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

Edited by: Void Uzumaki and Himura; B. Reader: Bub3loka

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

13th Day of the 8th Moon

Eddard Stark

He couldn't help but feel disappointed at Robert's bored indifference. Where was his friend who would daringly leap head-first into every fray, voice booming and warhammer swinging?

Truth be told, Ned had suspected the Night's Watch plea would fall on deaf ears within the council, but he harboured the tiniest smidgeon of hope that the king would leap at the chance of fighting.

Alas, the Lord of Winterfell was met with profound disappointment instead. The lauded warrior and leal friend was gone, replaced with a drunken lout who cared not for ruling the kingdoms but for whores and wine.

Mayhaps he was always there, and the crown had brought out the worst in Robert? Or had he been too blind to see what was there all along?

It pained Ned to admit it, but he could close his eyes no longer. It was a little wonder the court was in such dire straits, along with the council and the royal coffers.

Yet Robert was still the king, and the Lord of Winterfell would bury his feelings of discontent and hold to his oaths of fealty if nothing else. There was only so much a Hand could do when the king cared little - but Ned would do his duty, both to the crown and to the North.

Since his friend seemed uncaring in the matters of governance, he redoubled his efforts in teaching Tommen everything he knew. Thankfully, the boy seemed to soak up the lessons and the slightest trace of attention like a dry sponge, unlike his elder brother, who did not seem interested in ruling or warfare. No matter what, Ned would be assured that the next generation of royals had at least one capable member. If things continued this way, Tommen would make for a fine Hand that could hopefully curb the worst tendencies of his capricious elder brother or at least rule in his stead.

All these new problems left Ned somehow ragged and exhausted. There was too much to do and too little time. His spare time was as rare as gold in the North, and he found himself juggling too many things at once. Aside from Tommen and the nascent Night's Watch reform, he also had to slog through the endless drudgery of courtesies, petitions and requests every day. A good chunk of his time was spent learning his way around the Red Keep and familiarising himself with the courtiers.

Even his time at the privy wasn't peaceful; after holding court, Ned had gone to the nearest privy to relieve himself, only to be ambushed on the way out by the lord of Bitterbridge, Derrick Caswell.

"Lord Hand," the Reach lord was a gaunt, frail, balding man who looked like a colder gale would topple him over for good despite his gaudy yellow doublet.

"Lord Caswell," Ned nodded curtly, his forbearance wearing thin. Tommen was gone to Pycelle for his lessons for the day, and Winter was regretfully prowling around the Godswood, having lost patience for sitting in the stuffy throne room where the court was held. More's the pity - few dared to approach him when the direwolf was by his side.

"May I have a moment of your time," Caswell's words were polite and courteous, and the man bowed his head in respect. It was hard to dismiss such a well-mannered request, especially since the Lord of Winterfell did have a few spare minutes right now, so Ned motioned for the man to proceed. "My lord, I come seeking audience with you for a matter of great importance."

"Urgent enough to avoid petitioning me at court or arranging a proper meeting through my steward?" Ned asked wryly, making the man shuffle uneasily.

"Lord Poole is a busy man, and I do not want to take from his time." the Lord of Winterfell barely held down his snort at the shameless reply; it was also the first time he had heard anyone refer to old Vayon with such courtesy, especially a rather powerful Reach Lord.

House Poole was elevated to nobility for the services of their ancestors to House Stark, but they held no land of their own, while the Caswells of Bitterbridge were an old and storied lineage hailing from the era of petty kings and could muster over a thousand swords.

"Speak plainly then, Lord Caswell, what is it you seek?"

Ned schooled his face into an impassive icy mask and squared his shoulders, making the man before him gulp - he had a good idea of the request, but it was better to hear it in full now, lest the reacher lord was snubbed.

"I have heard great tales about the beauty of Sansa Stark, the flower of the North! It is with my deepest respect and utmost honour that I have come to seek your daughter's hand in marriage for my son and heir - Ser Lorent Caswell," the older man started his speech confidently but wilted towards the end under Ned's icy gaze. Any following words seemed to have died in the lord's throat, and rightly so - Eddard was far from amused. In fact, it took him a few moments to suppress his rising annoyance.

