

The Bastard Daughter

a *Game of Thrones* fanfic

by **Rodo**

Chapter I: Bloody Seas

THE SHOUTING WOKE her. For a moment, Sansa thought the ship was caught in another storm, and her stomach dropped before her head caught on to the fact that she was not being tossed back and forth by the roiling sea. The ship was only swaying gently on the waves, rocking her in her narrow bed like a child in a cradle. Her heartbeat slowed again, but she couldn't go back to sleep, not with the sailors screaming above her. She couldn't make out the words, but worry permeated every syllable. Something was wrong. It might not be another terrible storm like the one that had blown their ship so far eastwards, the memory of which still made Sansa shudder, but something was wrong.

Her cabin was cramped and small by Sansa's reckoning, but Petyr had assured her that it was the biggest the ship had to offer. "As befits the daughter of the Warden of the North," he had told her. It was big enough for an actual bed, not a hammock, as well as a chair, a small table and an armoire, but Sansa had to be careful not to bump against the chair when she opened the armoire. Petyr had prepared for her rescue by bringing along a small selection of clothes. Sansa took out the cloak, stumbling when the ship was rocked by a wave she hadn't expected. Then she put it on to cover her nightdress before stepping out of the cabin.

"Alayne!" Petyr called. He stood on the steps that led up to the deck, and Sansa saw that he too had dressed in haste. The buttons of his usually so immaculate tunic were partly undone. She could see the undershirt peeking out. Petyr looked worried too, a slight furrow to his brow and an uncharacteristic tenseness around the eyes, even though he tried to cover it with a smile.

"Go back to your cabin, dear. I will return to my own in a moment as well." Petyr descended the rest of the steps and put a hand on her arm in a gesture that

was meant to be comforting and fatherly to Alayne but that fell just shy of it.

“What’s happening, Father?” Sansa asked. Above them, feet pounded on the deck as sailors ran frantically back and forth.

“Another ship draws close and the captain fears it may be pirates,” Petyr admitted, “but do not worry yourself. If it is pirates, they will have suffered from the storm as much as we did and be in no condition to do us any harm. Go back to bed, sweetling.”

His tone was soft, but his words brooked no resistance. Neither did the hand still on her arm. With a nod, Sansa went back to her cabin and closed the door, listening as Petyr stumbled down the narrow corridor to his own. Then she went over to the small, round window in the hull of the ship that allowed some light into the cabin. She peered outside, but could see nothing but the black water glistening in the moonlight.

There was no question of going back to sleep. In her mind, Sansa tried to imagine the sailors in their rough-spun clothes running to and fro, preparing for an attack as the unknown ship drew closer. They’d grab hooks and knives and whatever weapons they had handy. And all she could do was sit on her bed and wait. Would the three guards on the ship be enough to turn the tide if it came to an attack? Two others had vanished in the storm, but the remaining men were well-trained and well-equipped men-at-arms. Surely they could cope with a handful of weary pirates?

A collision shook the ship, along with a loud, wooden crack. Sansa fell sideways. So much for Petyr’s hope that the pirates would do no harm, she thought. Soon, screams rose and were joined by the angry clang of metal that she had learned to associate with tourneys and training yards in Westeros, and so Sansa decided that she would do the only thing she could do: she knelt in front of her bed and prayed. She prayed to the Father, to deliver justice, to the Warrior, to give the men the strength to repel the boarders, and to the Mother, to grant them mercy. It was habit and desperation more than true belief that made her do so. King’s Landing had taught her the truth about the efficacy of prayer. But there was nothing more to be done. Sansa was just a maiden, after all.

Heavy steps roused her from her trance and Sansa’s head turned around just in time to see the door being pushed open with head of an ax. A man stood there, the mighty ax in one hairy hand and a golden grin on his face when he spotted her. Sansa’s heart skipped a beat, and she knew she was lost. She was back in the

streets of King's Landing during the riot, only this time, there was no Hound to save her from being raped by a whole ship's worth of thugs.

When the man took a first step to enter the cabin, Sansa jumped to her feet. She didn't know where she was going, but she had to get away. She dodged left, almost hitting the armoire, and for one wild moment, she thought she'd throw herself into the seas and die a maid. Surely that fate was preferable to what awaited her on the ship. Then she ran headfirst into a second man, smaller and darker than the first, who had followed his friend. He grabbed her arms and jerked her around like a little doll. Then he chuckled, and it sent a shiver down her spine. Just a blink of an eye and they would tear off her cloak and rip apart her nightdress and reach for her—

But nothing happened. Neither pirate made a move to rape her. They just turned her around and shoved her out the door, talking lightly to each other in what must be a language of Essos, for Sansa didn't understand a word. They didn't bother talking to her either. Instead, they prodded her past two other pirates on their way deeper into the ship and pushed her forward whenever she hesitated, up the steps to the deck.

Sansa had spent little time up here since Petyr had saved her from Joffrey's disastrous wedding. He had wanted her to be as invisible as possible, he said, until they could get her to the Vale. There, they could regularly dye her hair so she could pass for Alayne more convincingly. The few times she had left her cabin, with her hair hidden by a shawl, the deck had been busy but spotless. Now, it was covered in blood and scattered equipment, and worse.

The man who presided over the chaos stood in the middle of the deck and ordered his men around as he inspected the remainder of the crew. He was a big man with a green beard and jewelry glittering in his hair. As Sansa stepped fully into the torchlight, he waved at his men to move a young man from one group of people to another near the prow. Then he took one look at the next man—one of middling years who cradled a hurt arm—and beckoned to another pirate. That one flashed a quick grin and grabbed the hurt man by the scruff, then dragged him to the rail. The last Sansa saw of him before he was pushed of the ship was his terrified eyes. There was a splash, then nothing. The pirate captain turned to her.

His intense blue eyes narrowed on Sansa's face as she tried to make herself small in front of the two pirates who had brought her up. She flinched when he reached out and took her chin in his rough hand and made her look at him. His

gaze ran over her face, her hair, and finally her chest, then he waved her over to the group by the prow. A couple of pirates with strangely shaped swords kept watch over the group, so Sansa sat down next to the young sailor and wrapped her arms around her knees, trying to pretend that she wasn't wearing only a nightdress and a cloak.

The captain went back to his examination of his captives, but soon was interrupted when two other men led Petyr Baelish up the stairs. He looked more nervous than Sansa had ever seen him, and still insisted on trying to cover it up with a self-assured smile that did little to fool anyone. He faltered a little when he was pushed forward to meet the captain.

"Now, there's no need to be so coarse. I'm sure we can work out something to our mutual benefit," Petyr said, brushing imaginary dirt off his cuff. The shadow of a little girl that still lingered in Sansa's heart wanted nothing more than to believe his words, but the glint in the captain's eye reminded her of Joffrey.

The captain looked Petyr up and down and didn't seem impressed. "What you want, little man?"

"To make an offer," Petyr answered. He drew himself up to his full height, still a full head shorter and half as bulky as the captain. "I am an important man in Westeros. Bring me back to my home, and you will be handsomely rewarded."

"I will?" the captain asked, obviously amused.

"Of course. I am a man of my word."

"But already I have your ship and your gold," the captain pointed out.

Petyr's smile became tense. "I am engaged to Lady Arryn of the Vale. She'll be very thankful for my safe return."

"Yes," the captain snorted. "With a blade on the neck she will thank me. Do you think me fool, richman? I come to your town, anchor in your ports, and all your promises are wind."

"Not even for a thousand golden dragons?" Petyr offered.

"A man needs a head to spend them."

"Two thousand?" Petyr was getting desperate. "You cannot mean to sell me as a slave," he scoffed. "I am a lord, the master of coin for King Joffrey."

"Yes," the pirate mused as he stroked his green beard. "I cannot sell you as slave. You are important lord, after all."

"Thank y—" Petyr began, but his words were cut short by the stroke of a sword, and they died in a bloody gurgle. The captain wiped his bronze blade clean

on Petyr's cloak while the man who had saved Sansa tried to hold his throat together with his bare hands.

"It is best you were never here," the pirate captain told him. "Disappear."

Like a puppet whose strings were cut, Petyr crumpled onto the deck, and the pool of blood spread on the wood as Sansa stared into his lifeless eyes. Tears began to form in her own as a pirate gathered the corpse and dropped it into the sea. He'd been her last hope of returning home one day.

The captain looked around coolly once it was done. "Someone else want to make offers?" he sneered.

Nobody did.

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The survivors were chained and then put in the hold of the pirates' vessel, where five men already awaited their fate. They all stared at Sansa, since she was the only woman, but for once, none of the looks were lustful. She must look frightful, she knew, with tears streaming down her face and the hem of her nightdress drenched in blood.

Over the following hours and days, Sansa finally learned a bit more about the fate that awaited them. One of the sailors, a young man named Tom, spoke the pirates' language and could translate what they spoke to each other while they guarded them or handed out bowls of disgusting slop that Sansa almost didn't eat.

"You gotta eat, Alayne," said Wat, who was chained up on her right side. "If you don't, they'll only beat you 'til you do."

Sansa didn't know how he knew that, since neither of them had been caught by pirates before, but Sansa wouldn't risk it after seeing the grumpy man who was noticeably unhappy that he had to feed them.

"M sorry about your father too," Wat added in between bites. "Lost mine when I was just a little older than you. Hurts mightily."

Sansa could imagine that, but she didn't know. Her father was fine, as far as she knew. She'd last seen him the day King Joffrey sent him to prison. Two days later, when Sansa had prepared to plead for mercy for him, he was gone. Joffrey had raged and raved and Ser Meryn had beaten her until she bled. There were scars on her back still, even though Joffrey had ordered him to stop. He hadn't wanted a scarred bride.

“If you ask me, it’s no great loss,” Marwin commented. He was the oldest man the captain had let live. He had been first mate on the ship and knew his letters and navigation, so he could be sold. “Littlefinger had a reputation, and it wasn’t a good one.”

“Don’t say that in front of his daughter,” Tom hissed.

Marwin shot her an apologetic look. He had a daughter that was her age, he had said. “I know he was your father, and that he’s dead and you shouldn’t speak badly of the dead, but you should also speak true. And Littlefinger was a well known crook. A highborn crook, maybe, but a crook. Made his money in brothels and by pocketing part of the harbor taxes. Thought money could buy him a title, but word on the street is he needed to buy the gold cloaks first to betray the Hand when the old king died. That’s how we got Joffrey the Illborn, and now we’re stuck with him.”

The men from her ship grumbled about that while the ones from the first vessel the pirates had captured looked at them in confusion. None of them knew the Common Tongue. But the Westerosi all hated Joffrey, even if nobody hated him as much as Sansa did.

“He’s dead,” she mumbled quietly.

“I know, girl,” Marwin told her. “But I speak the truth. Your father wasn’t the nicest man.”

“I don’t mean my father,” she clarified. They thought, of course, that she referred to the man who had just died on the deck, but she was thinking of her true father. He hopefully still lived. Although Tywin Lannister had been fighting him in the riverlands, last she heard. “I mean King Joffrey. He died shortly before I left.”

The sailors stared at her as if she’d announced she’d seen a wight in the flesh.

“Well, that’ll be good news if we ever make it back home,” Wat said.

“Fat chance of that happening,” Tom grouched. “The fuckers are headed for Volantis. They’re just looking for one last merchantman to rob before heading south. And then we’ll all get our faces painted and sold to the highest bidder.”

“Faces painted?” Wat asked.

“It’s what they do to slaves there,” Marwin explained. “I’ll end up with a figurehead on one cheek and you and Tom’ll get flies or wheels or a horsehead, unless you’re lucky and end up on a ship as well. Seen enough Volantene cogs in my time, even traded there a couple of times. And the girl ...”

They all looked at her with pity and Sansa felt dread coil up in the pit of her stomach like sleepy snake.

“I’ll end up in a brothel,” she said.

What would her mother say, she wondered one evening after they were served their food and the latrine bucket had been replaced. She shared all her private business with a couple of men and had seen more men’s privates than a lady ever should. And soon enough, she’d sink as low as a woman could, and sell her body. She listlessly moved her left foot—the shackled one—back and forth, and wished she had jumped into the sea when she had the chance. Her only consolation was the fact that nobody would ever know. No doubt they would think her dead. Vanished alongside Petyr Baelish, the man who had pretended to be her friend but who had stabbed her father in the back. The man who had looked at her in a heated, calculating way that had made her uncomfortable. The only man who had tried to save her.

It had been her own fault, really. She had ruined everything. She’d told the Queen that her Lord Father had wanted to send her and Arya away to safety, and it had cost them so much. Septa Mordane, Jeyne and her father, the whole household had lost their lives because Sansa had been a selfish little girl that didn’t want to listen to her father as a girl should. Her father had almost died, her sister was lost and probably dead... no wonder her family had never attempted to free her as Petyr had. Ending up in a brothel in Volantis might be better than what she deserved. Maybe this was a punishment from the gods for her sins. Joffrey had received one for his, after all.

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Sansa felt an eerie sense of *déjà vu* when, after a week aboard the pirate ship, the men above their heads suddenly started chattering and working. Feet were running back and forth, commands were shouted that she didn’t understand and somewhere, someone used a whetstone on their steel. One of the Essosi sailors—the remnants of a crew of a Lorathi merchantman—muttered something.

“They’ve found another victim,” Tom translated gloomily.

Another ship to plunder only meant they were one step closer to the slave markets of Volantis. Again there were screams and curses, and the crash of ship against ship that tossed them on the floor. Next came the clashes of metal against

metal, until the fighting subsided. The captives waited with bated breath. The pirates had left no guard behind, but they weren't really needed. The chains were enough to keep them in their place.

