms together because of three men; Tywin Lannister, Jon Arryn, and Eddard Stark.

It was brilliant of Jon Arryn to have Robert take Cersei Lannister as his wife, thereby tying the new Baratheon dynasty to House Lannister. Jon Arryn served as the Hand of the King, and Eddard Stark's friendship with the King ensured the Northern army would march for the Baratheon banner. This strength was unbreakable, and it showed in the Greyjoy rebellion. The ease with which Robert Baratheon crushed the Ironborn was almost awe-inspiring. Unfortunately, that victory was not to last, as House Baratheon was now at war with House Lannister. Both the Great Houses were going to emerge powerless in the aftermath of this war. Robert Baratheon's reputation would be irreparable once the lords of Westeros made peace and returned to their homes. Even now, the capital city was being destroyed thanks to the war and the tragedy that befell it before war broke out between the stags and the lions. It was now only a matter of time before King's Landing became a city only in name. He suspected Duskendale would emerge as the bustling city of trade in the Crownlands in the aftermath of this war.

The Hand was trying his best to keep the city together, but it was not going to work. The capital was going to fail within a handful of years. And when it does, all the vultures would surround the Iron Throne and pick at the carcass. Perhaps, House Stark could pull the Baratheons out of the hole they dug themselves in, but he was not going to allow it. That was why he considered this meeting very important.

Varys looked at the infamous Red Viper disembarking from the galley with his paramour Ellaria Sand attached to his hip. He could hardly see any change in the Dornish Prince. The Prince was tall, lithe and strong, making him a dangerous foe on the battlefield. The Red Viper was a master spearman and, most importantly, a master of poisons.

"Prince Oberyn. I hope your journey to the capital was comfortable." Varys dipped his head as a show of respect.

"Indeed. There was no shortage of comfort in my journey." Oberyn smirked, pressing a kiss to his paramour's neck, earning a giggle from Ellaria Sand.

"Lady Ellaria. You're as beautiful as the rumours say. I hope you'll find our city to your liking." said Vary, nodding at the black-haired woman.

"I thank you, Lord Varys. However, I must admit I'm a bit disappointed." said Ellaria,

"Oh?" Varys raised a curious eyebrow.

"Yes. You see, when they called you the Spider, I assumed you had eight legs and eight eyes. It's quite disappointing to see that is not the case."

"I'm afraid my remaining legs and eyes are very much in pursuit of whispers, my lady." Vary tittered.

Oberyn laughed aloud.

"Ha! A man with humour in this cesspool of a city. Then again, you're not exactly a man, are you?" Oberyn looked intently at the Master of Whispers with a glint of amusement in his black beady eyes.

"No, you're right, my prince. I'd be a eunuch. Do you happen to know how I became a eunuch?" Varys asked, tilting his head to the side.

"I'm afraid not. I'm most eager to know."

"Then please follow me into the Red Keep, my prince, my lady. I shall regale you with my life's tale along the way. I'm sure it'll be most illuminating." said Varys, a happy grin on his face as he always loved to explain how he emerged from the fires of tragedy.

After all, it was an inspiring tale.

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Oberyn rode inside a carriage with a healthy escort surrounding him courtesy of Jon Arryn. The city was still the shit-stained city he remembered, but most parts of it were now ghosted. The people were flooding into the Crownlands, if he was not mistaken. The city was falling apart at an unprecedented rate. Not even the infamous Targaryen civil war had broken King's Landing like this.

It made him all the happier as he saw House Baratheon's downfall with his own eyes. Now, it'd be much better if he were to watch the downfall of the lions as well. That was why he was here on his brother's command to negotiate with Lord Arryn and to keep up appearances.

"The city is in shambles. Has Lord Arryn washed his hands off the city?" Oberyn asked as they neared the outer gates of the Red Keep.

"Lord Arryn has done his best to hold the city together in these trying times, my prince. But the war has demanded our resources be spent elsewhere." said Varys.

"You could've simply said the royal treasury is empty." Oberyn deadpanned.

The Master of Whispers merely smiled, refusing to divulge anything more. But the man might as well have told him everything in that simpering smile. Soon, they breached the walls of the Red Keep, and the wheelhouse came to a stop. When he climbed out of the wheelhouse, he was greeted by none other than the Hand of the King.

"Prince Oberyn. On behalf of his grace, Robert the First of his name, I welcome you into the Red Keep." said Jon Arryn.

The servants came forth and offered him, as well as his entourage, bread and salt.

