Obligatory disclaimer: I don't own ASOIAF; that honour goes to GRRM.

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I also want to thank everyone for their support and encouragement.

7th Day of the 8th Moon

King's Landing

Eddard Stark

The king's steward was a jolly, balding man with a large potbelly, garbed in dark red robes adorned by golden stags and lions along the length of the sleeves. He warily stepped back at the sight of Winter but quickly managed to school his face with a slightly forced smile.

Not that he was alone in this, most of the men-at-arms guarding the Red Keep looked at the direwolf with unease.

"Lord Hand," he bowed with a stiff flourish. "Grandmaester Pycelle has convened the small council and urgently requests the Hand's presence if it pleases you."

Ned suppressed a groan; fools and flatterers, as Robert had said. And none could be trusted.

Was this some power play to see where he stood by requesting his presence immediately while he was still unwashed and travel-weary?

Perhaps they wanted to take a measure of him as he was tired - exhaustion had its way of loosening your mouth and shortening your temper.

Schemers and snakes, none to be trusted, if Jon had the right of it - and right now, Ned was inclined to agree with his son.

"What of His Grace and the Lord Commander?" the Hand asked. "How can a meeting be held with so many members missing?"

The steward shuffled uneasily, and beads of sweat atop his head glistened under the sun.

"His Grace and Ser Selmy attend when it pleases them," the words were uneasy, but Ned could hear the unspoken part loudly enough - neither Robert nor Barristan were seen much in the small council.

"Tell the Grandmaester I shall attend," he decided. "But I shall need appropriate garments and a hot bath first."

The small council waited half a year for a new Hand; they could wait another half an hour.

"I will inform the small council of the small delay," the steward bobbed his head like a squirrel. "We have given you Lord Arryn's former chambers in the Tower of the Hand if it pleases you. The garments and the hot bath will be prepared there, too."

“My thanks,” Ned peeled off his gloves, tucked them into his belt and dismounted. Behind him, Jory, Vayon, Tommen, and part of his retinue finally arrived.

The Hand then waved Poole over, “It seems that I am in need of a new wardrobe. Find me a master tailor and order five sets of lighter garments appropriate for the city. You know the ones I prefer.”

“At once, my lord.”

“Prince Tommen,” the royal steward bowed as Robert’s youngest approached. “Shall I prepare your chambers?”

Ned looked at his page to see how the boy would handle this. As a princely page, he had the choice to stay in his own quarters or become part of the Stark household for the duration of the fostering. Tommen was oft shy and avoided speaking to other people, but the harsh travel had melted away some of the timidness.

“I am page to Lord Stark now,” Tommen’s voice was squeaky and a bit hesitant, but it brought a smile to Ned’s face. “Steward Poole shall prepare me new quarters in the Tower of the Hand.”

The king’s steward coughed in an attempt to cover his surprise and nodded.

A prince of the realm needed to be firm, not soft or weak, and it was good to see Tommen progress.

Howland leaned in and whispered, “I shall meet you in the godswood after the council meeting.”

As a man without a position in court, the Lord of Greywater Watch and his men would be placed in the guest quarters in the Red Keep, which suited Ned fine - Howland would be his eyes and ears. Crannogmen were small, stealthy, oft underestimated and disdained by too many for their lesser stature or unorthodox upbringing.

Yet the same fools underestimated the dangers of the Neck - hundreds of Andal Warlords and ambitious kings had found their end there. And Howland Reed was amongst the most skilful crannogmen.

Nearly an hour later, Ned finally strode into the council chambers with Winter by his side. The hot bath had washed away some of the weariness, yet his sore legs and hungry belly still yearned for his feathered bed and a good meal. The pair of men-at-arms clad in polished mail and padded Baratheon surcoats that stood sentry at the entrance eyed the direwolf cautiously but did let him in.

In the end, his companion might be a beast, but his presence was too useful to ignore, and Winter knew how to behave.

A pair of Valyrian sphinxes hewn from black marble with polished red garnets for eyes flanked the doors.

The interior was no less gaudy - Myrish rugs covered the floor, pale polished marble visible between them. Tapestries from Norvos, Qohor, and Lys were hung on the walls, and all the furniture was of varnished oak upholstered with dark velvet. Shelves filled with maps and scrolls that could be required during meetings were lined between the tapestries.

A quick glance told him only four men were inside, sitting around the varnished table. Where was Stannis?

