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Edited by: Himura and R. Yorkshireman; B. Reader: Bub3loka.

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The start of 321 AC

The Lady of Winterfell

When fluttering golden banners bearing the proud crowned stag of Baratheon were spotted down the Kingsroad, Myrcella knew it was time. Unlike her father and mother, Tommen and Shireen didn't waste time with such luxuries as wheelhouses.

"Will we see Uncle Rickon again?" Joanna asked innocently, tugging at the hem of her father's cloak.

"He's down in the Disputed Lands now and won't be returning for some time," her husband said, ruffling her hair as they converged towards the main courtyard facing the kingsroad. The years had seen Robb Stark turn into a prideful and domineering man, but he had a soft spot for his daughters. It only made Myrcella love him more.

Jessamyn tugged on his cloak next, her eyes dreamy. "Will he bring back a wife then?"

"I'm afraid not," Myrcella said, shaking her head. Rickon had sworn off marriage and loudly proclaimed he would rather give his vows of love and affection to his axe, Bonebiter, after the maiden he fancied ran off with some bard. It was then her good-brother started indulging in whores instead.

"I want Uncle Jon to come and visit," Tommard whined as he nervously fidgeted. Of all her children, her youngest son was the softest and lacked the propensity for violence and bloodshed his brothers and cousins boasted. Some would almost mistake him for a girl, and Myrcella hoped he would grow out of this with time.

"Uncle Jon is about to have an eleventh child and is attending his wife in Snowhelm," Robb chided firmly. Despite the spearwife's desire to spawn a small army from her womb, Myrcella suspected this one would be the last since Jon's wife was at the twilight of her childbearing years. "He'll come with all of your cousins and your Aunt Val once she recovers from the birth."

The disappointment in their gazes was quickly replaced by anticipation. Uncle Jon Steelsong was a common sight in Winterfell, but King Tommen Baratheon was not. Her younger children kept clamouring, excited at the prospect of seeing their brother again and their royal uncle for the first time; the last time a king had come was before any of them had been born, back when Myrcella was wedded to House Stark.

The last fifteen years had seen her brother's deeds grow and his fame with them. Unlike the peaceful North, the South was rife with strife. Conquest, revolts, legendary duels, wars across the Narrow Sea—Tommen had done it all, and a part of her wondered how much less fighting her kingly brother would have done if he had chosen a more demure and softer woman for a wife. But Myrcella didn't like to think of it too much, for what ifs and could-be's served no one.

Her gaze wandered towards the cobblestones underneath her boots. All of her efforts had paid hefty dividends—each courtyard in Winterfell was paved, and so were the sprawling houses of Wintertown

nestled under the walls—now grown into a proper city with a fortified curtain wall. Even if many complained about how the pavements and cobblestones grew slippery under the sleet and slush and snow, Myrcella still thought it was better than the endless field of mud that was nearly impossible to traverse and carried in dirt everywhere.

Wintertown had flourished. The most eye-catching sights were the round marble dome of the Northern Citadel, which stood out like a sore thumb amidst all the rooves of black slate, the white hedge-covered walls of the Green Grove, where the green priests resided, and the infamous kiln with the gilded roof, where she had made a fortune over the last decade. Together, they served as a reminder of all the changes Renly's Rebellion had brought.

Soon enough, her royal brother rode into Winterfell at the helm of a small army of knights, squires, royal retainers and servants. It was akin to a river of muscle, polished steel, silver, and gold, carried by nearly a thousand horses.

"Where the king goes, the realm follows," Robb whispered as she struggled to keep her squirming youngest, Joanna Stark, under her grasp. "It makes me feel nostalgic—reminds me of when Robert Baratheon came here and turned my whole world upside down."

"I hope there won't be any such surprises this time," Myrcella sighed.

Renly's Rebellion had changed her husband. Where the young heir of Winterfell she wedded was bright, kind, and eager, Prince Robb Stark was solemn and grim-faced. And there was a new bitterness towards the South in him when he reluctantly let their second son take the mantle of Prince of Casterly Rock. The numerous wars of her royal brother didn't help, turning the relationship between Winterfell and King's Landing distant, even if Tommen never directly called the Northern banners.

This time, Myrcella hoped that the king's visit would not be a herald of chaos and destruction. But despite her wishes and desires, where the King went, the Great Game followed in his wake. The North did not lack for its brand of scheming and baying for influence, but the cold, harsh winters saw unity and peace come first above all. Even now, the Stark bannermen were headed towards Winterfell to see the king and declare their relevance with their presence alone. Cley Cerwyn was already here, and the rest were doubtlessly on the way.

Her gaze roamed over the procession pouring in through the Kingsroad Gate.

She recognised many of the riders. With his bright smile and booming voice, Ser Godry Farring, the greying Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, called for the knights and squires to form into lines as they entered the castle. Ser Jonnel Serrett, now known as the Butcher of Grey Gallows, deceptively looked like a lazy old man if not for his white plate and ringmail. Only those two remained from the original kingsguard. Tommen's many wars had seen his white cloaks oft replaced, over two dozen since the beginning of his reign.