It felt like an eternity, but couldn't have been more than a fraction of an hour, when everything changed again. A man strode into the hold with an air of authority, and he was one they hadn't seen before. He wasn't led in by the pirates, either. He was as dusky skinned as they were, with a head of curly dark hair, receding from his hairline, but unlike them, he wore no gaudy jewels. His clothes were in a different style, too. When he saw the captives, he called back to someone else. Soon enough, the large doors in the deck above them opened at his command and Sansa had to blink against the sudden, bright light. She was lucky, she thought later, that it was a cloudy day. Otherwise her eyes might have been hurt.

The man asked the prisoners a question and the Lorathi sailors answered. Tom did too, a bit later and a little haltingly.

"You are Westerosi?" the man asked sharply. He spoke with a strange but muted accent.

Now the captives from Sansa's ship sat up straighter. None of them expected a foreigner who was able to address them in their own tongue. Behind him, someone else entered the hold with a hammer and chisel. After a gesture from his superior, the new man went towards the Lorathi and got to work on their manacles.

"I have the honor of being Narquo Teryan, captain of the *Titan's Shoe*, in the employ of Oro Tendyris, merchant of Braavos," the man explained, and the men around Sansa started to sit up straighter. "This ship and its cargo are now in the custody of the city of Braavos, until such a time as their proper owners prove their claims, should they do so within a three-year term. However, as slavery is illegal in our fine city, you are hereby freed."

Wat whooped with joy and Sansa felt as if she could float away were she not chained to the floor. The man with hammer and chisel was bent over Marwin's leg now, and the captain was talking to the freed Lorathi, who bathed in the drab light. They had been below deck for almost a moon's turn.

"What will happen to us now?" Sansa asked no-one in particular.

Captain Teryan's eyes turned to her, as did many of the others. Only the man with the chisel kept working.

"My men will sail this ship to Braavos," he explained, "And you are free to help—although maybe not you, girl. You best come aboard the *Titan's Shoe*, after

we've found you something better to wear in the loot. Then we'll see."

Then the chisel was put to the manacle on her ankle, the hammer went down once, twice, and Sansa was free. Braavos, she thought. She knew little about the city, other than that it lay in Essos, and was home to a famous giant statue and the Iron Bank. It wasn't like Myr—where they made the fabled lace she'd loved to admire when she was young and innocent. It was just a merchant city to her, without even nobles and princes to keep her interested in her lessons.

"I know you want to go home, girl, but Braavos is the next best thing," Marwin said from behind her. "Do you have family back home that can pay your way?"

Sansa thought of her mother and father, her brother and the aunt and uncle she didn't know. But she wasn't Sansa, she remembered. She was Alayne, the bastard daughter of a dead man and a woman who was lowborn, not someone who was wanted by half of the Seven Kingdoms for one reason or another. She shook her head.

"In that case, you might want to stay in Braavos. At least there's no war there. And you're a clever girl. You'll land on your feet," he assured her, patting her on her shoulder as he walked past to ask the captain what he could do. Which left Sansa to wonder what she could do. She had never had to make her own way. She was just a stupid girl who had no trade. She could read and write and do her numbers tolerably well, but that was all, really, aside from the womanly arts. Her mother had taught her to be a wife to a lord one day; Sansa didn't really know how to do anything else.

But first, she went to find the part of the ship where the pirates kept their loot. And indeed, after rummaging through crates and chests, she found her dresses. Or rather Alayne's dresses, which Petyr had brought for her to disguise herself. She took them and then retired to what had been the pirate captain's cabin, where she washed herself as best she could with a bucket of saltwater before finally dressing. It was strange to wear a bodice again, but she felt more like herself. Even if that was not who she was supposed to be. Alayne. She was supposed to be Alayne now. She'd have to remember.

Chapter II: The Bastard Daughter of Valyria

ALAYNE STARED UP, gaping. She'd known about the Titan of Braavos. She'd known it was big, but she hadn't known just how big it was. It towered over the gap between the two rocky islands that shielded the lagoon beyond. The ships weaving through the fog at his feet looked like little toy boats, like the ones her brothers used to play with in the pond in the godswood. She couldn't even see the tip of the sword; it disappeared into the low hanging clouds. Slowly, the wind carried the *Titan's Shoe* closer to her home port. In the bad weather, Alayne had yet to catch a glimpse of the city they called the bastard daughter of Valyria.

"We'll dock soon," Captain Teryn told her. He stood with her near the prow of his ship. In the past few days, he had been kind to her, but also curious as to what led to a well-educated young girl being captured by slavers. At times, Alayne thought she saw a little suspicion in his gaze.

She simply nodded. Her future seemed so unsure to her. What would happen to her once she stepped onto dry land once more? She didn't even speak the bastardized version of Valyrian they spoke in Braavos, and she had no coin to her name.

"There's always work," the captain told her, "for those who want it. Provided they're not too proud to take it."

He was fishing for something again. This wasn't the first time they had tried to discuss her future, and always he managed to hint at what he presumed to know about Alayne Stone without outright saying it. Alayne had been careful not to drop the smallest hint of knowledge around him. The last thing she wanted was to be ransomed back to the Lannisters, whose reputation for paying their debts with their fabled riches was surely known in a city of commerce such as this.

“It is not my pride that worries me,” Alayne explained. “I have never worked before and have no skills but those my father saw fit to teach me. I don’t know how to wash or cook and I never learned any trade.”

“If it comes to the worst, any pretty face can sell flowers or fruit in the markets,” he told her with a smirk. “But don’t think about what you cannot do, think about what you can do. I can’t put an ox before a plow anymore than I can count coppers for the Iron Bank, but I can sail a ship better than most, and so that is what I do.”

Slowly the shadow of the Titan fell over them. Distantly, Alayne could see the burning eyes, the murder holes, and the bronze fingers that grabbed the bluff to its left. A deafening roar emanated from the statue quite suddenly, and Alayne flinched. The captain beside her laughed and she could hear the other sailors chuckle as well when her ears stopped ringing.

“They’re only warning the Arsenal of our approach,” Narquo Teryan explained. “Only those that mean harm to Braavos need to worry if they hear the Titan’s Roar.”

Alayne peered ahead cautiously, hoping that they wouldn’t be mistaken for enemies. The Braavosi seemed unconcerned, and no further warnings rang out over the water as they entered the lagoon.

“My father had me educated with the hope of finding me a good match,” Alayne said after a while, continuing the previous conversation. “I know my letters, can do my sums and I can sing a little. But apart from that, the septa spent most of her time instructing me in the Faith. Oh, and embroidery.”

“Embroidery?” the captain asked. His grasp of the Common Tongue was very good, but sometimes, she or the others found a word that tripped him up. Usually he just grinned and reminded them that he had learned it to deal with greedy Westerosi merchants, not to make conversation.

“Sewing pictures onto cloth,” Alayne explained. “Although I can sew other things as well. It’s a common pastime for noble ladies to embroider their husbands’ and children’s clothes and banners and even cushions.”

The captain shook his head and mumbled something that sounded almost like “Westerosi”. Alayne assumed it was the Braavosi word. “If that is so, you can come with me when we dock. My neighbor is a seamstress who employs a number of girls in her shop.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Alayne nodded. It was better than being left on

her own. She just hoped the captain was as honorable as he had seemed at first. You could never know for certain, though. She had learned that the hard way.

It didn't take long for them to pass the bastion that the captain called the Arsenal. Then, the *Titan's Shoe* pulled into one of the city's ports. They weren't to leave the ship yet, the Westerosi and Lorathi were cautioned by one of the crew. In fact, nobody left it. Instead, a man dressed in deep burgundy velvet with an ermine trim came aboard and talked with the captain. After a few words, the two went below deck, talking.

"A customs official," Tom said, translating the first mate's explanation for their benefit. "They'll talk about the pirates' loot and their ship and the like, some Braavosi custom. And they'll want to know what Captain Teryan has on board so they can tax his master accordingly."

There were quite a few ships docked in what she was told was called Chequy Port. Some had people busy on deck, while others lay in their distant berths like old men in their sickbeds.

"Those are the quarantined ones—captured or requisitioned ships and those that might carry plague," Tom explained when he noticed her looking. Then he pointed to the guards that patrolled the quays, making sure nobody sneaked onto or off the ships.

They had to wait for hours while the port authority inspected the ship's cargo. Alayne was starting to worry a bit, but the *Titan's Shoe's* crew seemed only bored. Finally, the man in the expensive doublet came back onto the deck, shook hands with the Captain and left the ship. Suddenly, the sailors sprang into action. Soon the sails were unfurled and the ship slowly left Chequy Port behind, passing the quays and houses and countless little boats as it made towards the Purple Harbor.

The fog had mostly lifted by then, so Alayne finally got a good first look at the city she would call home for the foreseeable future. The first thing that stood out to her was that Braavos seemed to be a city of stone. Where even King's Landing had wooden shacks and dirty lanes, all of Braavos was either stone or water, a warren of lanes and canals that wound through towering, narrow houses that seemed to grow out of the sea.

The Purple Harbor was a lively place with sailors and merchants unloading the cogs that docked in this port, while men haggled and girls with wheelbarrows and baskets attempted to sell their wares. Everyone was chattering loudly or

calling out to someone. There were spices being loaded into barges and bolts of colorful fabric being moved. It was so busy, for a moment Alayne didn't know where to go or look as she stepped off the plank, dressed in one of the three modest gowns that were her only possessions. The other two she carried in a bag.

"Alayne!" someone called, and when Alayne turned she saw that it was Marwin. "Have you decided what to do?" he asked when he reached her. He was always so worried about her, it made Alayne simultaneously happy and uncomfortable. She missed her father.

"Captain Teryan has offered to introduce me to his neighbor, a seamstress. She might hire me, he says."

Marwin frowned. "I'll come along," he told her. "Better safe than sorry. The captain seems a decent man, but you never know."

Alayne nodded, and together they waited until the captain finished talking to a man who sat in a booth by the quayside. Then they followed the captain into the labyrinth of narrow alleyways, small bridges and murky canals. Everywhere were people, Alayne thought, so many of them, as she silently followed the two men. They talked about ships, and about the possibility of Marwin joining the captain's next voyage. King's Landing must have been just as densely packed with people, but Alayne had seen little of the city, and even less of the common folk who lived there. Children now ran past her skirts in a game of tag, while in front of her, a man was weaving his way through the throngs of people with a giant instrument that was almost as wide as the entire street above his head.

The captain's home looked much like the other houses. He motioned for them to go inside, and for a moment, Alayne's heart beat faster with fear, before she reminded herself that Marwin was there as well. She stepped inside and was promptly led out the back into a tiny courtyard that was paved with the same gray stones as the rest of the city. One side was open to a canal. There was a small midden with flies swarming around it, and a wooden tub stood beside one of the doors that led to this place. Above their heads, the sky was blocked by clotheslines heavy with dresses and smallclothes and the odd doublets with sliced sleeves that many Braavosi men seemed to wear.

The captain knocked on the door opposite his own and, after a moment, a young girl with mousy brown hair in two buns opened the door. She vanished inside again after a few words, and finally a matronly woman with furrowed brows appeared in her place. Even Alayne could tell that her gruff words towards

the captain were not a greeting, but Narquo Teryan just smiled and started with his explanation, gesturing at Alayne in between sentences.

Finally, the woman turned to her and looked her over, from top to bottom, as Alayne returned her scrutiny. She was overweight bordering on fat, and her dark hair was graying. Her dress was well-made and of a shade between dark red and brown, with a white trim.

After a moment, she said something. “Mistress Sarnel asks if you can really sew,” Captain Teryan translated.

Alayne shrugged. “A little,” she said.

“And you can—what was the word again?”

“Embroider?”

The captain nodded.

“Yes.”

Mistress Sarnel sighed deeply and then stepped aside, motioning for Alayne to come inside. She was a little unsure, though.

“Mistress Sarnel wants you to show her what you can do,” the captain told her. Then the seamstress said something else. “And she has a girl working for her that speaks your language,” Narquo Teryan translated. “Do not worry, you will be fine.”

With a goodbye to the two men, she did as she was bid. Mistress Sarnel closed the door behind them and Alayne once again felt alone. She should be used to it by now, she thought, but somehow she wasn’t. She still felt it sting.

With some gestures, her new mistress told Alayne to sit down on a chair in a room where a couple of other girls were already working on various gowns or parts thereof in different states of completion. Then she was handed an embroidery hoop and a basket with a selection of thread and a piece of cloth.

“Sera!” the mistress called, and one of the girls walked over to sit down beside her after a short exchange of words. She was willowy and maybe Robb’s age.

“You are from Westeros?” she asked in the common tongue without any trace of an accent. That surprised Alayne a little and distracted her from thinking about what to stitch.

“Yes.”

“I’m Sera, one of Mistress Sarnel’s apprentices. My father is a ship’s captain, like Captain Teryan. He met my mother in Gulltown, when they were young, of course, and then they moved back here. My mother works as a servant for the

Antaryons, so as soon as I was old enough, I was introduced to Mistress Sarnel, and well, here I am,” the girl explained, and Alayne wondered if she always talked this much to people she had just met.

“I’m Alayne,” she replied. “Alayne Stone.”

The fabric was a pale green that reminded Alayne of Margaery, and so she picked up some golden-yellow thread and another thread one or two shades darker. She took a needle and began working on a rose. She had embroidered enough of those over the years, and they were a safe subject unlikely to give away any political leanings. Everybody liked roses.

“That’s a bastard’s name, isn’t it?” Sera asked, and when Alayne nodded she continued. “So was your father a lord? Is that why you were abducted by pirates?”