“Lord Stark,” it was a shorter man, garbed in fine blue velvet with a mockingbird sewn at his breast with a black thread. Ned didn’t recognise him, but he could only be Petyr Baelish, also known as Littlefinger. “We were beginning to think you had decided not to come!”

The would-be Lord Paramount of the Trident and Protector of the Vale didn’t look like much. He had a practised smile, but there was a hint of mockery in his eyes. His stature and movements suggested a man with little practice at arms. His positions had to have been earned through cunning and deception, especially considering he was one of the most minor lords in the Vale, worse than most landed knights.

“Is this the fabled… direwolf?” Varys, the distasteful eunuch still holding the office of master of whispers, eyed Winter warily, as did the other councillors.

The plump Esossi’s powdered face and high-pitched voice unnerved him no less than the cloying smell reminiscent of flowers on a grave. Robert should have shortened the eunuch a head instead of keeping him in his service.

“Indeed, fret not - my companion is well-trained and does not bite those who mean me no harm,” Ned assured as he took a seat beside the head of the table, Winter curling by his feet.

The master of whispers remained silently observant, with a half frown, half smile resting upon his lips.

“We are glad that you have arrived safely, Lord Stark,” Renly spoke, clad in fine green velvet with delicate golden stags prancing along the length of his collar and sleeves.

A lie.

Ned resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. Not only fools and flatterers but liars, too? And at such a basic thing as courtesies? Was the fool that disappointed Ned survived the journey, or just to see him here?

Worse, he was not really surprised, only disappointed, having expected more from them.

The last time he had seen Renly, the thin slip of a boy had scarcely been six name days. Yet, now, the youngest brother had grown into a man - tall and broad, he could have easily been mistaken for Robert if not for his sea-green eyes and the lazy smile gracing his face. Though Renly had the looks of his eldest brother, there was an air of disregard and something akin to lushness to his movements that Robert never had. It was disconcerting, even more so now that he knew the man to harbour dangerous ambitions.

“I had hoped to meet you for some years, Lord Stark,” Littlefinger’s smile almost bordered on insolence. It also felt like a lie, but not quite… A half lie? “No doubt Lady Catelyn has mentioned me to you.”

The sly arrogance rankled at Ned greatly, and his suspicion over the singer and the merchant in Winterfell came back to his mind. Cat had warned him that Baelish had been cunning as a boy, and now the boy had grown into a man. Littlefinger was playing some game, and the Lord of Winterfell liked it not. Yet… if fools, liars, and flatterers wanted to play, he could do it, no matter his mislike.

“Ah yes,” Ned paused as nonchalantly as possible, “that little boy from Riverrun?”

Littlefinger froze, a scowl marring his face for a heartbeat. “A boy no longer,” the arrogance was gone from his face, replaced by impassive coldness.

“Oh, you were that lad that challenged my brother at scarcely one and ten name-days? Quite daring.” The Lord of Winterfell smiled coldly.

“A childish flight of fancy,” the short man waved away. A lie. “Although I still bear a token to remind me of the encounter.”

Unwilling to spar with words any further, Ned nodded in greeting to the last member of the council.

“Grandmaester Pycelle.”

Unlike Luwin, he seemed to prefer a gaudier garb - his red velvet robe had an ermine collar and golden fastenings. The chain upon his neck was no less garish - the long chains were intertwined with many metals, signifying quite a hefty mastery of a school of knowledge. Every link was adorned by jewellery - amethysts, black pearls, emeralds, rubies, and such. It was considered the height of overweening arrogance to display so many accomplishments with such aplomb, more so for men of an order of scholars sworn to celibacy and humble, leal service.

The Grandmaester smiled from his chair. “I am well enough for a man of my years, my lord,” his voice was hoarse, but his pale eyes were lively. “I fear I tire easily nowadays.” Another half lie. “Perhaps we should begin soon? I feel I might fall asleep soon.”

And that was another lie. Pycelle looked old and feeble with his hunched back, bald spotted head, and long white beard, but… was it all a facade?

Gods! What had Robert dragged him into?

“Very well, my lords,” he said formally. “But should we not wait for His Grace and Commander Selmy to join us before convening?”

Renly snorted, “If we wait for my brother to grace us with his royal presence, it would be a long sit.”

“Our good King Robert has many cares,” Varys said. “He entrusts some small matters to us to lighten the load.”