Her son, Prince Brandon Lannister of Casterly Rock, with his golden hair and wolfish grey eyes, gave her his familiar lopsided grin. The hulking figure clad in white was even bigger and burlier than Ser Godry, a head taller than everyone else, and the gruff face of the Umbers was unmistakable—that could only be Edwyle Umer, the Giant of the Kingsguard. Which meant the maiden beside him was Princess Argella Baratheon. With golden hair, proud blue eyes and unblemished skin, she looked more like her father with only a sliver of her mother.

Flanked by a pair of white cloaks, at the head of the procession was Tommen, looking every inch the king, dignified and solemn. The Queen rode by his side, her face even stonier than Myrcella remembered, and now she was marred by a jagged scar from the side of her temple down towards her chin to mirror her greyscale. Shireen bore it with pride.

Tommen almost seemed like a stranger to her until a smile bloomed on his face, and he vaulted off his destrier to pull her in a hug, joyfully exclaiming, "Sister!" His hands were strong, and his embrace was tight yet not crushing. He took a step back and looked her over from top to bottom and laughed. "You are even more beautiful than I remember, Myrcella!"

He sounded like a stranger. Despite the warmth of the greeting, he no longer spoke in the gangly voice of a young boy of four and ten, for his words echoed with the deep baritone of a grown man of over thirty. Now nearly a head taller since she last saw him, he looked every inch the warrior like her Uncle Jaime, though his face was far more guarded and lacking in the arrogance the Kingslayer always carried with him like a cloak. Broad shoulders, nearly six foot three, with a trained body akin to a shadowcat. Combined with Brightroar's gilded lion-head pommel peeking over his belt, Tommen was the spitting image of the Warrior in the flesh. With a clean-shaven face, the golden doublet embroidered with the black stag of House Baratheon and an elaborate royal mantle of black checkered with gold and rimmed with crimson, he was an impressive figure.

Worse, despite all the difference in garb, Tommen Baratheon looked exactly like her uncle Jaime did in her memory, if far more regal in bearing. The striking resemblance was uncanny, too uncanny—and she couldn't help but wonder if that had given Renly the idea to throw such wild accusations all those years ago.

It had been more than fifteen years since Myrcella had laid eyes upon her brother, when he was merely a young man entering into holy matrimony, unaware of all the challenges marriage would entail and the burdens of the crown sitting atop his head.

Was he still her beloved brother, or a distant king come to bring war to House Stark's doorsteps yet again?

Alas, whether you were prince or pauper, kings were hard to turn away, doubly more so when they arrived at your doorstep.

"Winterfell is yours, Your Grace," Robb kneeled in the snow as the rest of the procession began dismounting. A part of Myrcella frowned at the sheer amount of horses—easily over a thousand, which meant they had to be dispersed in the stables of Wintertown, something that would take the better half of the day.

Tommen moved onto her husband, acknowledging the show of obeisance as courtesy dictated before quickly pulling Robb into a strong embrace.

Queen Shireen showed a rare, slight smile as she hugged Myrcella like a long-lost sibling. Now, on foot and up close, Myrcella finally took a good look at her good sister. At three and thirty, she was the tallest woman the Princess had seen, even slightly taller than Tommen, and while her scarred face was not comely, it was not homely either. Her body was willowy, her chest was full in a way that made Myrcella slightly jealous, and her infamous Florent ears were hidden behind her inky locks.

The four royal princesses trailed behind their mother like lost ducklings, each in descending height. Argella—the ones they called Battleborn—was the oldest at fifteen, nearly a woman grown and already rivalling Myrcella in height, and prettier than a Princess had any right to be. Next was the

pouty Cassandra at fourteen, red-faced Floris at nine, and shy little Alysanne at seven, the three crowned with hair in various shades of golden curls, while Floris's was the same inky black as her mother's. If Lady Cerwyn's raven was true, the youngest twin Princesses, Jocelyn and Maris, had fallen ill with fever and remained in King's Landing.

Myrcella's children were also brought forward, and the two parties formally introduced each child. Brandon needed no introduction, even if his name was her husband's jest—or some might even call it a mocking protest over Tywin Lannister's final will, and the lords of the west even called him the Wolf of Casterly Rock. Edwyn and his wife received star-struck looks from the Baratheon Princesses. Tommard, slightly younger than Alysanne, looked at the royal daughters and seemed to find them boring. Jessamyn, Cerenna, and Joanna were displeased at the looks Tommen's daughters were throwing at their eldest brother, judging by their stiff curtsies.

The most attention was on Calla, and Myrcella could see envy in the eyes of her nieces, and rightfully so. Silver gold curls, violet eyes that melted your heart, and a sly smile that could melt ice, Calla Steelsong was the envy of every maiden, and not only because she had wedded the heir of Winterfell. Even she could begrudgingly acknowledge that Calla was the most beautiful woman she had laid her eyes upon, being only slightly better than herself. It was the advantage of youth, of course.

At that moment, Myrcella knew that the royal stay in Winterfell would definitely be eventful.

As soon as the formalities were completed, Tommen straightened up, his face growing all kingly. "Take me to the crypts, Robb. I must pay my respects first."

The Queen looked rather lost, and the slightest trace of uncertainty appeared on her face. It was so fleeting that Myrcella would have missed it if she didn't know what to look for.

While the Lady of Winterfell was experiencing a strange sense of familiarity with the whole situation, Robb seemed torn between disgruntlement and a whole tangle of emotions like grief and anger before swallowing and adopting the icy mask the Starks were so infamous for.