Alayne sighed wearily as she began with the first stitches of the center. She hadn’t embroidered in quite a while, but it came back to her as soon as she started.

“That’s not quite it,” she explained. “My father was a lord, a minor one from the Fingers, and the pirates seized our ship as we were on our way back there. They didn’t care one whit that he was a lord, because they threw him into the sea anyway.” But not before cutting his throat. The memories of Petyr’s wide eyes and all the blood still stole into her dreams. But Sera didn’t need to know that.

“Oh,” Sera said, and put down her own work for a moment. She was working on a skirt of blue samite, working glassy pearls onto the cloth in a pattern Alayne couldn’t make out. “I’m so sorry. Maybe that’s why the mistress was so ready to take you in. She lost her husband to pirates as well.”

Alayne chanced a glance at the woman, who was showing the young girl that had opened the door how to properly sew a seam. She was surprisingly gentle, considering the first impression she gave Alayne. A little like Septa Mordane, perhaps, only the septa had been anything but gentle when Arya didn’t manage to keep her stitches straight. For a while, Sera and Alayne sat together and each worked on their own project. The center of the rose was quickly finished, and so now it was time for the hardest part: outlining the petals in the darker thread so that they were all the right size.

“What’s it like in Westeros?” Sera asked her. “My mother doesn’t tell me much, and she’s only been in Gulltown, anyway. She mostly says we’re better off without lords starting wars with each other all the time here in Braavos.”

Sera’s mother might have it right, Alayne thought. Westeros was tearing itself apart, Stark against Lannister against Baratheon against Baratheon against Tyrell,

with all the smaller houses caught up in trying to choose the winner so as to get some of the crumbs. “It’s different,” she answered vaguely, as she threaded the needle through the fabric again and again. “It’s really big too, so you can’t really compare all of Westeros with just Braavos. There’s big forests in the North, mountains in the east and the west and the deserts of Dorne ... I haven’t seen much, mind you. But I spent some time in King’s Landing, and it’s different, I suppose. There’s more color, for one. The Red Keep really is red, and the houses of the richer merchants are painted. There are flowers and even some trees. The smell, though ... I much prefer Braavos in that regard.”

Sera shot her a quizzical look. “Have you ever seen the King or Queen?”

Alayne hesitated for a moment. “Once, from a distance,” she lied.

“Really! What were they like?”

“Not as kingly and queenly as you’d think,” Alayne said, before retreating into her work again. The stitching calmed her, and chased away thoughts of Cersei and the speech she’d given Sansa during the Battle of the Blackwater, and thoughts of Joffrey as he made Sansa look at the decapitated heads of the Stark household in King’s Landing. She drew the thread just tight enough, wove the needle through the cloth and bit by bit, the picture of a golden rose formed.

When she was done, Alayne examined her work. It looked like a passable attempt at a Tyrell rose to her. Then she showed it to Sera, who grinned in delight and called over the stern mistress. The woman walked over cautiously after a last look at the little girl’s work, then stared at the golden rose with raised eyebrows, before addressing a question to Sera.

“She wants to know whether everyone in Westeros embroiders this way,” Sera translated.

Alayne cocked her head. “It is the only way of embroidering I know of,” she told them. “Why? Is it bad?”

Mistress Sarnel scoffed when Sera translated the question. “Not bad,” she answered. “Different. Useful, maybe. And with a talent like yours, you’ll pick up the Braavosi way in no time.” After Sera was done relaying her words, she paused for a moment, then spoke again. “You can stay. Now help Sera—I mean me—with the hem of the dress,” Sera translated, while Mistress Sarnel had already wandered off to look at the other apprentices’ work.

Alayne looked at the skirt and took the bottom into her lap, while Sera handed her a needle and pins from her own sewing basket. After the other girl

had made sure that Alayne knew how to sew a hem like the one planned for the dress, she went back to adding pearls to the top of the skirt, which now looked like a river of stars ran down its side.

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Mistress Sarnel's apprentices lived in the attic of her shop, as Alayne found out that evening. There were six of them now, which was too many, Sera told her, but it wasn't too bad, since Marla, the oldest, would leave them within a moon. Alayne had been too tired to properly parse Sera's explanation as to why, but it was either because she wanted to open or own shop or marry her sweetheart, or maybe both. Marla was a serious girl of nine and ten, or perhaps twenty, and she seemed to keep the others in line when the mistress wasn't around.

Then there was Dia, the girl with the mousy hair. She was the youngest at eight and had been taken on three moons previously to eventually become Marla's replacement. Alayne got the impression that Dia didn't know what to make of her yet. Shaena, too, was wary of her. She was a bit younger than Alayne as well. The last girl, Tarry, was around Alayne's age, and she at least sent her an encouraging smile when they ate that evening. All the girls, with the exception of Sera with her dirty-blonde hair, had brown hair, and darker skin than Alayne. When they got ready for bed after spreading their pallets on the floor, Dia looked on in fascination as Alayne brushed her long hair.

The lumpy mattress was the worst Alayne had ever slept on. Years ago, she would have complained until she had a feather bed to lie down on, but after weeks on ships sleeping on nothing but wooden planks and hammocks, she was quite happy with the straw-filled sack and pillow. It didn't even distract her to share a room with five girls, one of whom snored. She fell asleep the moment after she first turned from one side onto another.

The next morning, Mistress Sarnel's apprentices rose at dawn to the roar of the Titan. Alayne had been so exhausted, she didn't even hear it. Shaena had to wake her with an apologetic smile on her lips. In relative silence, the girls washed and dressed, as countless people in the tall houses around them doubtless did the same.

There were many tasks to be done before the day's work could begin, and Alayne was unsuited to all of them. She knew nothing about how to cook or clean, and could only look on helplessly as the others went to work.

Marla took down the dresses hanging from the lines in the yard and Tarry prepared the food for breaking their fasts. Then Sera handed her two buckets. “Come on, we have to go.”

“Where are we going?” she asked as she slipped past Dia, who swept the floors. Shaena was already waiting for them outside.

“We need to fetch water,” Sera explained.

“Is the well far away?”

That elicited a laugh from Sera, followed by a question from Shaena, who apparently found Alayne’s question amusing as well. They had already left the street their shop was in and joined a crowd of others who were carrying buckets of their own.

“There are no wells in Braavos, Alayne. It’s all brine here. We have to go to the closest water fountain,” Sera told her, and followed it up with a lengthy explanation of the sweetwater river, a bulky construction that could be seen in the distance and that Alayne had mistaken for some sort of battlement or wall. It transported water into the city from the mainland, and by the Sealord’s grace, it was free for all who dwelled in the city.

Soon, the three girls reached the square that was big by Braavosi standards but small by those of Westeros. There were already plenty of people, mostly women and girls, grouped around the small pool in one corner that was fed by what looked like a solid archway. Some of the women chatted with each other—probably the latest gossip—and Alayne yawned. She could have slept for a few more hours. There hadn’t even been any nightmares. Maybe it helped that she was on solid ground again.

“Shaena wants to know who taught you to sew so well,” Sera said suddenly, and Alayne noticed she’d almost dozed off where she stood. The crowd before them had thinned a little. Soon it would be their turn at the fountain.

“Oh, my mother and my septa.”

“Septa?”

Alayne furrowed her brow in confusion for a moment. “Yes, my septa. My father got her to teach me how to be ladylike.”

Sera giggled as she translated for Shaena, then relayed the girl’s answer. “Well, she definitely succeeded there. So that’s what a septa is for? We call them governesses here,” she added, her own question separated from Shaena’s words by only a small pause and a subtle change in inflection.

“No ...” Alayne answered, then abruptly caught on to what else the girl had said. “What do you mean, she succeeded?” She was supposed to be a bastard, not a lady.

Sera shrugged. “It’s how you walk and sit, I think. You’re a little stiff, like a lady. Your *septa* must have taught you that, no?”

Alayne started to shake her head, then thought better of it. Septa Mordane had never had to remind her not to slouch, unlike Arya, but it was a good excuse. She resolved to study the other girls more, to learn how to blend in, but now it was almost time to fill their buckets. Only a gaggle of servant girls was standing in front of them.

“Besides,” Alayne replied, “that’s not just what a septa is for. A septa is a female servant of the Faith of the Seven. They teach young women the Seven Pointed Star and prepare them for their lives as wives. And they live in septries and minister to the poor and the common folk, or serve the gods in other ways.”

“Ah,” Sera said as she walked forward to fill her first bucket. “Are you very religious? My mother goes to the Sept-Beyond-the-Sea sometimes, but I don’t like it there. I go to the Temple of the Moonsingers with my father, when he is here. I can show you on our next free day, if you want?”

Alayne hesitated for a bit; she was busy heaving the heavy buckets back up and tried not to splash too much of the precious water on her skirts. The way back was far harder than the way to the fountain, and Alayne’s arms began to ache before they were even halfway there. But she gritted her teeth and persisted.

“I’ll think about your offer,” she finally answered as they entered their street. It was home to not only a seamstress’ shop, but also to one that sold glassware, one for candles and candelabras, and one for paper, ledgers and other books, if the signs and displays were anything to go by. Alayne didn’t know how she felt about the gods anymore, and her father’s gods were strangers in this foreign land. There would be no godswood to be found, she was sure of that. Then her stomach growled when she smelled what the bakery two doors down the street had to offer. Hopefully it was time for breakfast.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t. Not yet. When they were back, the girls still had to empty the chamber pots and the privy, a task that Alayne had never thought would be hers. She wished she could stop her nose from smelling when she did so, but to no avail. At least the midden was smaller than it had been the previous night—she would later learn that there were men who emptied them onto their barges in the dead of night and sold the waste to farmers on the mainland.

After washing that unpleasant task off her hands, it was finally time for breaking her fast. She was ravenous. The bread was fresh and the cheese delicious on her tongue. She would have loved to take more than the others, but Alayne didn't want to stand out. She did cherish the apple, though, and the fish.

Then it was time for work. First they finished what they could in the back, so that the dresses could be delivered to their customers, while the mistress worked in the front of the shop. The girls sat on their chairs and stools and chatted a little when Mistress Sarnel wasn't there to supervise them. Alayne let the idle chatter run over her while she worked, adding a lacy collar to an otherwise plain maroon dress.

In the afternoon, the mistress spent some time with them in the back. Sera began to teach her some Braavosi Valyrian and found it very amusing that Alayne had so much trouble wrapping her tongue around some of the vowels and consonants. Of course, in between language lessons, Sera also explained Braavosi embroidery to her, which created patterns by adding small, crossed stitches until they formed a picture. Alayne worked again with the golden threads and the leftover green fabric to create another rose, this one in the new style. She felt proud of herself when Mistress Sarnel praised her, and even prouder when she managed to thank the woman in her own tongue.

Chapter III: The Crane and the Pearl

“I CAN’T HELP it if your language is so confusing,” Alayne joked as she and Tarry were cutting some deep red cloth for the dress they were working on. “Why you need so many different kinds of words for things, I will never understand.”

Tarry smiled. It suited her well, since her dimples could charm even the coldest of hearts. “You’re doing better than I expected, really. You just need to work on getting the word endings right.”

Alayne sighed. Learning had never been her strongest suit, and yet she had to admit that Tarry was right. Circumstances had turned her into a good learner of languages. Or at least of the one language. Within only a few moons she had learned to speak about whatever she wished, however imperfectly and accented her words might be. She no longer needed to stick to Sera’s side like a barnacle. They were still good friends, though.

“Alayne!” Sera called. Speaking of, Alayne thought. The other girl sounded particularly enthusiastic. Then she didn’t even wait for a reply and almost stormed into the work room. “Mistress Sarnel has agreed to give us liberty for the first day of the Uncloaking as well as the last! You absolutely *must* come!”

Tarry nodded in agreement.

“All right,” Alayne said, although she was not thrilled. It was not that she didn’t want to go to the opening market to look at exotic wares and mummies. The Uncloaking was a yearly festival that lasted for ten days and that celebrated the Uncloaking of Uthero centuries past, when the city finally gave up its secrecy and revealed itself to the world at large one hundred and eleven years after its founding. It sounded like everything she would have loved, a few short years ago. There would be music, dancing and feasts. But now, she didn’t know if spending a dark

evening among a lot of people who ran around in cloaks and masks appealed to her as much as it would have then. Danger lurked everywhere, especially in mobs.

And then there was the money. Alayne wanted to save hers, not spend it at a market. One day, she dreamed, she would return to Westeros and see her family again. News from Westeros was sparse and distorted, but as far as she knew, Joffrey's death hadn't ended the wars at all. There were rumors about Tyrion—her husband, as far as the world was concerned—being on trial for the murder, and rumors about her father's armies still being trapped north of the Neck by the Freys' betrayal. And then there were fantastic stories from the east about a Targaryen amassing armies for an invasion of Westeros. Now was not the time to return, but she didn't have the money yet anyway. And if she spent it on frivolous things, she never would.

But maybe it wouldn't be so bad, she reckoned, to get out a little. Mistress Sarnel paid for their food and board, so she was earning very little, but unlike Shaena, Alayne didn't buy tortoiseshell combs, and unlike Sera or Tarry she didn't buy scented soaps and perfumes. No, she made do with plain soap and a simple brush, mended her dresses as much as she could and already had more money in her purse than any of the other girls. If she kept saving like this, she'd need an account with the Iron Bank, her mistress had japed.

"It's great to see you having some fun for once," Dia told her as they all got ready with the new cloaks they had sewn themselves and the masks they had bought the day before. Alayne's was plain white with dark rings around the eyes and blue feathers at the sides.

"I do have fun," Alayne argued, and her voice sounded strange and claustrophobic with the mask on her face.