Truth, but Ned couldn’t help but find it mocking despite, or maybe because of the serenity with which it was spoken.

“Business of coin, justice, and crops bores my royal brother to tears, so he leaves us to deal with such. Of course, he does send commands from time to time.”

Truth. Ned stifled his groan, closed his eyes for a moment and pushed down the irritation threatening to erupt - this was far, far worse than he expected. All the councillors kept their courtesies as appropriate, but there was a hint of derision or mockery behind the jibes, even when speaking.

And now it fell to him to deal with the fools and flatterers.

“And what of Lord Stannis?” Ned opened his eyes. “Where is the Master of Ships?”

“The Lord of Dragonstone sailed home when the King decided to head North,” Varys said with an annoying titter. “Took most of the royal fleet with him, too. Yet, I have heard some *disturbing* things from Dragonstone the last few moons.”

“Ah yes,” Renly’s green eyes almost glowed with amusement. “His wife perished in some fiery mishap a few moons ago. It would have been a tragic affair if my brother held any love for her. Yet, knowing my dutiful brother, he will be looking to remarry and finally sire an heir. Mayhaps he will choose someone easier on the eye this time?”

That… was new. Still, Ned held no love for Stannis, especially with the man now missing and his questionable doings that Jon had written about. The animosity between the brothers was also… not surprising but still woeful to see.

“Ah, Lord Renly, mayhaps you should join him in his hunt for a spouse - you’re also in need of an heir.” Littlefinger smiled, showing his pearly teeth, but his eyes crinkled with mirth as if laughing at a joke only he knew.

“Are you perhaps offering to play matchmaker?” The Lord of Storm’s End leered at Littlefinger. “But I am still young, my lord Baelish - there’s time for me. You, on the other hand, are past your thirties and unwed. We cannot let Drearfort remain without an heir either.”

Ned coughed to remind them that they were here to address matters of the state, not trade barbs and insults. Thankfully, both halted but did not look overly chastised - this may have been a common occurrence, judging by Varys and Pycelle's nonchalance.

"I shall pen a letter to Lord Stannis expressing my condolences for his loss," Ned declared. "And summon him back to King's Landing."

The Lord of Dragonstone was a stubborn man, as Ned himself could be - if Stannis wanted to shirk his duty, the Hand would relieve him of it. A month of respite and further mourning was all he was willing to grant Robert's middle brother.

Pycelle coughed, grabbing their attention.

"This morning, a royal messenger arrived from His Grace," the grandmaester paused to fish out a scroll from his robes. "The king has an urgent task for us."

The scroll was passed to the other councillors, who looked at it with interest for a few moments before passing it on. Eventually, Renly handed the message to the Hand.

Ned's grey eyes danced as he read Robert's scrawl to his mounting disbelief. Gods be good; was there no end to his friend's folly? Ninety thousand dragons on a single tourney?!

He rubbed his face tiredly, "Does this happen often?"

"My royal brother loves his tourneys and feasts," Renly shrugged. "And he is ever generous."

"Can…" the words failed Ned for a short moment, and his throat felt dry. "Can we afford such extravagance?"

"Forty thousand dragons to the champion of the joust," Littlefinger began to list off with a sigh, "half to the man who comes second, another twenty to the winner of the melee and ten to the winner of the archery. And we must not neglect other costs - cooks, carpenters, serving girls, jugglers, fools…"

"Fools we have aplenty," Lord Renly japed, his lips twitching in amusement.

It was extravagant to have such a large victor's purse, but just this time, Ned could reluctantly agree to it.

He looked at the master of coin, "Can the treasury bear this expense?"

"The treasury has been empty for years," Bealish shrugged. "I shall have to borrow the coin again to make do."

Truth.

The treasury has been empty for years.

None of them were surprised.

I shall have to borrow coin again to make do.

The words were said as if borrowing was commonplace.

“Aerys Targaryen left the treasury overflowing,” Ned said, aghast. “Yet you’re telling me the crown is in debt now?”

“Yes,” Littlefinger leaned back on his chair with a hint of amusement. “The Iron Throne owes more than six million dragons. Half of that to Lord Tywin, but we borrowed from Lord Tyrell, the Iron Bank, and several Tyroshi trading cartels. Of late, I’ve had to turn to the Faith. You won’t believe how the High Septon haggles - he’s worse than a Dornish fishmonger.”