"You must be exhausted from your, long journey. Your quarters are ready for you. You may rest your body and mind, and come morning, we shall perhaps address some serious issues to your liking." Jon Arryn offered.

"Hmm... That's acceptable." Oberyn replied with an easy grin. "Come, Lord Varys. I'm most eager to hear more of your story in Essos. I don't like a story that's half finished."

Oberyn stared at the eunuch pointedly so that the man would know what he meant.

"Of course, Prince Oberyn. I never realised my life was such an interesting story. Perhaps, you might like my trysts when I joined a local playhouse as a juggler?"

"Indeed, I would. I'd hear the rest of the story over some wine." said Oberyn, following Varys into the Red Keep.

An hour later, Oberyn was sitting alone in a chamber with Varys sitting across from him. His chalice was drained of wine, but Varys had yet to touch the fine beverage.

"Tell me another tale Lord Varys." Said Oberyn, draining the last few drops of his wine.

"What tale would that be, my prince?" Varys asked.

"The tale of a mother and her two children should suffice." said Oberyn.

"Isn't that a tale you already know?"

"I had assumed so until I met the Young Griff." said Oberyn, looking intently at the Spider.

"I see." Varys eyed Oberyn for a long moment before starting the narration of a story that was heart-wrenching, gruesome and certainly something that no brother should hear.

For a long moment, Oberyn remained silent after Varys narrated the story of the Lannister butchery and what his poor sister endured. He had learned much from years of rumours and hearsay but this

was the account of the Master of Whispers, who was in the Red Keep at the time of his sister's murder.

"So, Gregor Clegane was the one to rape and kill Elia?" Oberyng asked.

"I'm afraid so, my prince."

"Amory Lorch then killed my niece Rhaenys."

"By stabbing her half a hundred times." Varys said unkindly.

"All on the orders of Lord Tywin Lannister." Oberyng bit out through gritted teeth.

"Obviously." Varys said, shrugging his shoulders.

"And I'm to believe you smuggled out Aegon from King's Landing?" Oberyng asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes." Varys nodded.

"Tell me why you did not help Elia and Rhaenys?"

"For the simple reason that I'm a foreigner with no great resources. I had no loyalty from the men surrounding me, and I could not call great resources to my service while the Lannisters were cutting a bloody swathe through the city. I could save only myself and anything that I could carry in my hands." Varys couldn't help but sigh as that was the hard truth. "If I had more time, perhaps I could have found a double to impersonate Princess Rhaenys. Although that would've been a challenge as the young Princess took after her mother rather than her father in appearance."

Oberyng remained silent and stared at the Master of Whispers keenly for any hint of deceit.

"I advised the King to deny the Lannister army entry into the city. He ignored my warnings in favour of advice from Grand Maester Pycelle, who insisted Lord Tywin was his grace's friend here to help. From there on out, I had little to no time to act. On the one hand, there were the guards of the Red Keep loyal to King Aerys, and on the other, there were Lannister men hunting down all loyalists." Varys said, his eyes looking far away. "I'm no great warrior or a dashing knight in shining armour, my prince. I did what I could that day. Even today, I marvel at the plot's success in taking little Aegon and placing the tanner's son in the crib."

"Then why have you kept Aegon far away from us? Why did you deny us the knowledge of Elia's son's survival?" Oberyng asked.

"Because men are not infallible, Prince Oberyng. We all make mistakes at some point. I gave King Robert an enemy in the form of Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen to hunt across Essos. That doesn't mean I could've always fooled the stags and lions. The fewer people knew about the Prince, the better it was for his safety. I had Jon Connington fake his death before the man was given charge of Prince Aegon. Until then, the boy was brought up in the manse of my old friend Illyrio Mopatis of Pentos., far away from those who'd do him harm."

Oberyng took a deep breath at the end of the long-winded tale. He was still not sure whether he wanted to believe Varys' tale. Sadly, there was no way to confirm whether Aegon was truly his nephew. Doran was convinced Aegon was Elia's son, as the boy does look a lot like Rhaegar. The boy had all the looks of a Valyrian, but most of the free Cities like Volantis, Myr, Lys and Tyrosh hold innumerable people with valyrian looks. Yet, that does not make them a Targaryen.

It was a sad day for House Martell when he could not even recognise his sister's son. He had only fleetingly met the child when Elia gave birth to the boy. He and Arianne had visited young Aegon in the Red Keep. At that time, there were greater concerns plaguing his mind, and he had not given much thought to anything else. Never had he thought at that time, the threat to the Targaryen dynasty would come from Rhaegar.