It had been less than a sennight since he arrived in King's Landing, yet this was the seventh proposal of marriage for his children and third for Sansa's hand. The nearly thirty-year-old Lord Arstan Selmy had proposed to make his eldest daughter the lady of Haystack Hall, and Owen Merryweather had asked Sansa's hand for his son. There was Walder Frey, who had sent one of his endless progeny with a generous yet open offer for marriage - sons or daughters, he cared little. The greying widow of

Stokeworth, Tanda, had expressed interest in Rickon's hand in marriage, though Eddard couldn't say if it was for herself or one of her daughters, and he did not really want to know either.

To his horror, the young Staunton widow, a shy buxom maiden of barely twenty name days, had also expressed her desire to wed Jon Snow or Rickon, promising to stake their claim on Rook's Rest.

The Plumm heir, a burly blonde man with a thick neck and a red face, also requested Sansa's hand, and there was even a Crane knight from a cadet branch seeking Arya's hand.

"I'm afraid the rest of my children are too young for me to be considering marriages just yet," Ned pinned Derrick Caswell under his icy gaze, making the man step back uneasily. "And I cannot, in good conscience, agree to a betrothal without presenting the boy in question before my lady wife and daughter. Besides, isn't your heir already wed?"

Oh, he had seen Lorent Caswell for himself in court once or twice - a wispy young man with far too much pride and little skill and sense to back it. Ned had done his best to get familiar with the Southron nobility once more on his way here, lest he end up unprepared.

The question seemed to grant the gaunt old lord some strength and courage.

"I'm afraid Lady Leyra passed away after a heavy pregnancy," there was not a single trace of regret in the man's face or voice.

"You have my condolences, Lord Caswell," Ned inclined his head while staring at the reacher lord with his most wolfish gaze. "Perhaps Ser Lorent needs some time to grieve. If you insist on pursuing such a match later, he can travel to Winterfell and present himself before Lady Stark and my daughter. Now, I bid you a good day, my lord - the needs of the realm await me."

The words seemed to make the Caswell wilt, and Ned strode past the distraught Lord of Bitterbridge. It seemed if he wanted to use the privy peacefully, he'd have to walk to his quarters from now on. Eddard couldn't even make the way back to the Tower of the Hand before being ambushed by yet another courtier, the King's Counter - a portly man who, by Littlefinger's behest, delivered all the ledgers detailing the crown's revenues and expenditures for the last decade.

The next few hours were no less busy - as Hand, he had to deal with even more courtiers and attempted to familiarise himself with the crown's logs, but with no success.

It was only by late afternoon that he managed to make his way to the Godswood for a prayer. Thankfully, Poole had found him a master tailor, and now Ned had five sets of light garments suitable for the southron heat. The grey silk was so impossibly thin that he felt somewhat naked, yet the relief and comfort were unquestionable. They were all a tad too gaudy, but of the finest make, so he could not complain.

Cotton would have been preferable for the heat, but the Queen had snatched the latest shipment of dornish cotton all for herself, according to the tailors.

Winter enthusiastically greeted him the moment he stepped into the grove. Any errant visitors were deterred, if not outright scared away, by the direwolf's presence and few here in the South cared about the old gods, leaving the Godswood thankfully empty in contrast to the bustling Red Keep. Prayers were not to be disturbed - even before the old gods - so the grove remained the most serene place and, sadly, the only one he could meet, knowing nobody would eavesdrop or disturb him.

In truth, the grove was a pure mockery - a godswood without a weirwood was like a naked warrior without a blade. There had been a proper heart tree here once - a gift from Torrhen Stark to the Conqueror - but it had been chopped down during Baelor's reign. He had found the stump between some bushes near the centre two days ago, and the servants taking care of the grove had elucidated Ned on the history in question.

Howland was already waiting by the old oak that served as a poor replacement for a Heart Tree; Winter promptly began inspecting the surroundings, ensuring they were not disturbed.

“You look quite ragged, Ned,” his friend noted with no small amount of concern.