Truth.

Ned felt even more weary. Gods, he was never the best in ledgers and sums, but he learned well enough.

"The crown directly draws customs from White Harbour, Gulltown, Oldtown, King's Landing, and Lannisport. All the highlords and the Crownlands pay tithe to the Iron Throne. Hundreds of thousands, no, it must be over a million dragons each year, even more so during summer! And the crown still has to borrow?"

“Yes,” the master of coin confirmed, finally looking serious.

Truth.

“How?”

“Well,” Pycelle coughed. “Ever since the Conquest, the royal fleet was based upon the seafaring houses of the Narrow Sea, but His Grace decided to rebuild it directly under the full control of the Iron Throne. It was quite costly, and Lord Stannis had to do it twice after a storm sunk most of it during the assault on Dragonstone. Its upkeep is quite hefty, and the Lord of Dragonstone insisted on replacing the warships with the newer and bigger war galleys after the Greyjoy Rebellion, which also strained the coffers further.”

Truth.

How far had the Iron Throne fallen to owe coin to slavers, bankers, zealots, amongst others?!

“I did say my royal brother also loves his tourneys and feasts,” Renly added. “Our lovely Queen’s appetites for spending coin are no lesser - she only demands the finest for the royal family, and both loathe *counting coppers*.”

Not a single lie, again. Eddard wasn't very good at sums, but the crown must have easily spent over twenty million dragons since Robert took over. Just the thought of that much gold made his head spin, and it took him a good half a minute to gather his wits together.

“How could Jon Arryn allow for this to happen?” He still couldn’t wrap his head around this. The Lord of the Eyrie was a careful man who gave sage advice and, while never overly thrifty, always tried to plan for the future.

“Lord Arryn was a prudent man, and he approved the reconstruction of the royal fleet. It was a necessary measure to deter incursions from Essosi corsairs and our own pirates. Yet, I fear His Grace does not always listen to wise counsel,” the grandmaester shook his head forlornly while running a hand through his wizened beard.

Truth.

The chamber descended in grave silence as the councillors looked at him with expectation.

This was far, far worse than anything he ever imagined. And he had not even begun to address the issue of the Night’s Watch.

With an inward groan, the Lord of Winterfell suppressed his rising weariness and steeled himself.

“Lord Baelish,” he looked at the master of coin. “In a sennight, I want you to prepare a plan to begin paying off the crown’s debts.”

“Which debtor should be cleared off first?” Littlefinger seemed intrigued.

“The Iron Bank,” Ned decided. It was an ill-thought idea to owe the Braavosi. The rest could wait, and the Tyroshi trading cartels could be last - they had the least power to pressure the crown, if at all.

“I am not sure His Grace or the Queen would be amenable to lessen their *burdens*,” Varys cautioned.

Truth.

Ned looked at Baelish, “I want a list of the crown’s yearly incomes and expenses for the past ten years ready for the next meeting. Mayhaps it’s some overly daring custom officers pocketing overmuch coin.”

“It shall be done,” the master of coin nodded thoughtfully. “And what of the tourney?”

"Lord Arryn always taught me tournaments were a way to make coin," the Hand leaned forward. "Try to borrow the gold from either Lord Tyrell or Lannister," he paused for a few heartbeats to roll the idea around his mind, then turned to Robert's brother. "Lord Renly, I must ask you to host this one and look for ways to offset the crown's losses. And perhaps… we could change things a bit."

“Change things a bit?” Curiosity sparked into the green eyes of the Lord of Storm’s End.

“The tourney is meant to celebrate the union between the North and the crown,” the words were spoken slowly and carefully as an idea swirled in his head. “Let us keep the rewards to ninety thousand golden dragons but make it more *interesting*-”

The godswood of the Red Keep was empty; there were few believers of the Old Gods in King’s Landing besides the Northerners. Winter prowled around, exploring the nearby bushes and elm trees, ensuring nobody would try to sneak upon them. He trusted the rooms and chambers of the Red Keep little - as the saying went, the walls had ears. But in the grove, any such eavesdroppers would be sniffed out by Winter immediately.

Howland laughed and laughed; it took him a good few minutes to stop.

“Gods,” his friend wheezed, “I can’t believe it. Horse racing, axe and javelin throwing, log tossing and boulder lifting have not been seen in the South for hundreds of years!”