This would not end well, Myrcella dreaded. Robb clung to his grievances and pride, and kings were quick to slight, especially Tommen, who had gone to war for smaller offences before. And because Myrcella knew her husband and had heard more than enough of her brother, she knew she had to be there to try and mediate lest they came to blows. But as the hostess of Winterfell, it would be improper to leave the Queen and the royal daughters hanging.

Sighing inwardly, Myrcella gave her eldest a look, and he quickly caught on.

"Go, father, mother" Edwyn whispered, always sensible. "Calla and I will deal with the royal accommodations."

Her eldest was one and twenty and had inherited the best from Myrcella and Robb, whether in looks or character. His wife had taken the best of her parents, too, if with a wilful streak of wildness—but unlike her wildling mother, she knew her courtesies and duties.

While Robb waved over the old Vayon for a lantern, Tommen dismissed his white cloaks, which made her husband ease up and the three of them headed towards the crypt in silence. Robb's slight limp in his left leg did not escape her brother's astute gaze, but he said nothing. Holding the lantern, her husband descended into the darkness down the winding steps first while Myrcella trailed behind him, together with a brother who was now a stranger to her.

But a part of it had been her fault.

Tommen broke the silence. "Winterfell is smaller than I remember."

"It is you who have grown, brother," Myrcella jested, trying to lighten the solemn mood. "After gazing upon the towers of Pentos, the Giant of Braavos, the wonders of the Three Daughters, the Three Bells of Norvos and the Rhoynish Cities of yore, the North must feel dreadfully dull and boring to you."

"I would call it quiet and peaceful." Her brother's green eyes flashed with wonder, almost looking like a child again. "Even if the bogs and forests and fields are far livelier than they are in my memory. Your newly minted Green Priests were frolicking across the North with their weirwood staffs, and the young Priest Gawen has been eagerly attempting to convert my youngest daughter since White Harbour."

"I now understand the Northmen's distrust and disdain for the clergy," Robb lamented. "Even if the pious followers of the Old Gods are far less troublesome and oft serve as wandering healers, scholars, story-tellers, and hedge-wizards and are welcomed in every corner of the North. My youngest sister herself has chosen to become one."

"I see the High Priestess Melisandre is no longer here," Tommen noted, his firm voice echoing in the darkness. "I expected her to attach herself to the royal retinue the moment we stepped foot in the North, especially after I heard she managed to sway Lady Manderly away from the Seven."

Robb offered no answer, so Myrcella spoke up instead. "She's gone now."

"Oh, my condolences."

"We mourn her passing but rejoice in her death." Myrcella snickered. "A most vexing and troublesome woman, forcing us to wrangle with the reluctant Green Men to keep her in line."

"Aye, I saw the grand weirwood in Wintertown and the well-kept grove that surrounds it. I wonder if I'll get to see any of the Children—Alysanne and Cassandra have been talking about it since we left King's Landing."

"They prefer to be called Singers," Robb said. "And only three linger in Winterfell's godswood and are hard to find when they desire to remain hidden. The rest decided to retreat up the hills or towards my brother's domain. Theirs is a tragic tale, not a mummer's show for young and eager Princesses."

"A pity. I'll have to disappoint the eager Cassandra." The air turned so cold their breaths began to mist up as they descended further down. "Gods, this place seems to go further down forever. Even the Crypts in Storm's End aren't nearly as deep."

"We're almost there," Myrcella muttered.

"Good." Her brother gave her a small, reassuring smile. "Truth be told, this journey has been full of surprises. I didn't expect to see that the kingsroad from White Harbour has been paved, and I saw nearly as many inns and merchants as I would in the Crownlands despite the snow. And gods, this is the first time Floris and Alysanne have even *seen* snow—let alone in the height of summer. I had forgotten how cold the Northern summers can be."

"So last winter was truly short and warm?"

"Aye, nothing like the Bloody Winter that saw my realm nearly crippled," Tommen's face darkened. "Either way, I see you've done good work, Robb."

Myrcella shivered, but not from the cold. Judging by her brother's testy tone, the small talk was over, and now came the clash of pride and the quarrelling.

"I can hardly take credit for the road building when it was my wife's doing," her husband's response betrayed no emotion. "Paving the roads from Castle Black to Barrowton and White Harbour to the Last River would have been an unthinkable endeavour without the spoils we earned from putting you on the throne."

"Unlike the rest of the realm, the North enjoyed years of prosperity and, most importantly, peace." The remark was given lightly, but Myrcella could hear the silent accusation. Beyond the Winter Wolves and the Manderly Fleet, the North had hardly contributed to the Iron Throne's numerous wars.

Robb had also heard it, and his response was frosty, "A peace we won with steel and blood. Prosperity won at the sacrifice of countless brave men and the point of a sword. A sacrifice that placed a crown on your head. You only need to look at the hill of skulls outside of Winterfell to remember—even if it's covered with snow now, Your Grace."