“Being Hand isn’t easy, and the courtiers are maddening,” he sighed, tiredly running a hand through his hair. “I had another request for Sansa’s hand by a reachlord who decided to ambush me by the privy of all places! Gods, when did noblemen grow so shameless?!”

Howland snorted with amusement.

“I don’t know why you’re so surprised. Even before Robb’s marriage and your new office, you were one of the most powerful and well-connected lords in the realm. All the more - your daughters will grow to be pretty maidens, and your sons have already proven themselves valiant.”

It was a headache he could do without - Ned never thought he would miss settling disputes over fishing rights in the northern mountains. Although Howland had a point - Sansa had flowered half a year ago, and it looked like she would grow to be even prettier than her lovely mother. Still, he had no desire to even begin entertaining more southern matches for now. Tactical and political considerations or not, with his new knowledge, the Lord of Winterfell preferred all his children to be above the Neck, where Winterfell’s powers reigned supreme.

In the end, Eddard Stark did not lack alliances or connections - for good or bad, his Father’s plans were all realised in some form or another.

“A headache to politely decline all the offers,” Ned shrugged.

“Hah, many a lord and lady struggle to find a proper marriage for their heirs and spares, and here you are spoiled for too much choice.”

“I’ve found that having too much choice is just as bad as having none,” he sighed. “Declining all the offers without insulting anyone is becoming cumbersome.” Hopefully, the prospect of travelling over a thousand miles to his seat of power with dubious chances of success would deter most. Even if they make their way to the North, Catelyn knew how to handle such persistent suits - his wife was far more diplomatic than he ever was, and none would be accepted without his say on the matter anyway. “Littlefinger provided me with the royal ledgers today.”

“Oh?” Howland’s brown eyes were alight with interest.

Ned shook his head. “Nothing I can make sense of no matter how much I wracked my wits. I passed it on to Vayon in hopes he could decipher the book.” Numbers and sums were never his strong suit. Still, he was good enough for it, yet even with his skills in keeping Winterfell’s ledgers in order, the accounting book made Ned’s head spin with the heavy mess of numbers and signs scattered all over the pages in no particular order. “Do you have anything on Baelish yet?”

The master of coin was the man Ned trusted the least in this thrice-damned city - and his insolence and hand in dealing with things in the North were no better.

“Gods be good, I do,” the crannogman grimaced. “So much that I don’t know where to start.”

“From the beginning would be a good place.”

Howland sighed and rubbed his eyes tiredly. “Alright then. He proved himself a most capable customs officer in Gulltown, and his rise was quick. In five years, Lord Arryn appointed him as a master of coin, and now he’s grown rich from his position.”

Ned quirked his eyebrow, “Rich how? Embezzlement?”

“Nay. Or well, none that I know of. The man knows the matters of trade and taxation like the back of his hand and, according to the rumours, invests every coin he gets his hands on and reaps the rewards - half the whorehouses in the city work for him, along with many inns, warehouses, and the such - if there is any matter of commerce, Littlefinger has his hand in it and makes coin. If he ever pilfered any coin from the royal treasury, it would be no more than any previous men in his position. I’d wager the only difference was how he used the gold.”

“Such moves are risky, though,” the Hand grunted. For some reason, it didn’t surprise him that Baelish was peddling flesh. Being the grandson of a Braavosi sellsword seemed to run in the blood - blood, steel, food, coin - they would work with it all, despite their claims of proud sanctity against slavery.

“That they are, but the master of coin can easily mitigate most of the dangers - and put his own men in many smaller offices - a harbour master here, a keeper of keys there. It seems that luck has smiled upon him - and of course, the long summer and its bounty were definitely in his favour. And from what I’ve heard, he has barely a handful of men at arms to keep the peace in his keep in the Vale and no other real expenditures.”

Ned could see it now - without bannermen and armies to call upon, Baelish looked mostly harmless, yet that freed up his hands and coin to be placed in other endeavours. The man worked with promises, gold, and favours instead of honour and duty, just like his grandsire, who sold his blade for coin.

“A lord by name, a peddler in truth,” he noted with distaste. “Anything that can be used to dislodge the man from his position?”

Howland stood silent for a long, uncomfortable minute, deep in thought.