“I would have to convince Robert first,” Ned wryly reminded. “But I do not think he would be against it much. No, this is the least of our problems.”

The Crannogman coughed, and his face grew thoughtful, “I have something to confess. Back in Winterfell, I might have implied that the Northmen’s presence is required here in King’s Landing and that the king would be hosting a generous tourney.”

“And who did you speak with?”

Howland did have quite a bit of cunning when he wanted, and Ned did not mind; he needed plenty of guile by his side now. Still, his gaze grew stern as he gazed at the Lord of Greywater Watch - his friend should have known better than to run schemes behind his back.

“All of them… bar the Leech Lord.”

Gods, he was sorely in need of rest, but it seemed the Hand received little respite.

“Next time you make plans for my bannermen, do consult with me first,” the icy words made Howland wilt, but Ned patted him on his shoulder. “And why did you exclude Bolton?”

“The man has no brothers, cousins, sons, uncles or the such,” the crannogman shuffled uneasily. “I even heard rumours how he’s looking for a new spouse. Yet the man’s seed is poor - neither of his wives survived for too long, and out of seven children, only a single one survived to age.”

“I take it he is having some trouble?”

Ned snorted in amusement; it seemed that Roose's unnamed bastard would not be a problem this time, just as Jon had promised. If the Leech Lord was looking for a new spouse, it could only mean he was in dire need of an heir.

"Indeed," Howland gave a weak chuckle. "Bolton has never been too popular, especially now when his wives and sons don't live long. Some think he's cursed by the gods."

"I'd wager he will soon look to the south, where many unaware knights and minor lords would jump at the chance anyway."

Roose's connections from Domeric Bolton's fostering with the Redforts and Ryswells were gone with his son's death, and the Flayed Man found himself standing alone, with no alliances.

The Crannoglord hummed in agreement, then thoughtfully stroked his well-trimmed goatee. "I suppose the Night's Watch's woes or the *trouble* Beyond the Wall did not get mentioned?"

"Not yet," Ned sighed. "I will inform the council of my plans, but apparently, Lord Commander Mormont sent a raven that he shall be coming down here in person over a moon ago."

The news made his friend grow thoughtful.

"Mayhaps First Ranger Benjen found some proof?"

"We'll find out soon enough for ourselves," the Lord of Winterfell waved dismissively, unwilling to deal with speculation and rumour-mongering. "But first, I have a few tasks for you."

"I am at your service, always," Howland kneeled dramatically, and Ned rolled his eyes.

"I want you and your men to keep an ear out for any rumours, big or small, in the city. And start investigating Janos Slynt and Petyr Baelish as discreetly as possible. And gods be good, get up!"

The crannogman leapt to his feet with vigour and declared boldly, "It shall be done!" Howland's face then grew serious. "Although I do have some news to report to you."

"Already?" It hasn't even been three hours since they arrived in the Red Keep.

"Aye, I heard a few courtiers talk in one of the yards. Apparently, Jon Arryn passed away quickly and suddenly, and his lady wife fled with their son and the Arryn retinue immediately upon his death."

"Quite suspicious. Your thoughts?"

"The court has little good to say for Lady Arryn, and many think her half-mad. As for the Lord of the Eyrie, it could be poison or some more stubborn illness," the words were so quiet, barely a whisper. "At that age, any ailment could be quick to end you. I can look into it further if you wish?"

Gods forgive him, but Ned was unwilling to pursue this right now. His good sister and her son had refused to honour all notions of kinship and alliances. Robert Arryn had been fine, while all of Ned's children but one had perished, their home sacked. An alliance was a bond that went both ways, and if Lysa Arryn was unwilling, he would not be trying too hard either.

Suddenly, he slapped his brow in frustration. Gods, that hidden letter bearing the Arryn sigil in the hour of the bat… he had forgotten about it. Everything had been so hectic that day…

It was probably *still* in one of his cloaks, dragging along with his wagons, a few hundred miles away, still travelling slowly on the kingsroad. Not that Ned could do anything about it right now, much less read it - that chance had ended the moment he passed Winterfell's gates. Worse, Littlefinger had a finger there, making him wonder how many plots the master of coin had a hand in.

“Maybe later, there are bigger problems to deal with now,” he decided. The future held enough issues and trials without digging into the past. If Lysa Arryn wanted justice for her husband, she could petition the king with proof.

“You should still be careful,” Howland’s face was concerned. “It would not be the first time a lord has been poisoned in King’s Landing.”