"Peace, brother, husband," Myrcella urged before the two prideful men could clash further and speak words that could not be taken back. "Let us not quarrel. House Stark did not undertake such a burden with just our coin. Houses Steelsong, Manderly, Dustin, Slate, Cerwyn, Wells, Umber, Karstark, Hornwood, and the Mountain Clansmen all helped, both with gold and labour. And the coin that flowed from Essos in the hands of the Winter Wolves only aided the endeavour along. The influx of merchants and tradesmen funded it further."

That silenced the arguing, if only temporarily.

They reached the level where the most recent Lords of Winterfell rested in their eternal sleep. The unusual chill so deep underground was not to Myrcella's liking, nor were the grasping shadows or the harsh faces of the Lords and Kings of Winter that looked down from their stony statues. The road between the granite pillars was long, and each time Robb's lantern swung in his grasp, the stony faces looked either laughing or crying at them. The crypt always made her feel like an outsider, even without the grief or the darkness. Ancient, chilly, and dark—the perfect embodiment of House Stark of yore, even in death. The frigidness in the air had grown far worse than she remembered the deeper they went, possibly because of the swords of frost buried with Artos, Eddard, and Arya Stark.

"It's not that the North was without its own woes," Robb spoke, not hiding his sorrow as they arrived before the statue of Eddard Stark flanked by a statue vaguely resembling Winter's shaggy form. Even in death, the man who had kept the Seven Kingdoms together and propped up Tommen Baratheon on the throne looked tired and weary. He was not alone in death; Bran and Arya's tombs were old, while Catelyn's and Artos looked like they had been carved yesterday.

Tommen knelt, bowing his head, muttering silently under his nose words that only he would hear. After a long, painful minute, the king stood up, but melancholy clung to him like a cloak.

"I wanted to come to Winterfell so badly, but my duties kept me away," he murmured, his voice thick with regret. "Fifteen hundred miles from here to King's Landing. I would have joined, you know—if my hand was not forced to finish the conquest of the Stepstones and Lys. Three years of fighting."

Her husband scoffed. "It's better that you didn't join us. Ten thousand men ventured into the Lands of Always Winter with Lord Commander Benjen Stark and my Princely Father, and only a tenth returned."

"That bad?"

"Worse than you could even imagine." Robb looked like an angry statue hewn of frost and stone then. "I lost a brother, a father, an uncle, my direwolf, and some of my finest warriors and bannermen, and we would have all perished in the Heart of Winter if not for Jon and the three dozen dragonsteel-wielding lords and warriors of renown. We wouldn't have made it without Melisandre and the Order of the Black Flame's sacrifice. But my grief only continued after we eked out the strength to return to the warm North. My mother—the loss was too much, and she followed father and my brother Artos in death two moons after we returned. Was there a more bitter victory and hollow triumph than ours?"

"You call your victory bitter and hollow, but defeat would have seen House Stark and the North devastated." Tommen grew wistful. "Loss oft makes fools of us all. I noticed the direwolves' absence. I thought they were in the godswood or the Wolfswood, running free."

"Grey Wind was getting slow with age, and so were the others. Only Ghost survives from the original litter, but he's scarred and so old he can barely run anymore. A pitiful end for a beast that was a king in all but name of his kind." Robb's shoulders slumped. "Jon offered us new pups to bond with—but neither Sansa, Rickon, or Lyarra want to replace our lost companions."

"I know the feeling." Tommen's gaze wandered towards the statue of Lyanna Stark—the lone stony maiden that stood out like a sour thumb in the long line of lords and kings. "Lions live an even shorter life than direwolves. Lan perished at thirteen."

Then, his figure straightened up, and his posture turned regal.

"But did you succeed?" It was the king demanding, not her brother asking. "Did you end the Others and their monstrous spiders for good?"

"We would have never returned otherwise," Robb allowed, his voice tight. "Do not ask me to speak more of that dark expedition, for words would fail to describe the struggle, the cold, and the horror we experienced, and I loathe to remember any of it, Your Grace."

A chilly gust of wind blew to the crypt as if to give credence to his words. The king warily looked around in the darkness as his hand instinctively reached for Brightroar's hilt but slightly eased when he saw nothing.

"Then I shan't ask, Robb. Disperse with the courtesies when it's only kin here."

"Many of my bannermen loudly praise my father for his many achievements and his warrior's death, but it feels like a part of me died with him. He thought of you often, you know?"

"Yet he still refused to come to King's Landing and always sent you instead," Tommen complained, closing his eyes. "I still miss him, as if I am still that young, clueless boy who felt alone in the world. The Seven know Eddard Stark was more of a father to me than Robert Baratheon ever was. The only father I knew—the man who saw something in that young, chubby prince everyone seemed to dismiss and taught me how to rule and fight, even if he grew distant after Renly's Rebellion."

Her husband took a slow, deep breath, and his words were filled with grief. "Gods, I was with him when he died, and his lifeblood slipped between my fingers. The dragonsteel armour didn't save him

from the bite of the cold or the onset of age that made him sluggish. So fierce was the cold that his blood turned to frost within a heartbeat.”

Tommen shuddered, Myrcella pulled the hems of her fur-lined cloak closely, and Robb stared off into the darkness at the unsealed tombs—dark empty holes awaiting the future Lords of Winterfell and their families—including her. She shook her head to banish such dark thoughts and hugged Robb’s muscled arm to bring herself a measure of comfort.