Oberyn sighed and leaned back in his chair. There was no point in scrutinizing the Master of Whispers needlessly. So far, the Spider had not shown any nefarious intentions except for the fact that the man used to be a servant of the Mad King.

"You've saved my nephew, Lord Varys. Ask anything of House Martell, and should it be within our power, we shall make it happen." said Oberyn.

"I'll hold you to that promise, Prince Oberyn. For now, let's talk about what our future moves shall be."

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"You've done well in pacifying House Tully and House Frey." said Tywin, staring out into the sea and showing his back to Gerion.

"Yes, I have, by selling off Cerenna and Myrielle to Frey and Tully." Gerion replied morosely.

"They had the advantage in this negotiation. But soon, that won't matter." said Tywin.

"Won't matter?" Gerion asked incredulously. "Have you not heard Tywin? We lost at Old Oak! Robert Baratheon crushed our army and killed our brother. As we speak, he marches along the Ocean Road to put Casterly Rock on a siege."

"Tygett lost his life because he refused to obey orders. He was ordered to withdraw the army back to the borders when it became clear our brother was incapable of taking Old Oak." Tywin thundered, turning on Gerion with his green eyes ablaze with fury. "Instead of obeying my command, he stubbornly threw himself and the men against the walls of a competent enemy. His death is the result of his stupidity."

"And who forced our brother to do that? I know of the messages you sent to our brother. You called him a failure repeatedly, which made Tygett try harder and harder. His death is on you, Tywin." Gerion growled back, not willing to bow out of this situation.

"I spoke only the truth. He failed to take Old Oak as he boasted. You'd remember, brother, that I was planning to give the command of our army to Addam Marbrand. Tygett was the one who insisted on taking command of the forces attacking the Reach from the Northmarch and Ocean Road." Tywin growled back. "His death is his own doing. I do not have the luxury of holding everyone's hand in this war when my son, daughter, and grandchildren are in danger."

Gerion backed down a little as he knew his brother was bothered by the implications should they lose the war. Jaime and Joffrey were still prisoners in Storm's End. While rumours of Cersei's and Myrcella's escape circulated to every corner of the Seven Kingdoms, no one knows their whereabouts. Even after months of waging the war, no one had reached out to them for the ransom.

Taking a deep breath, he calmed down as he knew Tywin grieved in his own way for Tygett. This was the time Tywin needed him the most, especially with Kevan away in the Reach.

“Has there been any word about Cersei and Myrcella?” Gerion asked.

“No.” Tywin said in a clipped tone going back to staring into the sea.

“The Redwyne fleet must have spooked whoever helped Cersei and Myrcella escape. They must’ve moored at one of the Free Cities, most probably in Lys.” said Tyrion, wading into the conversation, startling Gerion.

“What?” Tyrion asked, looking at his uncle, who was staring at him in surprise.

“When did you...?”

“Oh, I’ve been here for quite a while. As it happens, uncle, there are advantages in being the littlest Lannister.” Tyrion smirked.

Gerion couldn’t help but laugh at his nephew’s wit. He reached out and patted Tyrion’s shoulder.

“This is no time for your japes, Tyrion. Leave.” Tywin commanded.

“Now, wait just a moment, brother. Tyrion brings up a valid point. With war breaking out in Westeros, the rescuers of Cersei and Myrcella might not have been able to sail around the patrols of the Redwyne fleet. As Tyrion said, they must’ve taken refuge in one of the Free Cities.” said Gerion.

Tywin didn’t say anything, which meant his brother was considering the possibility other than thinking the Baratheons were lying or something untoward happened to Cersei and Myrcella.

“If that’s the case, we need to bring them back as soon as possible.” said Tywin.

“I’ll go and seek out my niece and her daughter. We’ll have to rescue her before the stags become aware of their location.” said Gerion.

“But how’ll you go, uncle? I doubt the Redwynes, Hightowers, or the Dornish would allow any of our ships passage through the sea.” Tyrion pointed out.

“Tyrion is right. I’ll have to take a ship from the Riverlands under disguise. I can arrange for the ransom to be paid with the aid of Essosi banks. We have many friends in the Free Cities.” said Gerion, looking curiously at Tywin for his opinion.

“Very well.” Tywin eventually said after an extended moment of silence. “But you’ll be doing something more while you’re in Essos.”

“What’s that, brother?” Gerion asked curiously.

Tywin turned around with his eyes as cold as a Northern winter. “You’ll be reaching out to the Golden Company. Tell them, House Lannister has a contract for them.”