“Fret not - my steward shall be informed, and I shall be sure to acquire myself food and wine testers.” Ned groaned inwardly at the thought of yet another layer of security and intrigue he had to watch out for. “Anything else before we adjourn?”

“Aye, Ser Wylis arrived yesterday and is here with his sizeable retinue.”

“And what of his task?”

"The gift shall land in Pentos and take a caravan to Vaes Dothrak, escorted by Ser Donnel Locke and Ser Robar Royce." A surprise but a pleasant one; it seemed that Ned's previous plans were going well. Yet, it appeared that the crannoglord had more to say. "Are you sure nothing should be done about the Mad King's daughter?"

"What can we do, Howland?" Ned's voice grew quiet and weary, and at that moment, he felt as if he was ten years older. The last dragon princess had rarely been a topic of their discussions despite the dark omens Jon had inked down. "Even if we wanted to harm the girl for something she had yet to do, it is out of our reach now."

It was a dangerous thing to talk about, more than the previous ones, and they looked around - there was nobody there, bar Winter, who prowled around the shrubbery.

“There’s indeed nothing to be done,” Howland conceded, but his eyes grew hard, even if his voice was reduced to a whisper. “But I do not like the threat of fire and blood looming over our heads in the hands

of someone with a grudge. At least if Jon is correct, she would have great difficulty controlling her beasts."

The idea of being at the mercy of the callous dragons rankled Ned just as much. But the possibility of such things happening and her arrival was so far away, and it was nearly impossible to plan for something like that. For a good moment, he considered assassination, but such a thing was quickly dismissed - catspaws were underhanded methods that easily opened you to retaliation. That was beside the real problem - he was not so callous to try and murder someone who had done him no harm, let alone a young maiden.

"It's not even certain the beasts would hatch - many have tried for the last century and a half with no success. Besides, while I trust Jon, some things are too *different* from his writings. If the gods are good, Daenerys Targaryen will live out her life far away from here without trying to plunge us in fire and blood."

Howland did look reluctant for a moment before schooling his face, "What about Aegon?"

"Elia bore no sons here."

"Indeed," the crannogman snorted. "But it's the involvement of the Golden Company that raises *different* questions."

"The last Blackfyre died forty years ago…"

"Or so we think. It's not impossible that a few slipped underneath our collective notice - Essos is vast, after all."

Dealing with another Blackfyre Rebellion was not something that appealed to Ned. "All we can do in this case is stay vigilant. That time, the Golden Company landed with a supposedly legitimate claimant when everyone was weakened from war, and Gods willing, neither shall happen again."

There had been no whispers of any hidden Blackfyres for the last forty years, so there was little he could do - even when the black dragons were in the open, they did not shy from attacking when their captain-general commanded. But in the end, neither was indeed a problem; the Golden Company might have been a decent fighting force, but they were still sellswords, limited in number and fighting for coin - smashing them in the field was no trouble.

The Lord of Greywater Watch seemed to have run out of topics to discuss, and their rendezvous was finally adjourned.

Usually, Ned would take his time to pray before the Heart Tree, but there was no weirwood here and no faces carved. His gaze moved to the centre of the grove, where a sizeable brown oak rested, old and wrinkled, its green crown growing thin, like a balding man.

The Lord of Winterfell had the persistent feeling that he did not belong here - but that mattered little, he would do his duty. With a sigh, Ned forced his weary body to move. His legs cried out in protest but were ignored - a hot beef steak and a feathered bed were waiting for him in the Tower of the Hand.

???, The Water Gardens

Oberyn Martell

As usual, his brother was on the highest terrace, where he could overlook the children playing below in the pools, fountains, and courtyards. The way was guarded by thirty of the best Martell men-at-arms. At the last door stood Areo Hotah, the tall, broad Norvoshi wrapped in orange silk and clad with his studded leather tunic and bronze scale shirt.

He carefully opened the polished mahogany door.

“Prince Doran is expecting you.”

With a nod, Oberyn entered, and the Norvoshi followed him inside, closing the door.

Doran's body looked even more soft, and judging by his hobble as he leaned on the cane, he would soon struggle to walk. The Prince of Dorne looked far older than his age, with his hair gone grey aside from a few errant strands of brown. The joints of his hands seemed slightly swollen and red, hinting at the heavy gout that Doran was suffering for those well-versed in healing.