"No, you don't," Tarry shot back. "All you do is work and sleep. Even on your free days, the most you do is walk around a little in the city. You aren't even taking any rides in the gondolas to spare your feet."

That was true, but Alayne preferred exploring on her own, without a gondolier telling her whatever came to his mind. It was a freedom she had never known, and Braavos offered so many different sights. Alayne had visited the Isle of the Gods a couple of times to see just how many gods people followed. She had never even heard of most of them. She had even found a weirwood carving of a heart tree in a corner of the Holy Warren, where the northern gods had been placed since they knew no temples. And then there were the Sealord's Palace, the

Moon Pool and the Iron Bank, and so many canals and manors and merchants to see. It was adventure enough for a girl who had never left Winterfell before her brief stay in King's Landing.

Now all five girls walked those no-longer foreign streets to the main square of their isle. Many others did the same. Some carried paper lanterns or torches, making the dusk less gloomy than it usually was in a city as gray as Braavos.

The square was packed with little booths where masked vendors hawked their wares. There were glazed baked apples and little glass figurines, stuffed toys and meat pastries. Alayne made sure to stick close to her friends for fear she might lose them in the crowds, though Sera's blonde hair and black mask at least stood out in the sea of cloaks and lacquered faces.

At one of the stands, Alayne bought her own little lantern, and at another, a lemon cake. The smell alone made her mouth water; she hadn't had any sweets in ages and these were her favorite. Then she went to join Tarry and Shaena, who were admiring some jewelry displayed on black velvet.

"What do you think? Does it suit me?" Tarry asked, holding up a bronze bee pendant with large black stones for the dark stripes of the bee's torso. The wings and legs were made of fine wire and glittered in the lamplight.

Alayne pondered the question for a moment and looked over the rings and necklaces. "Take the one in green," she suggested. "It doesn't look like a real bee, but it works better with your complexion."

"What about this one?" Shaena asked, holding up a rose pendant with turquoise petals.

"There are no blue roses," Tarry snorted while she fished for her purse beneath the bulky cloak. Alayne could picture her impish smile, but it was hidden under a yellow and blue mask.

"There are," Alayne corrected her. "But they're very rare. I heard they're grown in the north of Westeros. And it's really beautiful."

As she looked over the merchandise, Alayne wondered if there was anything she might buy. The things at this booth weren't expensive as far as jewelry went—only semi-precious stones and lesser metals. She shouldn't, she thought, she wanted to save, but then she saw a relatively simple hair clasp made of steel and a single moonstone. The metal was engraved to look like a starry night, with the stone serving as the moon.

"I'll take that one," she told the woman sitting behind the table.

“You *do* know how to live after all!” Tarry joked when they went to show Sera and Dia their spoils. The two were standing in front of a small dais where a troupe of jesters and acrobats performed the most astonishing feats. Currently, a bare-chested man with a polished head was slowly pushing a sword down his own throat. His head was tilted backwards, so he couldn’t see the crowd following his every move, but he made sure to turn a little so they could see it was no trick.

“Before, there was a man swallowing fire,” Dia whispered in awe.

The sword-swallower removed the sword with as much care as he had inserted it, then a little boy wearing a fool’s costume threw an apple into the air and the man halved it with the sword that had just been in his throat. He bowed with a twinkle in his eye to the applause of the audience, while the boy went to collect the money the revelers were willing to part with. Alayne gave him a hard-earned coin as well. She was curious what the troupe would come up next.

When she saw it, though, she had to swallow her disgust. A bunch of dwarves, dressed in costumes and masks that she assumed meant something to the Braavosi crowd, started to put on a farce that was altogether too much like the one Joffrey had enjoyed so, before he died. Alayne could see the diminutive Renly ride a bare-bottomed Ser Loras, Stannis and his red witch being beaten back by a valiant King Joffrey, and the wolf-headed Starks were chased off with cudgels by two clumsy dwarves playing the twin towers of the Freys. Suddenly, Alayne no longer felt like enjoying her free evening. Still, she gave the mummers more than she wanted to in memory of Tyrion, who had been kind to her. Maybe she could repay him a little by being kind to other dwarves.

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The morning after the last day of the Uncloaking, Mistress Sarnel let the girls sleep in. It had been a stressful few days for most of them. Sera had found herself an admirer, and Shaena and Tarry had danced almost ’til dawn after discarding their masks. Little Dia had spent the day with her family and stumbled back into the shop after midnight as well. Only Alayne had avoided the revelries, and so she had woken by the Titan’s roar like every morning. She went downstairs to start her chores, only to find the mistress in her favorite armchair sipping from a mug of tea, a little plate with smoked fish and bread next to her.

“Take something for yourself and sit down, dear,” the usually-stern woman told her.

Alayne hesitated. “Don’t you want me to wake the others so we can get started?” she asked.

Mistress Sarnel shook her head. “Not today. They can start when they crawl out of their beds. I doubt today is going to be very busy, at least not this early.”

Alayne went and got herself some cold food on a plate and some tea before sitting down next to her mistress. She ate in silence while Mistress Sarnel sipped. It felt strange that it was just the two of them. Usually, there was always Sera’s chatter or Dia’s fidgeting to add some noise to these rooms when Alayne was in them.

“You are a good girl,” Mistress Sarnel said suddenly. “You don’t have as much air between your ears as the others do, and you’re a diligent worker, talented. You don’t waste your time on frivolities either.”

Alayne thought of the hair clasp. She wore it, as she had every day since she’d bought it. She felt something like shame at those words. “Thank you,” she said.

“Oh, it’s not a compliment, I’m afraid. Anyone with eyes in their head can see you’ve had it rough. That sort of thing changes a person and makes a woman out of a girl far too young.”

You’re no longer a sweet summer child, Alayne thought, hearing Old Nan speak of winter and darkness and evils of ages past. For a moment, she wondered how the old woman was doing. Then she remembered that Winterfell had been sacked. Like as not, Nan was probably as dead as Alayne’s little brothers.

“Westeros must have been hard on you,” the woman continued. “Will you ever return?”

Alayne shrugged. “Not right now,” she said. “I wouldn’t feel safe with all the fighting.”

“That’s smart. Wars are never kind on the common people who just want to live their lives—”

It was obvious that she had wished to say something more, but they were interrupted by the bell that hung over the door of the shop. It was meant to alert them when the door opened or when someone wished to speak to them in the off hours.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Mistress Sarnel mumbled as she heaved herself out of her armchair. “At this hour? Today?”

Together, they made their way down the stairs and to the front door. When it

opened, they saw a beautiful woman about the age of Mistress Sarnel, with a heavily painted face and a more colorful gown than was currently fashionable. She perked up noticeably when she saw them.

“Ah, good. This is the third shop I’ve tried. Is nobody working this morning?” She walked into the shop with little ceremony. “I have an order to make, and it’s time sensitive, so if you’d please.”

“I hope you’ll forgive us if we’re a little slow this morning, madam. It’s been a late night,” Mistress Sarnel said, with an air of disapproval.

“Oh, certainly,” the woman said. “So long as the work is done.”

“And what is it you wish to have done?” Mistress Sarnel replied as she grabbed a tablet and chalk to make her notes. Alayne still had trouble deciphering the strange Valyrian letters the Braavosi used sometimes.

“Oh, I don’t have very specific ideas. We already had a dress, of course, but some drunkards barged through our prop room and there was an, well, *an accident*. We can’t make our own replacement in time for the play and it’s already been announced, so there’s no way to delay it,” the woman explained. She was very chipper, Alayne thought, and she suspected the woman had been out last night and hadn’t slept a wink yet.

“But what is it you wish us to make?”

“Oh,” the woman said, shaking her head. “Where is my head today? The play we’re putting on is Forel’s latest. It’s about court intrigue in Westeros. *I* play the Queen, so I’ll need a dress that makes me look like one.”

Mistress Sarnel frowned for a moment. “Alayne, come here, please. You’ll be far better at judging what a Westerosi queen should wear.”

Alayne did as she was bade and took the tablet and chalk. Then she looked at the actress. “What kind of Westerosi queen?” she asked.

“Are there that many?” the woman retorted.

Alayne simply tilted her head. “Yes. A Targaryen dragonrider would wear something different than the queens that came later,” she explained. And the women from Dorne had preferred wide, flowing dresses, she thought, as did some of the ladies from the Reach, like Margaery, the queen that almost was. “It will also influence the color scheme. During the Dance of the Dragons, the warring factions were called the Blacks and the Greens, after the colors of the dresses worn by the two queens.”

The actress raised a sardonic eyebrow at that much detail. She was probably

wondering why an apprentice seamstress in Braavos knew that much about the history of a faraway land. Although maybe her accent was explanation enough. Alayne was quite surprised she'd managed to remember anything of Maester Luwin's lessons herself. To be honest, she'd only paid attention to this part because of the dresses.

"It's based on the current queen," the actress said, and Alayne knew this would be easy.

"It'll be red and gold, then," she declared as she began to sketch. Long flowing skirts, not as high-waisted as the Braavosi dresses, with long, billowing sleeves and a revealing bust. "With golden lions embroidered on the bodice."

"Why lions?" the actress asked curiously.

"The Queen is a Lannister, and the golden lion on red is her family's coat of arms," Alayne explained, then showed the actress the rough sketch she had produced. The woman nodded.

"Then we'll need to know how much time we have, and your measurements, of course," Mistress Sarnel said, already brandishing the knotted string that was used to take their customers' measurements.

"Four days," the actress told them calmly. "To be delivered to Izembaro's company at the Gate."

Mistress Sarnel froze for a moment, then exchanged a look with Alayne. They both sighed and continued their work. "It won't be cheap," she warned the woman.

"Cheaper than postponing the premiere, I assure you," the actress replied wryly. "And the play is going to be a huge success, I know it. Love, intrigue, comedy, fights, it has it all. And with the Westerosi envoy here to negotiate with the Iron Bank, it'll draw an even bigger crowd."

Alayne felt faint. She hoped the envoy was nobody she knew. She was safe, wasn't she? Nobody would look for Sansa Stark when they saw Alayne Stone in her modest dresses. Still, it might be advisable to wear a shawl to hide her hair for the time being whenever she left the shop.

When the actress left the shop after her measurements were taken, Mistress Sarnel turned back to Alayne. Her stern facade was back in place. "Go wake the others, Alayne," she ordered. "We're going to work our fingers to the bone in the next few days."

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Alayne's fingers were still hurting when she and the others—even Mistress Sarnel—pushed their way into the Gate for the premiere of Phario Forel's latest play. After all the hard work they had put into it, not even the throngs of bravos, shopgirls and pickpockets could deter them. They so rarely got to admire the fruits of their labor, and when Alayne saw the theater's pit, she was worried she might not tonight, either. It would be a shame.

The past few days had been a frenzy. After a look at the fabrics they had in store, Alayne and Mistress Sarnel had to conclude that they didn't have the right shade of deep, bloody red, and not enough golden thread besides. They only had a yellow fabric that might serve as a contrast in a pinch, but it wasn't ideal either. So while the others were sleepily getting ready for the day, Alayne accompanied her mistress to a cloth merchant who sold linen and silk imported from everywhere from Lorath to Volantis. He even sold some wool from the Seven Kingdoms. The selection left Alayne speechless, so she just nodded when her mistress had found the right one. She added a better yellow cloth as well. When they came back, the girls had already started on their orders, leaving mistress and apprentice to finish the dress.

It had turned out beautifully, Alayne thought. It wasn't made from material expensive enough to please Queen Cersei herself, but it was a fair imitation, nonetheless.

The pit was filled to the brim, as were the boxes and balconies. In the best one, Alayne could spy the envoy with his sigil embroidered on this doublet. House Swyft, if she wasn't mistaken. She ran her hands over her shawl to make sure it covered her hair properly. Then a peddler bumped into her and offered her a greasy sausage. Alayne declined.

The play began. On stage was a lychyard full of tombstones. Then a dwarf stepped from behind one and began his lament.

"The seven-faced god has cheated me," he declared, sneering at the people gaping up at him. *"My noble sire he made of purest gold, and gold he made my siblings, boy and girl. But I am formed of darker stuff, of bones and blood and clay ..."*

Alayne was taken quite aback. She didn't know it was to be a play about Tyrion, and evidently neither had the writer, since the longer the play went on, the less like him the dwarf on stage seemed. Tyrion had been made of gold far more than his siblings and father, only he was gold on the inside. They were gilded without, but rotten inside.

The strangest experience for her, however, was when the girl with the red wig appeared on stage. She was the daughter of the old king's Hand, who had tried to take the throne for himself before fleeing north and leaving her behind. She saw it all again, distorted like the reflection in a disturbed pond: King Robert's death, her father's betrayal, the Battle of the Blackwater, and finally, the wedding.

Lady Crane, the actress who had come to them for the dress, was magnificent. She easily stole the scene from her dying "son" and the dwarf's scheming. All who saw her desperately clinging to the dead boy king and heard her cries were entranced. Her screams to have the dwarf thrown into the dungeon were the only thing that seemed even halfway true to the play's inspiration. The dress, of course, looked magnificent too. It fit very well and made the mummer look like a true queen.

After the final chase, in which the Bloody Hand killed his unwilling wife and left her body in the sewer, the villain was apprehended and brought to justice. The curtain fell. The mummers bowed before their audience, and then it was time for them to leave. Alayne felt a strange mixture of sadness and irritation. Was that really what people thought of them? That the Lannisters were good and the Starks bad? Alayne hoped not.

"The dress looked wonderful," Dia proclaimed once they were out of the Gate and on their way back. "You did great, Alayne. I could really see the lions, even from a distance! They looked a lot like the ones on the guards in the envoy's box."