“Let us speak no more of this topic.” She swallowed heavily, but her unease lessened when her husband pulled her closer and draped his own cloak over her. “I suspect you didn’t lead us here to merely pay your respect, brother. Nor did you journey all the way to Winterfell for mere well-wishes.”

To this moment, the reason for the royal visit baffled Myrcella. Kevan Lannister had grown old and grey but was still hale and served the realm as a Hand in his seventies. The new status quo of the Seven Kingdoms had seen House Stark and its bannermen largely decoupled from the Iron Throne’s numerous wars, even if the Winter Wolves led by Rickon Stark often ventured into Essos to enforce Winterfell’s interests to maintain the presence of House Stark there while serving the Iron Throne’s many battles. And the last war had finished just months prior with the Scouring of Lorath and the Conquest of the Stepstones, a war orchestrated by the warlike queen—even if Tommen had been doing the bulk of the fighting.

“Right you are sister,” Tommen agreed. “At times, I tend to forget that you’re the most cunning of my family. But first, what word do you have of our youngest sibling? Affairs of the realm had kept me busy, and I hadn’t had the chance to write Lord Steelsong in years.”

Her lips twitched. “Little Elayne is to marry Osric Snow soon. Or not so little anymore, seeing she’s grown taller than I.”

“A most fitting match.”

“Quite. Osric Snow proved himself a fierce warrior in that tragic expedition,” Robb offered. “I even intended to give him a village or two to rule as a new Masterly House, but he seems to have set his eyes on the position of Winterfell’s master-at-arms instead and has the skills to earn it once old Artos Ironhand steps down.”

The silence lingered between the three of them as the king’s gaze idly wandered around the stone statues. Myrcella was content to find warmth and comfort in her husband’s embrace while her brother bore the chill of the crypts on his lonesome, undaunted.

“Very well. I shall be candid with you, then. I came here for advice and not to pull House Stark into one of my wars,” A hint of amusement flashed through his eyes.

Robb scoffed. “I thought we had forged a lasting peace after Renly’s Rebellion. Oh, what a fool I was.”

“We all yearn for peace, Robb. But we can only drink from the cup given to us. Regardless, it is not war I have come for, but advice, and this is one of the rare few places where no ears would hear our talk.”

And privacy was a luxury worth more than gold or Valyrian Steel to kings.

“Is it the rising Rose King of Sarnor that bothers you so?” Myrcella prodded suspiciously—for all of her brother’s talk of peace, he was quick to wage war. “Or perhaps the mad king’s granddaughters, one of which is wedded to the Emperor of Yi Ti and the other to Blackfyre’s eldest son in Tiger’s Bay?”

"Neither. I do not need House Stark nor the North to fight my wars for me any more." Tommen's voice turned wistful. "The royal councillors fret and whisper in my ears of future threats and looming wars, but I have never cowered before a worthy foe. I didn't cower from the Yronwood Revolt, the Dornish Uprisings, or the many bandit kings and robber knights in the Crownlands who wanted to prove how shaky and weak my rule was once my regents were gone. Ten years—that's how long it took me to restore law and order in my lands so that even a young maid, alone and covered from head to toe in gold, could walk unmolested from King's Landing to Oldtown!"

It was the king's pride speaking now.

"It is I who survived the Faceless Men and brought them to their destruction, first in their grim House of Black and White in Braavos and then rooted out their remnants with the order of the Black Huntsmen." There was a sliver of rage in her brother's eyes. "Lys, Norvos, and Braavos all broke and kneeled before me in the end. I have caused the fall of countless kings and princes, magisters and masters, and orchestrated the rise of just as many, all for their friendship and support of the Iron Throne. My influence stretches from Lorath to the Summer Islands, and I now hold the Stepstones in their entirety with an iron grip—a deed even the Freehold never achieved, and even the Rogue Prince with his dragons and the famed Sea Snake and his mighty fleet failed to maintain. I have crossed swords and slain the Last Khal of the Great Grass Sea amidst the ruins of Ny Sar, allowing the Dragon of Tiger's Bay to set Vaes Dothrak ablaze and claim the last seeds of the House of the Dragon."

"It almost sounds as if you plan to conquer a third of Essos," Robb observed. "Not quite the picture of peace. It would see you clash with the Qohori, Sarnori, Ibbenese, and Blackfyre. First, it will be for influence, and then, the conflict will turn far more direct."

"I am satisfied with Lys and the Stepstones." Tommen chuckled at their disbelief. "I can swallow cities and Islands, but they take a long time to digest properly. Any larger bite will see me choke. I lack the dragons that made the Freehold masters of the sky and helped spread their authority far and wide. Even now, my Pentoshi allies have begun to turn mercurial, and I even hear whispers of plots with their former enemies in Braavos and Lorath to throw off my expanding influence."

Her husband eased his clenched jaw, not fully trusting the king's words but reassured that the North wouldn't see itself dragged into a perpetual war in Essos.

"You know what they say, brother—the tallest tree attracts the most wind," Myrcella mused as she hid her gloved hands in her sleeves for more warmth. "But if it is not fighting you fear, what ails your mind to bring you so far North?"

"Two matters. First, I have noticed the North grows distant and isolated yet again, and it's time House Stark fulfils its agreed-upon duties and sends a royal advisor to join me in court."