“You summoned me, brother,” Oberyn tried to hold in his irritation.

For a few moments, Doran continued to gaze down the balcony to the serene sight of the noble children playing in the water, and just when Oberyn decided to repeat his query, his brother slowly turned around, face pensive as usual.

“I have news from the North - Robb Stark has wed Robert’s daughter, and Lord Stark will soon be ruling as the Hand from King’s Landing.”

“And what shall we do?” The Red Viper asked, despite dreading the answer.

“We shall bide our time, of course,” Doran answered calmly as he hobbled towards his favourite polished ebony table and signalled to the serving girl to pour him his favourite heavy wine.

Oberyn blinked at his brother, mind refusing to comprehend what he had just heard.

“When Elia and little Rhaenys were brutally murdered, and you said you had a plan to avenge them, I waited,” he hissed. “It was not a terrible plan, yet Daenerys is married to a horselord now, and Viserys has gone as mad as his father!”

“Oberyn-”

“Don’t!” The Red Viper raised his hand. “Don’t give me the same pitiful excuse you fed me with a hundred times. No, I want answers *now*.”

“We shall wed Arianne to Viserys-”

“Don’t lie to yourself, brother. Do you want to curse Arianne to a cruel fate like Queen Rhaella? I told you that we should take the children and raise them here. Paint their hair, and nobody would recognise them in Dorne.”

“It was too dangerous,” his brother shook his head and took a slice of peeled blood-orange from the ornate bowl on the table. “We could not risk it.”

Oberyn spat on the floor, and his brother gazed at him with disappointment, but he cared no longer.

“And look where it got us. Now, both Daenerys and Viserys are forever out of our reach. Come now, brother, there’s no need to lie. Both of us have been to Essos and know the Dothraki - the girl will live and die in Vaes Dothrak, completely useless to us, and Viserys will probably get himself killed somewhere. A horselord has never crossed the Narrow Sea and never will. So, I ask *again,* how are we going to avenge Elia? By waiting for our foes to die of old age, mayhaps?!”

He stood there, waiting for Doran to give him an answer. His brother took his sweet time as he always did, slowly devouring the pieces of the blood orange and taking sips from his sweetened wine.

“The realm is growing unstable,” the greying Prince of Dorne finally spoke, face pensive.

“Unstable?!” Oberyn couldn’t help but laugh.

Did his brother even hear himself? Did he think Oberyn would keep getting deceived like some half-wit fool?

The Iron Throne was now linked with the Westerlands, Stormlands, Riverlands, Vale, and North by blood. The crown had never been so stable ever since the dragons had died. And if Joffrey was wed to the rose of Highgarden, the realm could not be any more stable!

Disappointed, Oberyn turned around to leave.

“Where are you going, brother,” Doran’s soft words halted him, but it seemed that not only had his body grown weak, but his voice and wits, too. “I have not dismissed you.”

“I’m going to *wait*,” he barely held in his snort, “just like you have decided. Unless… you have a different plan?”

That seemed to calm down Doran.

"Yes," he said, straight-faced and solemn. "We must wait for a more opportune moment - now is not the time to act."

It took all of Oberyn's self-control not to erupt, and he carefully pushed down his bubbling fury and answered all his brother's questions about Sunspear and Dorne. Another ten minutes of instructions, and he was free to go.

The Red Viper was not a fool - the realisation had been brewing for a long time, but now it hit with full force.

Doran didn't really care about avenging Elia. After waiting and waiting for seventeen years, their sole plan had already been foiled because his brother expected to wait his way to victory and revenge without even attempting to move the pieces.

Which meant that Oberyn had to take matters into his own hands, one way or another.

Once he rode past the ebony gates of Sunspear, he gave the reins of his steed to the stableboy and rushed to his quarters.

It wasn't long until Ellaria knocked on his door and entered as he was packing his belongings.

"Are we going somewhere, Oberyn?"

"Yes, darling," he smiled at his paramour. "Go tell my daughters to get ready for a trip to King's Landing quickly. It's been quite a while since I've visited."

Author's Endnote:

Starring fools, flatterers, liars, weary travellers, and angry brothers. Now that Ned's focus is not on Jon Arryn, who is old enough and may or may not have been murdered or died of old age, it's time to stir the pot differently.

Decided to switch Areo's canonical copper scale shirt to a bronze scale shirt.