"None so far. Littlefinger has broken no laws, and his skill in managing coin is the real deal, although I'll keep an eye out." Coupled with Baelish's notorious skill in providing gold when Robert requested, removing him from the small council would be hard unless Ned could offer a better replacement.

But he could not. Eddard could see how Petyr Baelish climbed to become Lord Paramount of the Riverlands and Protector of the Vale by marriage - the man was cunning, ruthless, and opportunistic with no regard for loyalty or honour and used every situation to his advantage. The hope that Vayon would decipher the ledgers and find some incriminating irregularity remained, but a cunning man like this would hardly leave traces to be caught, especially since he provided the book of accounts.

No matter how distasteful, it looked like Baelish firmly entrenched himself in his position, and Ned couldn't do anything about it… for now. There were far more pressing matters to deal with than an ambitious upstart.

Yet, Howland seemed uneasy.

“Anything else on Littlefinger?” Ned restlessly began to pace before the old oak.

“I’ve heard disturbing rumours,” the crannogman’s voice was but a whisper. The silence eerily dragged on for another half a minute as his friend hesitated before looking resigned. “It’s not confirmed, but some claim Baelish oft boasts of taking the maidenheads of both Tully sisters.”

Silence reigned in the Godswood for what felt like forever but was probably no longer than a minute or two.

"I have no knowledge of Lysa Arryn's dalliances," Ned's tone was steely but betrayed the agitation raging within. "But my lady wife came to me a maid on the wedding night."

Baelish's boasts would have been a far graver blow otherwise.

There was a tinge of anger, but Catelyn had been a dutiful and true wife, and despite any quarrels, he had little reason to distrust her. Yet, this foolish rumour seemed to explain many mysteries, considering how, according to Jon’s letter, Baelish’s rise in position was intertwined with his relationship with Lysa Arryn and his mocking insolence. Oh, if only Baelish dared to make such boasts before him, Ned would challenge him to a duel of honour - and do away with the scheming snake for good. Slandering the good

name of his lady wife was not something he could forgive; neither was the implied insult towards his person.

Unknowingly, his legs got him before the weirwood stump, and he found himself sitting on it. Winter trotted over and placed his enormous head over his legs lazily. The gesture soothed his frazzled nerves, and before Ned knew it, his hand was already running through the smooth, silvery fur.

Howland walked over and coughed, grabbing his attention. “I also looked into Janos Slynt - the man is shadier than Littlefinger. Known for taking bribes and selling promotions, and now apparently half the captains of the City Watch pay half of their salaries to him.”

“How has the man not been arrested for this?” Ned asked, aghast.

“Lord Arryn found two witnesses willing to testify, but both were found dead shortly after, and His Grace decided to leave Slynt in his post lest his successor turned out worse.”

Gods, nearly three thousand gold cloaks under the command of a corrupt son of a butcher. Ned knew the capital was a den of snakes and thieves, but to see it for himself was far more appalling. Worse, Robert’s inaction was not surprising from what he had seen of him over the past couple of moons - his childhood friend simply preferred to do as little as possible, if nothing at all.

“Keep an ear out for a way to bring the man to justice,” he decided. The largest armed force in King’s Landing being under a corrupt outlaw was unsettling. “But make no moves unless a good opportunity presents itself.”

“It shall be done,” Howland bowed solemnly. “There’s… more.”

“More?” Ned echoed, oddly calm. When his hand found the spot behind Winter’s ear, the direwolf lazily lolled out his tongue and closed his eyes.

“There’s some persistent rumour going around the inns and streets,” his friend grimaced. “Word is you are a dark sorcerer that turns into a wolf by night, practices the darkest of magics, and sacrifices maidens to the tree gods.”

Ned snorted. A heartbeat later, he couldn’t hold it anymore and howled with laughter, any lingering anger quickly forgotten.

Yet, Howland did not seem to share his mirth, and his troubled face cooled his amusement.

“It’s not a laughing matter, Ned. It’s the talk in *every* tavern, and I even heard a septon preach against you. A *septon*!”