"Do you seek to take one of my children?" Myrcella asked slowly, trying to swallow the rush of anger that churned in her belly. "You already have Brandon in the south!"

As a Lady and Princess, she knew children could not stay home forever, but the mother in her was reluctant to see any of them go.

"He answers for House Lannister and Casterly Rock, not Winterfell and the Starks," her brother gave her a firm smile. "And before you say Rickon is already there, he spends almost all of his time in Essos, swinging his axe at warriors and avoiding King's Landing like the plague, even after the mountains of gold spent to make my city the cleanest in Westeros."

“Lord Manderly would argue otherwise, for even after a thorough scrub, a pig would still jump back in the mud,” Robb scoffed, and Myrcella felt his whole body tense under her hands. The hatred for the South that he had brought back after Renly’s Rebellion had not only failed to heal but festered with time, and he was as loath to part with another child as she was. “No matter how clean it is, a viper’s den is full of snakes. I suppose I can send Edwyn to King’s Landing. Or perhaps Jessamyn—she always wanted to see the *splendour* and *warmth* of the South.”

“Many would see a woman becoming the royal advisor as an insult.”

“Despite your warlike queen?” Myrcella ribbed lightly.

“Because of her.” Tommen inclined his head, but his eyes were dancing with amusement. “She loathes the court more than you do, even if her most favourite pastime is to terrify the more shameless courtiers. Anyway, such a decision need not be taken now—but I’d rather not see House Stark slip away from the realm after receiving so many boons from the crown. You might hate me for it, but I would rather see the Starks of Winterfell fulfil their promised duties.”

Despite the reluctance in his voice, the unsaid threat rang in the darkness of the crypts, sending chills further down Myrcella’s spine. Tommen didn’t explain further, but he didn’t need to. The North couldn’t fight the Iron Throne alone. Despite all his martial skills and exploits, her brother was not a brute but a man of cunning. It wouldn’t be a direct declaration of war—Tommen would find one fault or another, summon Robb to King’s Landing and start away eating at House Stark’s influence and privilege and the North until they either submitted or rebelled, earning himself a reason for war.

He would do so while holding hostage, while the Riverlands and the Vale would join Tommen, for Prince Tully and Lord Arryn were far closer to the king and the Iron Throne than they were to the North as of late. It would possibly be a war that would only have losers and no clear winner.

Robb knew that too, especially as the North had spent its attention in the last ten years on the Haunted Forest, and the Lands Beyond the Wall, preparing with the Watch for that tragic yet successful expedition. Worse, unlike Myrcella, her husband was not afraid of fighting or losing but desired peace more than anything else. He sighed, suddenly looking ten years older.

“Very well. I shall send Edwyn down south in the snake’s den along with you,” he conceded, failing to hide the bitterness in his voice. “And some of the Northern heirs with him. My mother always wanted to knit the kingdoms tightly by blood.” But as reluctant as he sounded, her husband knew how the Great Game was played and would play it. Doubtlessly, Edwyn and all the Northern heirs would be under strict orders to mingle and wed with brides from the powerful houses from the Riverlands and the Westerlands, rekindling old ties.

The tension bled out of her brother—after all, courtly intrigue was the norm in King’s Landing. Instead, he now glanced at the statue of Eddard Stark with longing.

“Good—don’t worry, they will be treated befitting their stature.” His tone and reassuring smile suggested he meant ‘dear nephew’, not a hostage. “Edwyn can become my Master of Laws, too. Words fail to describe how relieved hearing your agreement makes me. This brings me to the final reason I came. I need advice.”

“You do not lack loyal courtiers whispering in your ears and currying for your favour,” Myrcella said, still cautious of how large the royal appetite had grown. While Tommen didn’t indulge in feasting and whoring like their father, he lusted for conquest, expansion of his royal power, and collecting talent most of all.

"I have heard their thoughts on my qualms, and I have heard it all too many times until my ears have grown sore and my mind clouded. I need someone from the outside, someone unbiased, to give me advice."

"You give us too much praise; we're hardly unbiased and merely ill-informed of all the happenings of the Red Keep," she countered.

His reply was expected but sent chills down her spine.

"False modesty suits you not, Cella, for I know your spies are only second to my own, sister. Regardless, I came here all the same." Tommen measured them carefully with his heavy gaze. "I have found that bonds of kinship wither with time if not watered with care and affection, so I must rectify that failing. And what better way than to hear your thoughts on my own woes?"

"Ask your query, brother, but know we might be ill-equipped to advise, let alone aid you."

"We shall see. As you well know, the gods have seen fit to bless me with six daughters and no son."

"A son may still come," Robb offered half-heartedly. "Queen Shireen has proven fertile and is merely three and thirty, as hale as an aurochs."

"So it might seem on the outside. The last pregnancy turned into a bloody miscarriage that almost saw Shireen perish and bedridden for over a moon. Only a select few know that Grandmaester Pylos later confided to me that further attempts would kill my wife. I confirmed as much with the First Healer of Tyrosh." Her brother's face darkened. "The court you so much loathe would rejoice if they knew and urge me to fuck my wife to her death—the quicker, the better, so I could take a new, younger queen that would give me male heirs. Preferably their own daughter, of course. But the mounting pressure to declare an heir will not subside, and I'm preparing to declare Argella as the Crown Princess of the Seven Kingdoms."