"Thank you," Alayne said. "It really wasn't as difficult as all that."

"Don't sell yourself short," her mistress said. "You really did well, especially with the little time we had."

Alayne lowered her head and felt herself blush.

"I wonder if it was really like that, with the Hand and all that. Phario Forel loves to write about things that really happened. I saw his play about the dragon lords once," Shaena mused.

Alayne snorted. "Don't believe a word," she told them fiercely. "Joffrey was a terrible king. They called him Illborn behind his back, and even to his face when the people rioted because they were starving. And it was Lord Tyrion who saved the city from Stannis. I was in King's Landing when all that happened."

It was the most Alayne had ever said about her time in Westeros, she realized, and she hadn't really meant to. It had just happened. She regretted it immediately and was about to apologize for her uncharacteristic outburst when Sera spoke

first.

“Of course you’re right,” she said diplomatically. “But it was an entertaining play.”

They all nodded in agreement and talked little all the way back home, but Alayne could see their glances. Seven only knew what they were thinking. They probably imagined her being menaced by soldiers and the rabble during the riot and the battle. Likely they also cast Petyr, whom they thought her father, as the hero who had tried to save her from it all, only to die tragically just when he had succeeded.

It was a nice story, she supposed. But characters in stories were rarely like real people. Her father had never saved her and Petyr had had his own motives. The people of King’s Landing were just desperate with hunger, not evil villains. Alayne remembered the woman carrying her dead babe. Stannis was the rightful king who only did what kings always did, and fought for his throne. The people just happened to be caught between him and Joffrey. And Sansa had been forgotten.

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Daily life took over once again the following day. There were always orders to be handled and dresses to be worked on. Mistress Sarnel had also started to teach Alayne and Sera how to keep the books and handle the business side of her shop. Sera was not very good with her numbers, while Alayne had never much bothered with the intricacies of managing a budget. Her mother and Maester Luwin had tried their best to teach it to her, but Sansa hadn’t listened. Now she rued her former self’s careless nature. At least she had Sera, who thought about how much money she could afford to spend as if it was second nature, and whom she helped with her subtraction, addition and the more complicated multiplications and divisions, not that Alayne was all that good at them herself. They were both hunched over their tablets, trying to figure out how to price a dress based on the size of the woman and the quality of the materials, plus the cost they had to factor in for work hours, the house, food, and taxes, when Mistress Sarnel called up to them one evening.

“Alayne, would you come down, please?”

Alayne frowned at Sera. They had both heard the bell at the entrance ring, of

course, but Tarry had gone out on an errand with Shaena, so they had simply assumed it had been them. Sera shrugged, and nodded for her to leave.

When Alayne arrived downstairs, she saw that her mistress wasn't with Tarry and Shaena, but a customer, even though it was already past the eighth hour of the evening, by the Titan's roar. With her stood a stunning young woman with dark skin and black hair. She wore a dress of fine peach silk decorated with white pearls. On her neck, she wore a choker with the biggest black pearl Alayne had ever seen.

"This is the girl?" the woman asked.

Mistress Sarnel nodded. "Alayne, may I introduce Bellegere Otherys, the Black Pearl of Braavos."

The Black Pearl nodded in greeting, while Alayne curtsied uncertainly. She didn't know how to properly greet a courtesan, and certainly not a famous one. For that was who was gracing them with her presence. The Black Pearl smirked slightly.

"You designed the dress for Lady Crane, then?"

Alayne needed a moment to place the actress's name, then she nodded. "I did."

"Well then, girl, I want to commission a dress in the Westerosi style."

Why? Alayne wondered. The Braavosi dresses were a little different, especially in the sleeves, but Alayne liked them just as well as any other. Still, the Black Pearl was a customer, and one who had a reputation for being able to pay.

"What kind of dress?" Alayne asked, before adding, "Do you want any specific colors?"

The Black Pearl hummed for a moment. "A black one, I think. With red dragons. The Targaryen queen in Meereen has made it her mission to abolish slavery, have you heard? And she is my kin, if very distantly. Soon, people will praise her in all the known world, and I intend to make the most of it."

Although they looked nothing alike, the Black Pearl reminded her of Margaery Tyrell, if she ever started acting the way she felt. Or, more likely, her grandmother. A pragmatist to the bone.

"I also want it to be made of the best fabric—silk perhaps, or brocade, if you think it needs to be heavier," the Black Pearl continued. "Can you work with those?"

Alayne nodded, then tilted her head. "Winter is coming," she echoed her house's words, "and a heavier cloth will likely be of more use than the light silks of summer. A question, though," Alayne asked, tentatively. "Will you be wanting

the three-headed dragon of the Targaryens, or will simple dragons do?”

The Black Pearl smiled like a shark. “A simple, one-headed one will do. One shouldn’t presume on one’s relations’ goodwill *too* much.”

Chapter IV: Weathering the Storm

WINTER SETTLED OVER Braavos, but Alayne hardly had time to notice it. She was simply too busy. People, it seemed, had noticed the Black Pearl's visit to their shop. When the dress was delivered—a black one with dark red accents and dragons curling around the sleeves and shoulders— word of mouth spread even more. Soon enough, they had so many commissions, Mistress Sarnel had to turn some customers away. And many of them explicitly asked for Alayne's work.

The other girls were thrilled, of course. The wives of the keyholders of Braavos were seen in their shop, and so were the popular courtesans of the city. Little Dia had to be taught not to stare at them all so openly. Alayne was less awed by the politicians of Braavos; she had dined with kings and queens, once upon a time. But she *had* enjoyed the quiet obscurity she had thrived in, and now she missed it. Westerosi dresses were in fashion, now, and her particular design skills were in demand. On some days, she had so much sewing and embroidery to do, she didn't even have to do any chores, despite the fact that the other girls and Mistress Sarnel were all studying her methods.

What kept her going was the promise of home. She still dreamed of Winterfell sometimes, and of her parents and siblings. She would never see Bran and Rickon again, but Robb and Arya still lived. And she'd even like to see Jon again, to apologize for how she had treated him. He may only have been her half-brother, but he had always been a good brother to her, and she had repaid him with disdain.

But to make all these dreams reality, she needed money. She had saved up quite a bit already, enough for a cheap passage, but Alayne didn't want to risk it after her last experience at sea. She wanted to make sure she had everything she needed. Enough for a ship to White Harbor, enough to pay her way to

Winterfell, and enough to come back to Braavos, should anything go wrong. Who knew if her family even remembered her? Would her mother love a daughter that had done what she had done, that had lived as a bastard commoner for so long? Her head said yes, but her heart was not so sure. They had never come for her, after all.

And so Alayne sewed until she'd worn out more thimbles than she could count, until her hands ached and her eyes watered in the candlelight that they needed to use more and more these days. The sun set ever earlier, and Alayne wondered if Winterfell was now permanently covered in snow. She didn't remember the last winter, as she had been too small, but she could picture it.

The first evening it snowed in Braavos, Alayne went out to the backyard with the other girls. They all admired the beautiful white flakes as they slowly fluttered down onto their heads. Dia even ran around trying to catch them with her mouth. Alayne just hoped she didn't accidentally stumble into the midden while she was looking up. The entire scene reminded her a lot of home, with Arya running around and Bran following close behind.

"It's going to become quite unpleasant very soon," Mistress Sarnel warned them when they came back inside to drink some hot nettle tea. "Mark my words, give it a week, and you'll curse the snow."

They all nodded, but Alayne thought she was the only one who really believed her. Sera was old enough to remember the last winter, but she had been young, and it had been a short and mild one. And she had been in Braavos. People treated winter differently here. Back home in the North, the adults had never stopped complaining about the cold and the endless masses of snow.

"Will the canals freeze?" she asked. The others stared at her as if she had lost her mind.

"Maybe," Mistress Sarnel told them, surprising the girls. "It happens every couple of decades, I think. My grandmother told me stories of walking over the Canal of Heroes once. But that's only in very harsh winters. You should worry more about the sweetwater river and the fountains. Those are more prone to it than the sea."

"A long winter follows on a long summer, they say," Alayne pointed out, although she didn't know *who* said it, only that she had heard it before.

"You mean it's going to be this cold for *years*?!" Dia asked, mouth gaping.

Alayne shrugged.

“It’s a good thing I made you all sew new woolen dresses, isn’t it?” the mistress remarked. Shaena and Sera especially had griped about it, since she had made them work overtime and taken the cost of the fabrics out of their pay. They nodded grudgingly now, but wouldn’t realize how glad they were for their new dresses until the cold lasted long enough to creep through the walls, no matter how much wood was put in the fireplace.

“And you, Alayne, should consider finding a ship to Westeros, now that the autumn storms are over. If you don’t, you’ll have to stay all winter. Fewer ships make the journey then. The icebergs are dangerous and passage will become more expensive. It should become safer in Westeros now, too. Nobody sane fights a lengthy war in winter.”

The other girls all looked at Alayne. She saw the curiosity in their eyes, but also the regret. With a pang, Alayne thought that she would miss them all very much. They were the first true friends Alayne had made since Winterfell, girls who really liked her even if they didn’t know all of her.

“Will you really leave?” Dia asked, looking unhappy.

Alayne hesitated, then she nodded. “I suppose so,” she said, sounding sad even to her own ears.

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In all her time in Braavos, Alayne had never been to Ragman’s Harbor, the place in the city where foreign ships made port. She had walked to the markets, and past the houses of the rich, but she had avoided the less savory parts of the city. Ragman’s Harbor had a reputation for being full of cutpurses and other lowlifes, as well as sailors that hadn’t seen a woman for moons. And so, when Alayne went to seek passage on a ship, she was secretly relieved that Sera had decided to accompany her. Alayne suspected that Sera was as curious about the Westerosi as she had been curious about Alayne the first day they had met. Alayne was just glad she had someone with her when she approached strangers.

Ragman’s Harbor was as busy and cramped as any place in Braavos where many people congregated. When they reached the long quay, Alayne almost stumbled over a girl pushing a wheelbarrow full of cockles while trying to avoid the wild gestures of a man with a blue beard who was telling a story to another man. The tale was an emotional one, it seemed, but Alayne could barely

understand a word of his Valyrian dialect.

“What do we do?” Sera hissed into her ear. She was gripping Alayne’s arms a little too hard as her eyes roamed over the ships and sails.

“Ask someone,” Alayne replied. She looked around to find someone who wasn’t busy and spied a man sitting in a booth, looking at thick sheaves of paper and books. She dragged Sera over to the man and cleared her throat. When he saw the two girls standing before him, he seemed so annoyed Alayne almost retreated.

“Are there any ships from Westeros?” she asked, a beat too late and a little too timidly.

The man shot her a look. “Are there stars in the sky?”

When he didn’t speak any further, Alayne said, with a little more steel in her voice, “Could you please point us to one of them?”

“And what do girls like you want with a ship?”

“I wish to buy a passage,” Alayne replied.

“Any place in particular?” It almost sounded as if he thought they were trying to run away with no clue what they were doing. Alayne was starting to get annoyed.

“White Harbor. The North in general,” she said, earning her a surprised glance from Sera.

The man just huffed and pointed at a large galley with faded gray sails. Alayne nodded at the man and walked away from him as fast as she could.

“The North?” Sera asked incredulously, as soon as they were out of hearing range of the man. “Why would you ever want to go *there*? It’s even colder there than here!”

That was true enough. “My father had enemies in the south,” she explained vaguely. “I’d rather not run into them. Last I heard the Starks were still in the North, and my father knew Lady Stark, once upon a time.”

Sera frowned. “Still, it’s cold there. And the people are probably barbarians.”

Alayne had to laugh at that. “You say that about all Westerosi here.”

“But they’re different.”

Alayne was about to mock her some more, but they had arrived at the ship. It looked drab, for all that it had once been an impressive galley. The crew looked little better, with drawn, sunken faces and clothes that had once been black. A couple crewmen lounging on the docks near their ship eyed them hungrily.

“Excuse me,” Alayne began, “where can I find your captain?”

“Tavern over there. Bugger me if I can tell what it’s called.” He nodded at a

building with a group of exuberant—and likely drunken sailors—in front of it.

“The Outcast Inn,” Alayne informed them, having deciphered the washed-out letters. “Thank you.”

The inn was a rowdy place, that much they could tell even before they entered. The stench of beer wafted out the door, as did unintelligible singing in innumerable languages. There were black Summer Islanders in one corner admiring the barmaid, and some Braavosi gamblers in another. Only one table was not in a jolly mood. There sat three men in faded black and a woman in rough furs, cradling an infant. Alayne walked over to them, a curious Sera on her heels.

“Are you the captain of the *Blackbird*?”

One of the men—a middle-aged man with a large belly whom she presumed was the captain—exchanged a glance with the other two. One was young and fat; the other, a wiry man of about her father’s age. “Aye, what do you want?”

“Offer the girls a seat, Old Tattersalt,” the wiry man said. Alayne didn’t even have to wait for the captain to nod before Sera pulled some chairs from the other tables for them to sit in.

She composed herself carefully, to be sure she kept her northern vowels out of her speech. “I wish to buy a passage to Westeros. I was told you hail from there?”

The captain bellowed a laugh, the wiry man grinned, and the young one looked at her with pity. Only the girl seemed curious.

“I think you’ve got the wrong boat, then,” the captain said.

“Do you not travel back there?”

“Oh, we do, once Cotter’s done with his business. Fat lot of good that’ll do. No, you don’t want to go where we’re going.”

“We’re men of the Night’s Watch,” the fat man added helpfully. “The *Blackbird* will sail back to Eastwatch. Not a place a young woman like you will want to travel.”