The words sent a chill up his spine. That was very troubling - rumours were not something that could be fought off. And for them to spread so quickly far and wide, someone was moving in the shadows against

him - especially if the Faith was involved. Ned knew of the Seven-Pointed Star but held no love for the Andal gods and their clergy. He had met the High Septon two days ago - a fat man who indulged in the pleasures of food and coin far too much and seemed just as corrupt as Slynt, if not more.

"Someone is pouring oil into the fire," Ned sighed as he looked west, where the sun had already hidden behind the pinkish curtain wall.

It seemed that even fools and lickspittles did not lack cunning and ambition.

“Indeed. I’ll try to look into the source of the rumours, but it will take some time.” Though, judging by his tone, Howland didn’t think he could succeed anytime soon.

The Lord of Winterfell shook his head and stood up, Winter faithfully standing beside him. The crannogman had nought else for him - it seemed that their rendezvous was to an end. Not that the revelations were small, but Ned feared what his friend would manage to unearth given more time.

For good or for bad, he understood Cregan Stark a little better now, and it was a pity he couldn’t chop off some heads and leave back home as swiftly as possible. Alas, the talks about the Watch were only beginning, and Ned had a feeling they wouldn’t be resolved too quickly. The duties of a Hand were numerous and cumbersome, even without the unnerving news Howland brought. He wanted to help Robert, yet the question was not only how but if his friend truly desired his assistance. Everything around him felt like a tangled knot, a complex spiderweb of wilful negligence, corruption, ambition, and incompetence.

A dainty but pained squeal brought him back to the present. Blinking twice, he realised that he had walked into a young woman, sending her sprawling to the ground upon collision.

“I apologise, lady…” Ned hid his embarrassment as he reached his hand to help her up.

"Senelle, my lord," she giggled as she took his hand, and he hauled her up. "No harm done!"

She was light. As Senelle patted the hems of her crimson gown to remove the dust, he got a better look at poor lass. She was a head shorter than him, no older than twenty, with bright crimson hair and a freckled face. Her eyes were dull blue.

The gown was of smooth silk with myrish lacing and showed a generous amount of flesh and wealth, along with the silver pin that held her braid, but Ned wasn’t sure if she was some courtier, an important handmaid, or some expensive whore. Despite her love for plain, simple attire, Catelyn easily looked better in her thirties.

“Good evening, lady Senelle,” Ned shook his head and turned to head back to the Tower of the Hand.

“Wait, my lord,” she smiled… coquettishly? And leaned forward, hands crossed in a way that her bust almost spilt out of her tight bodice. “It’s getting dark, and I-I’m scared-”

A low, rumbling growl made Senelle stiffly turn around, only to see Winter bearing his teeth at her, hackles raised.

Before Ned could even blink, the rapidly paling girl had picked up the hem of her gown and was already running away, shrieking as if chased by a band of wildlings, leaving him stunned.

What, in the name of the gods, had just happened?!

…Did the foolish lass just try to seduce him?

16th Day of the 8th Moon

The Spider

From the east, an orange glow split through the dark, cloudy skies, heralding the arrival of dawn. The gravedigger struggled until the small body was left in the gloom of the twisty, ramshackle alley behind the run-down pot shop and slinked into the darkness. Even in the poorest places in Fleabottom, none disturbed a gravedigger, who were considered sons of the Stranger, and it was a bad omen to trouble them.

It was a pity, but once his little birds grew up, they outlived their usefulness and needed to be disposed of. Some said ignorance was bliss, and they were right - knowing too much was a sin. Little children were far easier to control than adolescents, and meat was never wasted in Flea Bottom, no matter the source.

Two more turns and he was at the Street of Flour, entering an ordinary-looking bakery through the backdoor. There was a plain oaken wardrobe in the basement, and he quietly entered, carefully removing a part of the bottom, revealing a dark tunnel below.

Fifteen minutes later, Varys emerged from an inn just below the hook in his favourite silk robes with his face powdered.