"Half the lords will plot to see their sons wedded to her, and the other half would loathe the idea of being ruled over by a woman," Myrcella groaned, anxiously tugging on her golden curls.

"Indeed. A poor choice for my eldest's husband will see everything I have built so far crumble," Tommen said, tone dangerously low. "I would have chosen Edwyn as the next male in the royal line to unite our claims, but he's already wedded and bedded with a child on the way. So is Brandon to Malyna Marbrand, and Tommard is merely five. Without those considerations, I need someone of sufficient prestige, lineage, and considerable martial skill to prop up my daughter's rule instead of usurping it. After all, none know better than I how shaky royal transition of power can be."

"What of Prince Brynden Tully or Jasper Arryn?" she offered after a few moments of contemplation. "I have heard they are strapping young men in their own right."

"Strapping and capable and ambitious, for the former," her brother riposted. "Too ambitious in his vainglory. Brynden is overeager to win my Argella's hand, but not out of love or duty. Lust, the thrill of the conquest, for the glory and prestige it would bring him. And the young Jasper... let's just say he prefers swords to maidens in all the ways that matter. Not to mention, they're the heirs of the Riverrun and the Eyrie and would never let go of their pride to let go of their rightful inheritance only to be ruled by Argella, even if they would loudly proclaim otherwise if I inquire. How could I entrust my precious child to them, let alone the realm?"

"Rickon would have been the perfect candidate," Robb lamented. "He knows how to lead and fight and rule but is woefully unambitious. If only he hadn't sworn off marriage."

"If he hadn't sworn off marriage, I reckon he would be long married," Tommen pointed out mirthlessly. "I already asked him, and he declined, no matter what sweet promises I offered. Even claims he can't see Argella as anything but his snot-nosed niece."

"So you come to us for advice," Myrcella hummed. "But I can hardly be of help after avoiding the Southron politics in the last decade."

"I know. Your reluctance to return to Casterly Rock and Robb's rare venture to the Westerlands clued me in," he said wryly. "At first, I thought the wars and unrest in the Crownlands scared you, but when that quieted down, you still didn't come to visit."

"Do you truly need our advice on the matter?" Robb asked. "A man like you would certainly have his ideas about it."

"I do, but I would hear if your thoughts coincide with mine."

Robb and Myrcella shared a knowing look.

"Aemon Steelsong," they said in unison.

The king's lips curled in amusement. "And why has he been unwed at twenty?"

"My brother doesn't lack for heirs with eight sons to his name," Robb chuckled. "And Val wishes her sons would marry for love, of course, and Jon would never entertain a maiden of insufficient pedigree like a wildling or some crofter's daughter for his favourite son—which means that none of the Northern Ladies the right age pass their muster."

"Hah! To think that Jon would struggle."

"I wouldn't call it struggle—more like contentment. Jon loves his peace, even if he would fight like a demon to preserve it."

"He has the right of it." For a heartbeat, her brother looked regretful. But the moment disappeared so quickly it might as well have been Myrcella's imagination. "You know how the ancient Ghiscari saying goes—if you want peace, prepare for war. I remember my last regent vividly, a man of staunch duty, strong swordhand, and sharp wit, despite all the naysayers and the fearmongers, and I hope his son is much the same."

"Aemon is Jon writ small," Myrcella said with some amusement. A pity he did not get on with Jossamyn, or she would have done everything in her power to see them wed. "All of Lord Steelsong's sons are of the same mould as their father. He's not one to spoil his children, and his wife is no lesser."

"My worst worries are assuaged, then," Tommen said, voice full of relief. "Only I fear if I make the offer, I would be declined. I haven't seen the man in fifteen years, and the courtiers are generous with their fearful curses thrown at his name."

Myrcella could appreciate the irony of the situation. Her father would be spinning in his grave, and somewhere above, the gods were certainly laughing at them all. They were doubtlessly laughing even harder than when her uncle Tyrion, the richest man in the world, perished at seven and forty from a burst heart while bedding his seventh wife, leaving a mountain of gold and no children to inherit it.

“Jon might not look ambitious, but he has never failed to squeeze an opportunity that lands in his lap,” she offered. “His eldest is much the same. Even if Lady Val protests, Aemon Steelsong would accept the position of Royal Consort and fulfil it dutifully without usurping his wife. Only, I advise you to wed Cassandra to his twin brother, Jeor, to bind the two families together.”

Tommen’s golden eyebrows raised so high they might as well have disappeared into his mane. “A double marriage for a newly risen noble house and half-wildling one at that? That’s too much.”

“Are these your thoughts or the words of your courtiers?”

The words took her brother aback, and he blinked at her thoughtfully.

“You came here to drag the North back into the royal court, didn’t you?” Robb said stonily, but the crinkle in his eyes betrayed his amusement. “The North has always, and will always, be different from the rest of the realm. Did you think you could do such a feat with minimal effort?”

“I am offering your nephew as a royal consort to my *daughter*.” Tommen gowled in frustration, and for once, Myrcella saw the innocent little brother of years ago. “And you dare haggle like a fishwife?”

“Trust me. You will not regret Intertwining your line with Steelsong all the way—on my word as the Stark of Winterfell.”