That at least explained the black everywhere, Alayne mused. Sera asked them what the Watch was, and the young man patiently explained.

“I don’t care,” Alayne said. “I have a brother in the Watch; surely that counts for something.”

The men eyed her with varying degrees of surprise and pity, while Sera stared at her with raised eyebrows. Alayne had never mentioned a brother before.

“You don’t want to go to Eastwatch,” the wiry man reiterated. “You don’t want to go to the North. Been here a while, haven’t you?”

Alayne nodded.

“It’s no fit place for a young woman. It’s no fit place for anyone, truth be told. That’s why Tarly here takes his girl south with him. And your brother is probably dead, unless he was stationed in the Shadow Tower or Eastwatch. Not many of us left between the wildlings and worse. And soon enough, the rest of us will be gone too, along with the whole damn Wall.”

“Don’t say that!” the young man—Tarly—protested, while the girl rocked her child. “If anyone can stop the White Walkers, Jon can.”

The man who was obviously the small group’s leader snorted. “You and your faith in the Lord Commander.” He paused to shake his head in exasperation. “Stay here, girl. We sure won’t take you. The North is overrun with wildlings already, and I doubt Lord Stark will manage them. And worse is yet to come. There’ll be war in the North soon. The worst war any of us have ever seen.”

Alayne nodded and swallowed. It was too late. She didn’t know if she believed the talk about the White Walkers, but with the news of dragons in the east, who knew? Whatever had happened, the North seemed to be in dire straits, and she was afraid. Maybe her brother was dead. Maybe he still lived. Maybe he was the Jon Tarly had mentioned, but then again, it was a common name, and if there were wildlings in the North ... at least here in Braavos, she was safe. And after everything, safety was what she craved the most.

“I thank you for your time and wish you good fortune,” she said to the men, who seemed to relax when she and Sera moved away from the table. Outside the inn, Alayne took a deep breath of the briny air. Braavos was to be her home a little longer, it seemed.

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“I think it is time you left us,” Mistress Sarnel told Alayne one evening two weeks after she had returned from Ragman’s Harbor with the news that she would stay after all.

Alayne felt her stomach drop. “But I can’t go to Westeros! It’s too dangerous!”

Mistress Sarnel clucked with her tongue and leaned back in her chair. Her knitting needles clacked against each other while the sock she was working on grew. “I’m not talking about that, girl. I’m talking about the shop. We have more work than we can handle, and I don’t have the room to expand the business to suit

our new needs. No room to store the fabrics for all your special orders, and no room for another apprentice to help with all the work. It's as if I'm trying to run two shops in one house right now. My own and yours. And I regret to say it, but I have nothing more to teach you. I think you should leave the nest, so to speak."

"But ..." she didn't know how, Alayne thought. Her whole life, people had watched out for her. Others had made her decisions for her, and taught her how to be what she was expected to be.

"It's scary, I know. But I think you're ready to go into business on your own." Alayne gaped as she continued. "I won't throw you out the door tomorrow. You have the funds to rent a little place, and I'll send any customers asking for you your way. You'll need to take in a girl or two to help you, of course. Maybe Sera would like to go with you. And if you need advice or just want to sit down with an old woman to drink tea, I'll be right here. Although gods know, people your age should have different things on their minds."

"I don't," Alayne objected. "And you're not that old."

"That's kind of you to say, dear. You're a good girl. Your parents must have been proud of you."

Alayne doubted it. She hadn't always been good, after all. Oh, she'd been the perfect daughter in the eyes of her parents, but when it counted ... twice she had been selfish and it had only brought her pain. She'd lost Lady, and she'd betrayed her family when it had mattered the most. She'd always thought herself a better daughter than Arya, but now she was no longer sure.

*

"What do you think?" Alayne asked Sera as she showed her around the vacant shop one of Mistress Sarnel's many acquaintances had found for her. It had been a book binder's before. You could still smell traces of glue and paper, even though all the tools and furniture had been removed. The previous tenant had died without an heir. There were only empty rooms and scratched wooden floors. Despite the bright green door and freshly painted shutters on the outside, Alayne thought the house looked sad.

"It needs furniture," Sera said, "but I think you can make it work. You should put one or two examples of your work on the left here, so that they can be seen when the shutters are open, and some sort of rug in the middle to be more

welcoming. A selection of fabrics in the back here, and you can start working.” Her eyes sparkled. “This is so exciting!”

Sera was genuinely happy, Alayne thought. She was a truly good friend.

“We,” Alayne told her. “I thought we could make it work together.”

“What?” Sera asked wide-eyed.

“It’ll be tight, of course, and we’ll have to save a lot of coin at first to repay the loan Mistress Sarnel has agreed to give me to help with the equipment. We’ll have to share a room too, but we’ll each get our own bed, at least. And we’ll have to do some of the chores, since I think we can only afford one apprentice to start with, but you’ve been with me all the way so far, and we’re friends. I think we can do this together.”

Sera kept staring at her and for a moment, Alayne thought she might say no after all.

“Yes!” Sera screamed and then she launched herself into Alayne’s arms. She hugged her tightly and spun her around on the dusty floor, laughing like a maniac. Alayne couldn’t help but laugh with her.

“Oh, this is going to be so wonderful! I still have so much to learn from you! And I’ll help with the furniture. My mother knows someone who works for her employers, maybe she can get us a good price. And we’ll get new dresses, now that we’re no longer apprentices. We can’t look like we’re wearing hand-me-downs if we’re working in our own shop!” Sera squealed, dancing around the floor, drawing circles in the dust.

“A seamstress always dresses carefully to show her talent, but she never shows up her customers,” Alayne quoted Mistress Sarnel’s words.

“Oh, don’t play daft,” Sera chided her. “Of course we’re not going to run around in bright yellow dresses with pearls on our collars. But I’d like something in deep violet, and you’d look perfect in dark blue. And we should add some of your embroideries—subtle ones, of course—to advertise.”

Sera painted a pretty picture, Alayne thought, and inevitably found herself drawn into her friend’s fantasy, where they wore beautiful dresses and ran a successful enterprise together that all the worthies of Braavos spoke of. And for the first time since King’s Landing, she didn’t want to give up on a dream. Instead, she grabbed it with both hands and refused to let go.

But first, her hand had to grab onto some heavier things. Sera’s mother’s friend did give them a good deal on the furniture, but tables, beds and chairs

didn't carry themselves. They couldn't afford to hire help except for the heaviest items, and so Alayne and Sera carried their mattresses and small tables up the narrow steps of their new home. They fetched buckets and scrubbed the floors and walls until everything was clean except for them.

And after a week of work, when the bolts of fabric she'd ordered had been delivered and the rug lay in their parlor, when they had both taken a good soak in their new wooden bathtub, when the sign hung over their door, Alayne truly had her own place for the first time in her life. She stood in the middle of her new home and envisioned the dresses she would create for show. One tailored to fit her, and another for Sera. Pale green for Sera, Alayne thought, with beautiful lilies—

“Alayne! Come up here! We're finally done and I've got us a bottle of Tyroshi pear brandy to celebrate with!” Sera called from upstairs.

Alayne shook her head and smiled. Her plans could wait another day.

Chapter V: Winter's End

AS IT TURNED out, Alayne loved running her own shop. She had been skeptical at first, but she had no problem being in charge, as she discovered. In fact, she was very good at it. It was still more work than she had ever imagined, even with Sera helping her, but she loved every moment of it. She didn't even notice the cold.

Each morning, at the beginning of the sixth hour, she and Sera rose from their beds to start with the chores. Their apprentice—an eight-year-old girl called Amorri with an open, round face and lovely chestnut curls—was too small to carry heavy buckets full of water, so they had to go to the nearest fountain themselves. It wasn't even dawn when they started out, with their faces wrapped in scarves. Sera had to teach Alayne how to make them since she had never deigned to learn from Old Nan. On some days, a man had to hack the ice that formed on the pools at night into pieces for the waiting people to take with them. They would bang against the wooden buckets when Sera and Alayne shuffled back home.

There, Amorri had already cleaned the chamber pots, and was busily cleaning the rooms. Alayne boiled the water and did some odd tasks—running the numbers, going to the market, doing the washing—while Sera took care of the food. They had worked out quite early that Alayne knew nothing about cooking and they soon had so much work that they could not take the time for Sera to teach her.

The rest of the day was spent on that work, and there was, it seemed, no end to it. There were so many dresses to make. Few Braavosi had a proper winter wardrobe after a ten-year-long summer. Moths had eaten half of what people had

stashed in their closets, and the rest no longer fit those who had grown tall or fat off a prosperous summer. Alayne didn't sew for the poorer people, of course, but the rich wanted to dress finely, as well as warmly, when they left their comfortably heated homes. And so she had dusted off her knowledge of working with furs, fusing it with Southron and Braavosi fashions and embroidery, adding collars and cuffs made of pelts imported from the North or the northern coast of Essos. She rarely used silk any more—it was wool and heavier fabrics she made her dresses of, now. And for once, the usually rather reserved Braavosi preferred brighter colors to add some light to the gray darkness of winter.

If time allowed, Alayne and Sera taught each other—and their apprentice—in between working on orders. Amorri learned how to make sleeves, Alayne improved her knowledge of the impossible Braavosi writing system, and Sera learned what Alayne remembered from her lessons about Westerosi history. Sometimes they went out to look at the newly-arrived stock of the cloth merchants. They were busy enough that much of that had to be done in the evenings or mornings. Mistress Sarnel had stayed true to her word, and sent those that wanted Alayne's work to her shop, so they managed to repay the loan within a few moons. Alayne had some coin in her account with the Iron Bank now. Even Sera, who loved to spend hers on dresses, jewelry and sweets, had a little left over.

And so their days went as the sun rose later and set earlier, as snow fell more often than rain, and the cold crept under layers of blankets at night. Then one day, Alayne rose in the dark and for once, the cold felt a little less oppressive. Even the sun came up a little earlier than the day before, or so it seemed. It was a welcome reprieve, yet Alayne thought it was no more than an illusion. But the next day was warmer as well, and the one after. Alayne could barely believe it when she could walk outside again without a scarf protecting her face.

Spring had truly arrived, and Braavos marveled at it. Nobody had expected winter to end so soon, and Alayne heard some of her more wealthy customers posit the oddest theories. One woman said that the shadow binders of faraway Asshai had sacrificed a dragon to their fiery god. The truth, however, was much more fantastic.

Alayne and Sera went to Ragman's Harbor on one of their free days, to see if any new ships had arrived that carried fabrics they might buy. Now that winter was over, the merchantmen could travel freely again without worrying about icebergs. There were indeed many ships berthed at the harbor, far more than in

moons past, and many merchants and errand boys ran around. It felt a little like stepping into an ant hill that was your own size, Alayne thought. People scurried about everywhere. Only in one place were they standing, watching something in front of them, and curious, Alayne stopped to see what was going on.

In front of a ship flying the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen stood a man in Westerosi clothing. He was deep in a heated argument with one of the men—an elderly Braavosi, probably a merchant, by the looks of him. The crowd had formed a half-circle around them.

“You lie!” the Braavosi accused the man. “Something like that could never have happened.”

“I do not!” the man insisted vehemently. “I swear this is the story of my king and queen and how they saved not only the Seven Kingdoms, but also your sorry hide!”

“What are they talking about?” Alayne asked the young boy standing next to her, keeping her voice low.

The boy shrugged. “Some fantastic tale about the dragon queen returning to Westeros and saving it from some evil men made of ice that tried to invade from the north. Says *they* were the ones responsible for winter.”

“Really?” Sera asked. Alayne had told her some of Old Nan’s stories in the evenings when they were shivering in the darkness. Like Bran, she liked the dark tales of Others and skinchangers and the Rat King.

The boy nodded. “Ask him yourself when they’re done screaming at each other.”

After the argument was finally over and done with, the Braavosi left, throwing his arms up in the air as though he had decided it wasn’t worth the effort to continue fighting. The other man—obviously the ship’s captain—turned back to the dockhands who were unloading his cog. When Alayne approached, the captain scowled at her, as if she was planning to call him a fraud as well.

“Please,” she said in the common tongue. It felt a little odd on her lips now. “I come from the Seven Kingdoms and would like to hear of home.”

For a long moment, the captain stared at her and the others who had stayed to listen. Then he sighed and sat down on one of the stone pillars lining the quay.

“Very well, then,” he began. He spun them a tale of war and woe. Some of it Alayne had already known. And it didn’t surprise her in the least to hear of some of what she had not, like Cersei’s depravity and the South ignoring the threat in

the North. The captain was a talented storyteller who had soon captured his audience as if they were little children listening to their grandmother's tales. Only Alayne truly mourned when she heard of sweet little Tommen's death and of Margaery's fate. To her, they were more than just characters in a story.

"So Queen Cersei the Cruel took his place, ready to conquer the whole realm," the man continued, pausing a little for effect, "when Queen Daenerys arrived from the east, together with her three dragons, her army of Unsullied, and hordes of Dothraki."

That caused some incredulous murmurs among the crowd. The Dothraki, while never a threat to Braavos proper, had raided towns and villages on its periphery for centuries. They had ever been unpredictable, and never followed a king or queen.

"The Dothraki hate the sea," Alayne heard someone whisper loudly behind her.