Things had become unexpectedly troublesome lately - he had not expected the king to push for a direct match so quickly, not between his daughter and Winterfell's heir. It made sense in hindsight, but it was something he had failed to foresee - a match between Sansa and Joffrey had seemed so much more likely…

Now, the two most formidable men in the realm were behind Joffrey's claim. However, it was not all lost - Eddard Stark was a creature of honour, and Varys foresaw the connection between Joffrey and Winterfell to grow tumultuous with time, regardless of the truth.

Ah, the highlord of the North had grown to be an even more dangerous man than Varys remembered. While not carrying the same aura of restrained violence as Rickard Stark, who perished in the green flames, Eddard was no less baleful with his cold grey eyes despite his quiet demeanour.

Worse, there were two formidable sons to his name now; not only had the trueborn turned out to be valiant according to the rumours, but the bastard as well - the next generation of direwolves was no lesser than the previous one.

And now, the Lord of Winterfell sat at the highest position in the kingdom, just below the king. Yet, he made no moves to investigate his foster father's demise, and thus, he would have no reason to question Cersei's children and their parentage. What a delightful conundrum - what would an honourable man like Eddard Stark do when he found out his good daughter was, in fact, false? A bastard girl born of incest.

Alas, the Quiet Wolf's attention seemed to be aimed northward still, towards the woes of the Night's Watch, where grumkins and snarks had come back to life.

The tales of magicks Beyond the Wall were ominously dreadful, but in hindsight, the king was correct - what was there to fear from foes that young bastards and trained rangers could so easily best?

For now, the Lord of Winterfell seemed unapproachable, even more so with the savage grey-furred beast by his side. The elusive crannoglord was not to be underestimated either; the short, slim man many looked down upon oft disappeared in such ways that not even Varys or his little birds could find what he was up to.

It was even harder to glean what Lord Stark's true aim was here - he always carried himself with an icy demeanour and had made no meaningful moves besides fulfilling his usual duties as the Hand. The northern lord spoke little, even amongst his household, and was content to observe and ask questions. How unsettling - such a boorish man becoming such a mystery.

And the Spider hated mysteries.

His little birds couldn't thrive in the cold North even in summer, leaving Varys almost entirely blind to the happenings besides hearsay brought by merchants and sailors.

Usually, the Spider would look for a good opportunity to approach Lord Stark and leave him some breadcrumbs to follow slowly entangling him in his web of intrigue and suspicion, but such notions were now snuffed out with the revelation of *sorcery*.

Still, standing by and only observing was not an option - the Lord of Winterfell was capable, and given enough time, he could resolve many of the crown's woes, things that Jon Arryn was too old and tired to deal with properly.

Such a thing would simply not do. Whispers were already afoot about the northern lord's dabbling with magic - even before Varys played his hand, which meant someone else was also pouring oil into the fire. The crown and Lord Stark had spurned the Faith with the Princess' wedding, and the Spider looked forward with delight to seeing how that conundrum would play out. He knew well that words were not to be underestimated, especially those spoken by the pious.

Still, things were not going in the direction he desired - Eddard Stark had the uncanny ability to reign in Robert far better than anyone else. The well-thought gift sent to Khal Drogo spoke volumes of the king's willingness to listen to his friend's counsel.

But there were other players that could get tangled in his web still.

So Varys finally made his way into the Red Keep's training yards and observed from the shadows - a routine repeated for the fourth morn in a row. This time, however, it seemed that luck smiled upon him.

Eddard Stark instructed his princely page in person in swordplay and footwork - a rare occasion given the man's preciously busy time. Even better, Renly was observing as his former squire Ser Loras sparred with Arys Oakheart.

Subtly, the Spider made his way to the enamoured Lord of Storm's End.

"I did not know you held an interest in training at arms, Lord Varys," Renly lazily tilted his head in greeting; his jet-black hair, cleaned and combed as always, was tied with a golden ribbon behind his head. As usual, the youngest Baratheon brother seemed to have put great effort into his appearance.

"Not much, in truth. Yet the performance is not as important as the players," he nodded at Tommen's tired form as Lord Stark had him drilling footwork relentlessly.

Renly's face became unreadable when looking at Lord Stark, and the Spider knew why. The Hand had acted courteously but carried a subtle trace of particular judging coldness when dealing with Littlefinger or Renly, and the young lord was perceptive enough to catch it.