Tommen paused, looking at Robb as if he were seeing him for the first time. “You will put your famed honour on the line for your brother’s children?”

“Aye. Don’t ask—I have given my word not to speak of this until I die.”

“I shall consider it, then,” the king finally allowed. His face had grown red from the cold, and hoarfrost began to cling to the tips of his golden locks. “I suppose bringing magic to my lineage is not too bad of a choice, and it’s not like I will run out of daughters.”

The frigid air steadily crept through her garments, insidiously strangling the surroundings.

Myrcella tried to meld her body into Robb, but even her husband’s embrace could no longer ward off the sharp chill in the air. Lesser men would be a shivering wreck, but Robb and Tommen were too proud to concede first, even in something so petty.

“If there’s nothing else, let’s get out of here before we freeze to death,” Myrcella urged as she looked at her brother and husband with fondness.

It was not the best outcome House Stark could have hoped for, but it was better than they had feared.

Neither Jon nor his eldest son objected to the union in question, and the latter was, in fact, quite eager. Myrcella realised she was mistaken, for Aemon Steelsong was far more ambitious than his father ever was.

Three moons later, after much commotion, planning, and fretting, it felt like the whole North had already arrived in Winterfell and half of the Riverlands, Westerlands, and the Vale for the announced royal wedding. The castle never felt so cramped, even when Hightower had surrounded it with his warriors and zealots.

Even the Skagosi were all here, the clansmen far closer to the North after Renly’s Rebellion and the battles of the Narrow Sea. All those Valyrian spouses taken from Myr’s conquest had seen the North’s new generation flush with blue and purple eyes, golden locks and silvery curls, bringing

brightness and beauty to the otherwise overly grim Northmen. Ironically, Rhaegar's get didn't stand out amidst them all.

Winterfell's training yard was full of clamouring warriors each day. Many ladies clustered around to watch the Northern sons test their mettle against the royal retainers and their Southron peers. The best Northern swords in the new generation turned out to be her good nephew, Ser Eddard Dustin, Roland Wells, Edwyn Stark, and, unsurprisingly—the twins Aemon and Jeor Steelsong. While the twin swords of Steelsong had not inherited much of their father's monstrous speed and strength, their talent with the blade was no lesser. The first wielded Red Rain with deadly grace, while the second had long earned the right to use Nightfall.

One house, three Valyrian Steel swords—the envy of many even after over four hundred dragonsteel blades had ended up in Westeros after the end of Renly's Rebellion.

Even the king was challenged a few times by some of his former squire companions from his unfortunate journey through Essos with Eddard Stark, graciously accepted and displayed his famed skill with the sword. Her brother was a veritable whirlwind of steel, as dangerous as he was graceful, even with a dulled tourney sword in hand.

"Do you see it?" Robb asked as they watched Tommen duel against the burly Ethan Stout and his poleaxe. The man was a skilled barrowknight and the heir of Goldgrass and seemed to be holding his own better than most.

"Aye," Jon agreed, his lips twitching with amusement.

"See what?" Myrcella huffed.

"Your brother is holding back," Robb whispered. "He can probably beat Ser Ethan within half a minute but is content to test him and let him show all his skills. Quite cunning."

"It's also to show that kingship has not dulled his skills as a warrior," the Lord of Snowhelm added. "A display to prove he's worthy king of the First Men. Quite a successful one, at that."

Many were eager to see a duel between the king and her husband or the famed Sword in the Darkness, but neither of the men crossed swords—or at least not in public. Myrcella was certain they had duelled in the Godswood at least once after they returned from the grove, tired after an all-too-long *dip* in the hot springs but in quite a good mood—all previous grievances and qualms suddenly forgotten.

Meanwhile, Val spent her days in Winterfell, throwing subtle glares at Shireen filled with silent disapproval while inspecting the eldest royal princess as if to find faults. But just as Argella was being measured, so was Aemon. Various knights, courtiers, servants, and even a few ladies-in-waiting and handmaids crossed paths with him, testing every aspect of his skills and character, from his skills with a blade to hunting to skills in rulership, strategy, and tactics, down to his ability to keep it in his pants.

Aemon managed to win the approval of Tommen within a sennight, and even the queen seemed satisfied with her future good son, but it was hard to say with the stony expression permanently fixed on her face.

When Argella Baratheon turned six and ten and wedded Aemon Steelsong before the Heart Tree in Winterfell. The wedding was officiated by Priestess Lyarra Stark—a ceremony that would be repeated under the auspices of the Seven in the Great Sept of Baelor by the High Septon. The newlyweds were strangers still, but Myrcella suspected things would eventually work out, judging by the smitten look

the future Queen of the Seven Kingdoms gave her silver-haired spouse and the softness in Aemon's gaze. Cassandra, in contrast, looked rebellious at the thought of fostering in Winterfell until her majority, where she would wed Jeor, who had inherited his father's Stark colouring and looked unassuming next to his twin, especially with his heavily-scarred face and the missing ear, courtesy of that fated battle at the Heart of Always Winter.

It made Myrcella feel nostalgic.

For as long as the seasons kept turning and the sun rose from the east, the Great Game would continue, but Myrcella was content in Winterfell. She was happy. Her family was thriving, her home was safe, and the threat of the Others was shattered for good despite the heavy cost.