"And yet they braved it for their Queen," the storyteller responded with a sharp glance that threatened to leave the story unfinished should they accuse him of lying. He then told them of the War of the Queens, as they apparently called it. Alayne—and the crowd—laughed when they heard of Cersei's fate. It seemed the story was over, the heroine had won—

"Except by then, the Wall had fallen to the Others from north of the Wall, monsters that are ice made flesh. Lord Stark and the Lord Commander," Alayne's heart skipped a beat when she heard that name, "had rallied their forces at Winterfell after the Final Battle of Castle Black. They sent ravens begging the queen for help, and she agreed, leading her armies north, despite the cold and the snows. There was a great battle before Winterfell, Lord Stark leading the army on the ground, while the queen rode her big black dragon. The Dothraki horses died miserably in the cold and men could barely see in the flurry of snow. There were huge spiders made of ice, undead mammoths and giants, and every man who died joined the ranks of the enemy. Then, one of the queen's dragons fell. The living thought that all was lost. But the Lord Commander of what was left of the Night's Watch managed to get through to the Night King. The two fought a duel and after trading many blows, the Lord Commander felled his foe.

"The wights dropped like puppets, dead once again; their masters melted like ice in the summer as the sun rose again and the battle was won. In recognition of his heroic deed, the Queen took the Lord Commander as her husband and disbanded the Watch, since it was no longer needed. Now, they rule together and

the realm is finally at peace.”

The man concluded his tale and looked at all of them in turn, daring them all to call it a fairy tale for children and fools, but none did. Alayne doubted it was the entire truth, although she did not doubt the kernel that made up its core. She couldn't stop thinking about it, even after she and Sera returned home. Westeros was safe again. She could go home. But did she want to? She pondered the question as she lay in bed that night, trying to remember the faces of those she once knew. After all this time, did anybody really miss her?

She was content with her life now. She enjoyed the work and having friends. She enjoyed being Alayne Stone. If she was being honest with herself, she didn't much like Sansa Stark any more. Did she want to be Sansa again?

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Alayne was minding the shop and working on a dress for the wife of a man of some import at the Iron Bank when the door to her shop opened. That in itself wasn't unusual; customers always came and went, or sent their servants come to make an appointment. It wasn't even that unusual to see a man enter the shop.

The man was huge and maybe a handful of years older than her father, with a large walrus mustache. Alayne had never seen him before, to her knowledge, but she recognized the sigil on his green surcoat: the merman of House Manderly, whose lord had sometimes sent men to talk to her father when she had been a little girl. Alayne was so shocked by the unexpected sight of the familiar sigil that she almost didn't notice that the man looked like he had seen a ghost. Almost.

“Can I help you?” She spoke in the common tongue, she realized too late. The words were already out of her mouth.

“Gods, girl, you're the spitting image of your mother,” the man croaked. Then he rubbed his hand over his bald head. “Where are my manners? Ser Wylis Manderly, heir to White Harbor. It's a pleasure to meet you, my lady. Your family will be so pleased to know you're all right.”

Sansa blinked at him. Outwardly, she kept her manner calm, yet on the inside, she was panicking. Her heart was pounding; it felt, she thought, as though it were about to leap out of her chest. She worked to keep her hands as steady as she could as she put aside her sewing. She had to say something, but what?

It was Sera who saved her. She must have heard the bell and called from the

workroom. “Do we have a new customer? Or is it Moqorro with the new samples? What do they want?”

Alayne took a deep breath. “A customer,” she called back, before turning to Ser Wylis and forcing a smile onto her face.

“The other seamstress,” she explained. “Can we help you with something?”

“My lady, there is no reason to be coy with me. You look quite like your mother and are impossible to mistake. Are you being threatened? Is that why you stay here? If so, I assure you, I am a more capable warrior than I look. I fought in the Battle for the Dawn!”

Ser Wylis drew himself up to his full height—which was impressive, if only because of the added width—and put his hand on his sword belt. He thinks himself some sort of hero, Alayne thought, and he saw her as a maiden in distress. But she had learned long ago that there were no heroes.

“You must be mistaken, Ser,” she explained, trying to keep her voice pleasant and somewhat bemused. “I do not know who you take me for, but I doubt I am her. My mother died when I was still quite young and I barely remember her, while my father died a few years back. My name is Alayne Stone, and this is my shop. I must insist that you stop talking like a madman or I will call the guards.” Or one of the bravos eager to prove themselves, Alayne reckoned. They were usually faster than the city guards. Then she smiled with a confidence she didn’t feel. “Now, is there anything I can do for you?”

Ser Wylis deflated. “Are you quite sure, my lady?”

Alayne nodded.

The knight sighed. “I wish to buy a dress for my daughter. She likes exotic things from Essos. She’s a little shorter than you, but has about your figure. It doesn’t need to fit perfectly and I don’t have her precise measurements, but she’s good with needle and thread and can adjust it if need be.”

“An exotic dress?” Alayne asked.

Ser Wylis nodded. He had trouble looking her in the eyes now. Instead, he stared at the dresses around the shop, the ones displayed for customers and the one Alayne had been working on.

“Then I’m afraid I’ll be of little help. My dresses are inspired by the Westerosi styles,” she told him. “But I can tell you where you’ll find a seamstress who will gladly sew you something more traditionally Braavosi.”

“But they told me you were the one to go to for something exotic,” he huffed.

His mustache fluttered comically with his breath.

“And I am, if one’s idea of exotic is something Westerosi. For many Braavosi, it is.”

“Ah,” he said, blushing a little at the mistake he had made. With three more sentences, Alayne explained where he could find Mistress Sarnel’s shop and encouraged him out of the door. There were two men-at-arms waiting politely for their lord, while some street urchins stared at them as if they were particularly juicy bits of sausage.

“Are you sure you are not who I think you are?” Ser Wylis asked one last time as he stepped outside.

Alayne didn’t deign that worthy of an answer other than a disapproving frown. When she sat back down and took up her needlework again, she felt light and heavy at the same time. It was over and done with, yet the whole affair seemed also unfinished to her. Like something that was just beginning.

Why had she lied? House Manderly had been sworn to her family for generations. They were no Lannister men, if there were even any left after all the wars. She could go home. She had the money. Why didn’t she? The question felt like a knot in her chest that just wouldn’t unravel, no matter how much she poked at it. She liked Braavos, to be sure, but did she like it more than Winterfell? Did she love Sera more than her parents?

“Who was that?” Sera asked suddenly, causing Alayne to flinch and prick her finger.

“Nobody,” she answered, putting her finger into her mouth. Better to lick away the blood, lest it ruin the dress. “Some knight from Westeros, looking to buy an exotic dress for his daughter. I had to explain to him that the Braavosi had a different idea of exotic than he did. Hopefully Mistress Sarnel will appreciate the work.”

“A real knight?” Sera asked. “Did he look like they do in the stories?”

Sometimes Sera really was more girlish than Alayne. Or maybe she would still be like this too, if it hadn’t been for King’s Landing.

“He was old enough to be your father and twice as wide,” Alayne joked. “Knights get old and fat, too.”

“Not in the stories they don’t.”

“Well, this one clearly wasn’t in a story.”

“And what a shame,” Sera lamented theatrically. “If he were, we would be, too, and there would be princes and noblemen in our future.”

“Oh, go back and help Amorri,” Alayne replied, shoving her friend a little. Sera shuffled back to the workroom with a giggle, leaving Alayne to her work.

Chapter VI: The Wolf of Braavos

THERE WERE FIVE shadowy figures lurking in front of the shop one morning when Alayne and Sera came home carrying their water. Alayne couldn't properly make them out because it was only dawn, and a foggy one at that. But there shouldn't have been anybody there, let alone five people, and she and Sera shared a look before slowly walking on.

Alayne felt as if someone had punched her in the gut when she recognized the man standing in the middle. He was a little grayer than he had been the last time she'd seen him, and Sansa was sure his face would be more lined when she got a good look at it, but she knew the shape of his nose and the way he held himself. It was her father standing there. There was no mistaking him. Now that she was close enough, she could also see the familiar gray direwolf sigils on the tabards of the guards.

"Sansa!" a voice cried out. An unexpected, familiar voice. Next to her father stood someone she had taken for a young guard, but a closer look revealed that it was just her sister, wearing breeches as usual. She was still small for her age.

"Sansa!" Her father turned toward her, and his gaze pinned Sansa to the place where she stood. With swift steps, he walked over to her and drew her into a familiar embrace. She stood there awkwardly, the buckets of water weighing down her arms.

"Alayne? What's going on?" Sera asked with a tremble in her voice.

"Could you go ahead? I promise I'll explain everything," Sansa told her, and Sera acquiesced reluctantly. She wove past the guards, giving them suspicious glances before disappearing into the shop.

"You won't believe how happy I am to have finally found you," Ned Stark told

her when he finally released her from the hug, hands still on her shoulders. She must have grown a little, since he seemed less tall now than he did when she last saw him. “We thought you dead for so long. How did you end up here, of all places?”

Sansa simply frowned at him. It was so surreal to see him here, in a street in Braavos, with Stark guards at his back. Her two lives were never meant to meet.

“I think it might be best if we continued this conversation inside,” Sansa told him. Even she was surprised by the lack of emotion in her voice. “It’s still a little cold, and my arms can’t carry these buckets forever.”

Without asking, her father took the buckets from her. Sansa didn’t feel grateful to be relieved of the burden. Still, she now had no choice but to lead her father and sister inside, where Sera and Amorri were probably curious as to what was happening. They walked through the parlor and into the tiny kitchen in the back. Her father deposited the buckets by the hearth, where Sera was preparing breakfast.

“Are we going to have guests?” Sera asked.

Sansa simply shrugged wearily, then led her father and sister upstairs to the little sitting room.

“Don’t you have someone who could carry buckets for you?” her father asked as they made their way up the narrow stairs.

“I could hire someone to deliver them, but it costs money that could just as easily be spent elsewhere,” Sansa answered curtly. She was angry, she realized. She didn’t even know quite why. The morning’s events had unsettled her. There was her father, sitting in Sera’s chair, while Arya leaned against the wall by the door.

“Why are you here?” It came out more harshly than she’d intended.

Her father looked surprised by the question, and Arya uncrossed her arms. Sansa noticed that her hand went to a bravo’s sword at her hip. It was strange that she was allowed to dress and act as a boy so openly. She couldn’t believe their mother approved.

“Why? Sansa, you are my daughter. I thought you captive and then dead for so long. I imagined the worst things happening to you.”

“Well, they did happen,” Sansa snapped. “What do you expect of me? To still be the little girl you abandoned in King’s Landing? To be happy you’re finally here to rescue me? From what? Living a perfectly normal life? I’m happy here, finally! I don’t need you to save me any more!”

Sansa took a deep breath. Her father looked as if she had slapped him and Sansa felt a pang of regret, yet she was still so angry. He had disturbed her quiet

life, but that wasn't all. He hadn't been there for her when she needed him the most, and Sansa had never forgiven him for it.

"Sansa, I don't mean to hurt you," her father tried to explain patiently. "But please understand that I couldn't save you. I wish it had been possible, and we tried so hard to get to you, but we just couldn't. Please, let me make it up to you. I'm here now."

"Well, I don't need you. I'm fine here. I have my own shop, an apprentice and friends."

"But you don't have your family."

"What has family ever done for me?" Sansa asked. "You left me!"

Her father put on the mulish look that she was used to seeing on Arya's or Jon's face, but never on his. "I am here now and I am not leaving," he declared.

"But I don't want you here!"

"And yet here I am," her father said firmly. "You are our family. We won't just pretend you are not."

Sansa couldn't take it any more. She threw up her hands and stormed out of the sitting room, down the stairs and past a wide-eyed Sera. Then she ran out of the house and onto the streets, where she stomped around aimlessly until she walked down a dead end alley near the harbor. She sighed and stood still for a moment, then backtracked. When she reached a small bridge she saw Arya was standing on it, looking half like a boy with her breeches and the sword, though it was clear she had grown breasts since the last time Sansa had seen her.

"I don't want to talk," Sansa said.

Arya simply raised an eyebrow. "I think you have to, though." She leaned against a banister.

Sansa snorted. "And you're going to make me?"

Arya shrugged.

"I won't go back."

"Then how about we stay here?" Arya suggested. "Or we could walk through the city. I always wanted to see Braavos. My dancing master came from here, and a man I met during, well, what came after King's Landing. He even gave me a coin if I ever needed or wanted to meet him again. Said it would pay for my passage here."

"A single coin?" Sansa asked disbelievingly as she went over to her sister. She leaned against the gray stone next to her, staring into the murky waters of the

nameless canal they were standing over. “A single coin isn’t enough to pay for a passage across the narrow sea.”

“Jaen said this one would,” Arya told her, showing her an unremarkable iron coin. “That, and some words.”

Sansa felt a chill travel down her spine. “What words?”

“Valar morghulis,” Arya told her, and Sansa was uncomfortably sure that the stories she had heard from her friends were more than just fancy tales.

“Arya, I think you should give back that coin and forget you ever had it in the first place.”

Arya frowned at her and Sansa could see a mulish pout form. “Why? Jaen seemed nice enough.”

Why did her sister always have to be so contrary? “Jaen,’ was probably a Faceless Man, Arya. They’re dangerous assassins who can change their own faces at will. There’s tales of them all over Braavos.”

“Huh,” Arya said, and shrugged. “Sounds about right.” She stared at the coin and flipped it between her fingers. “I suppose I could give it back, though. I don’t think I’ll need it any more.”

Sansa exhaled and felt the tension leave her body. “Their temple is on the Isle of the Gods. I can come with you, if you want.”

Arya nodded, but didn’t reply. Instead, she watched curiously as a gondola passed below them, carrying a couple of crates of fruit, probably to take to one of Braavos’s many markets.

“You know Father would have saved you if he could have, right?” Arya finally asked, putting the coin pack into her pocket.

Sansa sighed and nodded. She did know, really. She always had. But that didn’t make the fact that he hadn’t hurt any less. She’d been so alone, and he was her *father*.