"It's a rare sight to see my brother's children in the yard," the master of laws hummed. "But not an unwelcome one."

"Indeed, it seems that His Grace has finally taken an interest in nurturing his heirs. In a few years, Prince Tommen would be well-prepared for the many difficulties of *governance*," Varys let out a well-measured titter that delightfully made Renly uneasy.

"How fortunate - maybe the Father will smile upon us, and my royal brother will decide to take more interest in the matters of the realm."

Renly's reply was somehow distracted, and his attention was now on Prince Tommen and Lord Stark; it seemed that some seeds of doubt were planted, but it was far from enough.

"It is a good thing," the Spider agreed readily. "It seems that the life of royal councillors is fraught with danger."

“None of us are half the age of old Arryn,” Renly snorted. “Well, none but Pycelle, but I doubt Tommen will be the one to replace him.”

“Ah yes, our kindly Grandmaester. He loves his naps, but I’m afraid one of these days, he will fall asleep for one last time.” Pycelle was a decent mummer, but anyone knew the old man was far more cunning than he liked to appear, most of all Varys. “But there are other… *whispers*.”

“Shouldn’t you bring those to my royal brother? Or perhaps the small council.”

“I would if I managed to find any proof. It is a delicate situation, after all,” Varys finished with a whisper, carefully looking around, and the words finally caught Renly’s interest enough for him to lean closer. “And it concerns your family - my little birds are singing the queerest songs - Lord Stannis thinks *someone* assassinated Lord Arryn and made an attempt on his life.”

Renly snorted, “Is my brother scared by some fire now?”

“Perhaps,” the Spider’s voice deepened. “But there are signs that he did not escape the flames unharmed, and Lord Stannis and Lord Arryn were investigating certain matters together just before our beloved Hand’s lamented passing.”

He would know - after all, Varys was the one who had subtly piqued Stannis’ suspicion and observed their investigation from the shadows. The master of ships and Lord of the Eyrie were many things, but subtle they were not. Oh, how a single nudge had turned into a tangled knot of intrigue and suspicion.

“Why wouldn’t Stannis go to my royal brother, then?”

“Ah, I wonder why, indeed,” Varys nodded meaningfully while throwing one last glance at Tommen and Eddard Stark. “I’m afraid that I have certain matters to attend to. If you’d excuse me, my lord.”

The Spider made his way out of the yard, leaving a thoughtful Renly behind. Lying was too easy, too risky. Truth on the other hand weighed down on one’s mind, even if it was just a small grain. Weaving truths was a delicate art - and timing mattered the most. Too early, and the results might be unpredictable; too late, and the revelations might have turned useless. Too little and nobody trusted you, and too much would reveal his hand.

Of course, Varys had suspicions about why Stannis had fled - the duty-bound brother had finally cracked from Robert's perceived scorn. The king had chosen to travel half the continent in search of a new Hand instead of granting his dour brother the office. Men like the Master of Ships loved to harp on about duty, but deep inside, he longed for recognition of his leal service - something his royal brother never granted. The fire of Dragonstone was a mystery, in truth, but it did leave Stannis heavily wounded - otherwise, the

man would not have reduced his appearances in public to a mere handful and for only half an hour at best every sennight.

Moreso, the Lord of Dragonstone had lost his daring boldness - everything he did seemed to be slow, subtle and well-calculated, and even Varys struggled to find out what his goal truly was.

For now, it was time to sit back, observe, and wait for an opportune moment. Many webs were spun, and the city did not lack ambitious men and women to muddy the waters. After all, Varys heavily suspected that Pycelle knew about the Tears of Lys, yet the old Grandmaester sent Colemon, Jon Arryn's personal maester, away before he could purge the poison, and the Lord of the Eyrie died two days later.

Author's Endnote.

Not as happy with the chapter as I wished, but here it is. Predictably, Ned's not having an easy time. Varys is plotting once more. I took a deep look at his characterisation in the books, and oh boy, the show did him a terrible disservice with the whitewashing.

Starring: Winter 'Thotbane, catcher of wildlings' the Direwolf and Varys 'fuk em big birds' the Spider