“He and Robb tried really hard, too. They tried to beat the Lannisters, but then they were allied with the Tyrells and Aunt Lysa wouldn’t help. Then fucking Theon betrayed us and ruined Winterfell, and... and then Cersei burned down the Great Sept and Queen Daenerys didn’t say anything about having you... we really thought you were dead, Sansa. Even when we finally figured out that you had left King’s Landing long before that. We just didn’t know where to look.”

Sansa sighed again. “Lord Baelish had smuggled me out of the city, but then there was a storm and pirates and he died.” Sansa hadn’t planned on telling Arya

what had happened, but it spilled out of her: Captain Teryan, Mistress Sarnel, the shop. All of it. “And then, I just... I just stayed.”

Arya nodded. “Probably a good idea. It was pretty bad at the end. If it hadn’t been for Jon, we’d all be dead.”

“Jon?”

“Aye, he killed the Night King.”

“Wait, I thought the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch killed the Night King, and that’s why the queen made him king?”

Arya’s face darkened unexpectedly when Sansa said that. “Well, Jon was the Lord Commander. But that’s not why she married him. She did it to avoid a second Dance of Dragons. You see, father lied to all of us. Jon’s not really our brother. He’s Aunt Lyanna’s son and not a bastard at all. So Daenerys had to marry him to keep her throne, especially after he saved the world and one of her dragons allowed him to ride it.”

Sansa tried to digest that piece of information and it was harder than she anticipated. Jon had been her almost-brother all her life. And while it made sense that her father would lie to save his sister’s son and never cheat on her mother, Jon was still just Jon to her. A sullen boy who sparred with Robb in the yard, not a warrior and king of legend. And her father didn’t lie, or so the little girl she once was used to believe.

“And Jon just agreed?”

Arya snorted. “Believe it or not, he likes the queen. Father isn’t all that happy about it, though. I think she reminds him of her father, only with a fire-breathing dragon the size of Balerion instead of jars of wildfire.”

“And Jon is king?”

Arya nodded. “He wanted to come too. But Father talked him out of it. He said the Braavosi probably wouldn’t take too kindly to a giant dragon suddenly appearing above their city.”

Sansa could just imagine it. Half the population would flock to the Isle of the Gods and pray, while the other half would jump into the dirty canals to avoid being burned to death. Imagining Jon on the back of such a monster was strange enough, but it was even stranger to imagine the two of them flying past the Titan.

“And I was always so horrible to him,” she mused.

“Yes, you were.”

“I wanted to apologize too, you know, before all this. I made so many mistakes when I was young.”

Arya nodded. “I did too. I shouldn’t have hated you so much, no matter how annoying you were. You were my sister, part of the pack.”

“No. I deserved it. I deserved it for lying at the ruby ford, and I deserved it for telling Cersei that Father wanted to send us away. I got so many people killed. Just because I couldn’t see Joffrey for the monster he was.” Thinking of him again made Sansa’s back hurt as if the beatings had happened yesterday, instead of being a distant memory. “You should all hate me for what I did.”

Arya snorted. “You were stupid, that’s all. A stupid little girl. But you didn’t screw up nearly as badly as Robb, who knew full well what he was doing when he married Talisa. We still love him. Personally, I think he did the right thing. Can’t imagine what it would be like if he had married the Frey girl, except we’d be drowning in her relations in Winterfell.” Arya shuddered at the thought. “He would have come too, if she wasn’t pregnant again. Oh, you’re an aunt, did you know that? His name is Torrhen and he’s the baby of the family right now. Rickon was so happy that he was no longer the youngest when he was born.”

“Rickon?!” Sansa cried. “But I thought he was dead! That’s what they told me when—”

“We thought so too, but Theon just pretended to kill them. Rickon is at home in Winterfell and he is more or less the same as he always was, only older. And Bran, well, Bran’s not okay, but maybe he will be one day. Something strange happened to him north of the Wall that I don’t really understand.”

Bran and Rickon lived, Sansa thought. She could barely believe it. She longed to see them so. Her little brothers lived, she was an aunt, and her bastard brother now ruled the Seven Kingdoms. So much had changed.

Yet she had changed so much, too. What would it be like to be back home, when nothing was the same any more?

“Are you ready to come back? To the shop, I mean.”

Sansa shot her a look, then nodded with a sigh.

“You proved me wrong there, you know. I always thought that sewing was useless. But you managed to make more of it than just a way to pass the time for noble ladies.”

“Well,” Sansa told her, “unlike you, I am actually good at it, so I wouldn’t call it useless.”

Arya laughed out loud. “Keep your needles, sister, I have my own,” she said, patting the sword at her hip.

Together, they walked back, chatting companionably. Sansa told Arya about the sights of the city that they were passing, while Arya told her some of the adventures she had missed out on back in Westeros. She told her about the size of the royal dragons, the end of the White Walkers, the Wall and the Watch, and about the family that Sansa hadn’t seen in forever. How mother started getting her first gray hairs, how Rickon seemed to be half wildling, and how Nymeria had a litter of direwolf pups. Arya’s tales were notable also for who they didn’t contain; there were no stories about Mikken, Old Nan or Hodor. Arya didn’t complain about Maester Luwin or her mother trying to force her to pray in the sept. Winterfell might still stand, but it was no longer the same.

The Stark guards still lingered in front of her shop, earning some curious glances. And inside, Amorri and Sera had finished their chores, but their confused faces told Sansa that they had not gone upstairs to talk to her father.

“I’ll stay down here, if you don’t mind,” Arya told her. “Just... try to be nice.” She turned to Sera, who was eating from a large plate with a variety of small dishes on it. “Can I have some of that?” Sera nodded dazedly.

With a deep breath, Sansa hitched up her skirts and walked back up the stairs. Her father still sat in Sera’s chair, his head in his hands. He looked up and sighed when she entered. An awkward silence lay between them.

“I don’t fault you for blaming me,” her father finally said. “I blame myself, for leaving you behind, for not saving you. You can’t possibly blame me half as much as I blame myself.”

Sansa looked at her father, who seemed still the same as she remembered, yet also different. There was a new scar on his forehead.

“I know,” Sansa said. “I know it wasn’t your fault. But I just feel angry. It was so terrible, and building a life here was hard. I didn’t think I could do it, and now you’re destroying all that. I know you don’t mean to,” Sansa quickly added, sensing he was about to disagree with her, “but you’re doing it all the same. I can no longer be Alayne Stone. And that hurts.”

“I’m sorry for that,” her father replied, even though he obviously didn’t understand, “and I’m very proud of what you achieved here. But you’re a Stark. Don’t you want to go home?”

“I’m not sure home still exists,” she sighed, and putting a name to that fear

made her feel as if a weight fell off her shoulders.

“Oh, Sansa,” her father said, looking her straight in the eye. “Home is different, but homes change all the time. Winterfell still stands. Your mother is there, and Robb and Rickon. We all miss you terribly.”

“I don’t want to be married off again. I’m old enough now to live on my own,” she protested, clenching her fists. She had been so eager to be married and to leave home, once upon a time.

“I promise you we will not marry you to anyone against your will. Not after what you had to go through with the Imp.” The scowl on her father’s face was thunderous.

“He wasn’t that bad. He never touched me.”

“He never should have been your husband. He’s not good enough for you, even if he is the Hand of the Queen now.”

“Tyrion is still alive?” Sansa asked, although she should have suspected. He had always been a resourceful man, or he wouldn’t have survived as long as he had when she’d met him.

Her father nodded. “And we’ll get an annulment the moment we’re back in Westeros,” he assured her. “I’ll seek your approval for any match, I promise. There aren’t that many young men left to betroth you to, anyway.”

The wars, Sansa thought. So many young men had died, fighting for a throne that was worthless, as far as she was concerned. How odd to think that it was her brother who ended up sitting on it, even though he had never competed for it.

“I don’t mind,” Sansa told him. “I don’t think I’m ready to be married.”

Ned Stark sighed, and a small, fond smile stole across his face. “You and your sister are more alike than you think. Both so much like your aunt, in different ways.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she replied dryly.

“You should. Lyanna was quite something to behold.”

Sansa finally sat down in her chair and looked around the modest sitting room of her home. There were some little nick-knacks and two doilies—all Sera’s—but otherwise there were few personal touches to remind people that she lived here too. Maybe she had always known that it was temporary and that’s why she didn’t make herself at home like her friend did.

“I’ll need to arrange everything,” Sansa mused aloud, as much for her own benefit as her father’s. There were the accounts at the bank, the lease on the shop,

the shop itself...

“Take as much time as you need. We’re staying on the ship and can leave as soon as you’re ready, but Arya will be glad to have some more time in Braavos, and I can look into taking out a loan to help with the rebuilding.”

Sansa nodded and wondered how she would explain all of this to Sera.

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“So, you’re a noble lady,” Sera said, wringing her hands awkwardly in her apron. They were in the kitchen. Normally, they would be at work already, but it was not a normal day. “I suppose I should have known. You’ve always had perfect manners.”

Sansa snorted. “You’ve just met my sister. Do you really think being a lady gives you manners?”

Sera made a face. “Well...”

“No.”

Sera broke out into a nervous giggle and finally looked at her again, even though she averted her eyes again immediately. “I guess I have to call you ‘my lady’ now.”

Sansa had to scoff at that. “You’re my friend, Sera. You’ve seen me crawl out of bed in the morning and you’ve shared my bed on the coldest nights. Call me whatever you want to.”

Sera bit her lip. “Even Alayne?”

“Of course, why not?” She had been Alayne long enough, after all. It made sense that people would forget that it wasn’t really her name at times. She’d almost forgotten herself.

“But that’s not your name. It’s Sansa Stark. Your father is a high lord and he was Hand of the King and... oh gods, that play we watched ages ago, about the evil dwarf and the Lannister king and all that, there was this girl with the red hair and *that was you!*”

Sansa felt blood rush to her cheeks. She was mortified. There had been a rape scene, she recalled, and then that embarrassing death scene in the sewers beneath the city. “Well, it wasn’t a very accurate story.”

“But you really met the king—kings—and you were betrothed to one, and... I really don’t think I can not call you ‘my lady’ now,” Sera finished lamely.

“As long as I am still your friend.”

Sera shot her a look. “Of course you are—my lady.”

For a few moments, they sat together in silence as Sansa finally broke her fast. It was strange and quiet, with her father and sister gone, though they had left behind one of the guards, a man called Edric. Her mind was full of the tasks and work that she needed to wrap up. And then there were all the people she needed to say goodbye to.

“When are you going to leave?” Sera asked. When, not if.

“As soon as I’ve put my affairs in order. And I promised to go to the Isle of the Gods with my sister.”

Sera remained silent for a beat. “What’s going to happen to the shop?” She sounded strangely subdued and Sansa couldn’t fault her for it. It was her life, after all, even if it had never quite been Sansa’s.

“I thought, as a thank you for all that you’ve done for me, I could leave everything to you. My account at the bank, our shared funds, all that. I think you’ve earned it.”

Sera turned to fully face her and stared at her with huge eyes. “You would do that for me?” she whispered.

“Of course,” Sansa assured her with a smile. “You deserve it.”

But instead of smiling, as Sansa expected, Sera cast her eyes down gloomily. “But I can’t do this without you. I’m not as good as you.”

“That’s nonsense. You’re a good seamstress. All you’re lacking, really, is a little more faith in your own talents.”

“If you say so,” Sera grumbled. “I won’t ever see you again, will I?”

Sansa shrugged. Probably not, she had to admit to herself. It was sad, but that was the truth. “Who knows. Maybe I’ll visit. Or maybe you will visit me. But I will write to you. And never forget that you will always have a friend across the narrow sea.”

Epilog: Home

A COOL WIND blew around them and disheveled Sansa's hair as they rode the last stretch of road towards Winterfell. She had ample time to stare at the familiar gray stone and wooden palisades. The wood was new, as Winterfell had been put to the torch, but the stones still stood, even if they were a little blackened in places. The smallfolk assembled to watch them pass as they rode through the town, and every now and again her father stopped to speak to some of the craftsmen. On one such occasion, a little girl approached her horse with a wreath made of wildflowers.

"Thank you," Sansa told her when she handed it to her. "A finer crown I could never wish for."

The girl blushed at the compliment before disappearing in her mother's embrace. Then a roar shook the earth, a bit like the Titan's, only this one indisputably came from a living creature. A shadow rose behind the walls of Winterfell from where the broken tower used to be. The beast was huge, with dark green scales that had golden highlights, but it took to the skies like the lightest bird.

"That's Rhaegal," Arya said from her own horse. "Which means Jon is here."

And indeed he was. Sansa saw him when she rode through the gates. They had all arranged themselves in front of the great hall to welcome back their lord. Jon stood in the middle, a modest circlet in his dark curls, next to Robb, who now sported a full beard. On Jon's other side stood Sansa's mother—an unusual sight, seeing them side-by-side, to say the least—followed by little Rickon, who wasn't so little any more. And next to Robb stood the woman who must be his wife. She carried an infant in her arms and a shy toddler clung to her skirts.

“My lord,” Robb said with a bow. “Winterfell is yours.”

Beside her, her father nodded with a hint of a smile on his solemn face. He couldn't take his eyes off the grandchild he hadn't met yet. Then everything became less formal. Sansa had scarcely time to dismount before her mother hugged her fiercely, as if she were afraid that Sansa would disappear again if she let go. They were the same height now, she noticed. Over her mother's shoulder, she exchanged a warm glance with her brothers, who all stared at her with love in their eyes.

“Oh, my little girl,” Sansa heard her mother mumble into her hair. “You're finally home.”

“Yes,” Sansa said. “I'm home.”

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