The Heirs to the Glimmering World

by adversarya

Summary

In which circumstances change, but people don't.

(Or, the one where the Tyrells pull a Lannister and change sides during the Rebellion and it changes absolutely everything.)

Notes

This fic is inspired by Machiavelli’s The Prince (and yes, I realize just how ludicrous that sounds), particularly the following quote:

“Messer Annible Bentivogli…was murdered by the Canneschi family who conspired against him; he left no heir except Messer Giovanni, then only a baby. As soon as this murder occurred, the people rose up and killed all the Canneschi. This came about because of the good will that the house of the Bentivogli enjoyed in those days; this good will was so great that with Annibale dead, and there being no one of that family left in that city who could rule Bologna, the Bolognese people, having heard that in Florence there was one of the Bentivogli blood who was believed until that time to be the son of a blacksmith, went to Florence to find him, and they gave him control of that city; it was ruled by him until Messer Giovanni became of age to rule.” (Machiavelli 62)

Now, If your mind works anything like mine did in a Starbucks at 7:30 AM on a Wednesday, you might have an idea where this is going. If not (and even if you do), I have graciously decided to outline the backstory below (read: I am too lazy to write all this out...
properly because, dude, that would be like 100 pages, minimum):

Everything before Robert’s Rebellion occurs exactly according to canon. Robert’s Rebellion goes just as it does in canon, with one exception: the Tyrells switch sides (like the Lannisters) halfway through the war.

Most events directly after the Rebellion follow book canon. Willem Darry takes the last Targaeryens to the Free Cities, Cersei marries Robert and becomes queen, Catelyn gives birth to Robb, Eddard comes home with Jon, etc., etc. I tried to stick to book canon timeline with ages and dates of major events and such, but I am sure I have made errors nonetheless.

I’ve rewritten and simplified many back stories (such as Cersei’s) because they are not pertinent to this story, nor, more importantly, am I George R. R. Martin.

On that note, I do not claim to have even a fraction of the writing talent or general genius the man possesses, so it’s dumbed-down story lines for me. He paints great masterpieces and I’m just trying to make a pretty picture with crayons, okay? Okay.

Let’s begin.
Tywin Lannister hated his children. Of course he loved them—they were his blood and his legacy—but he despised them all the same. Of the three, there was only one who had even half a brain, and it was the Imp. If that was not tragic, Tywin did not know what was. Still, he loved his children, so when fourteen-year-old Cersei told him that she wanted to be a queen, Tywin made her the Queen, because they were Lannisters and Lannisters always got what they wanted.

But the mighty Tywin Lannister forgot something very important, something that he did not recall until a good four years later, at the wedding feast of the new king and queen, a stag and a lion where once there were only dragons. When Tywin had informed his daughter of her betrothal two moons before, she had laughed with delight and thanked him a thousand times over, insisting that she was going to be the happiest woman in all Westeros.

And, for a day, she was. Then came the night, and feasting and dancing and drinking, and Tywin watched as realization dawned on his only daughter’s face as she in turn watched her new husband, her king, stare down into his goblet of Dornish wine with all the adoration that she so craved.

It was only then that, Tywin, too, realized; realized that desires could be poisonous and satisfying them fatal. But by then it was too late. He had given a lioness a crown, and in doing so he had dug a grave for the whole pride.

Such is fate, sometimes.

Cleome had a mother once, but she did not remember her. She had a father once, too, and she did remember him, though she wished she didn’t.

Now Cleome had a babe of her own. He was growing fast, though, and every day he looked less like a babe and more like a boy.

One day he would be grown (she had seen him in a dream, a man grown, tall and strong and beautiful, and it warmed her heart and broke it at the same time) and he would not remember her. Nor had he a father to remember, not in any way that really counted.

No, her beautiful boy would not remember her. He would not love her, never know her face, not if everything worked out for the best. But she would love him for always, and could only hope that someday he might come to forgive her, that someday he might come to understand. Even if he did not, it would be all right, because in order to hate her he had to be alive, and that was all that really mattered.

She saw a few gold cloaks coming down the street and instinctively pulled her own cloak tighter,
her hood falling to her brow to shadow her face.

She needed to save her son, her precious Gendry.

Being a whore had few advantages, but they were there nonetheless, and the greatest of them was knowledge. It would probably more accurate to say gossip, but the rumors first heard in the brothels tended to have an alarming amount of truth to them. So when she first heard whispers of Robert’s bastards being targeted, meeting “mysterious” ends, since the birth of the prince, Joffrey, she listened. Listened, and heard of fish market boys drowning and stablehands trampled and killed by their horses and dozens of other suspicious tales, connected only by black hair and blue eyes and bastard names and, nearby, whispers of red and gold and lions (though no one dared mention the name “Lannister”).

Cleome was a whore, but she was no fool. She knew her son wasn’t safe—he had too much of the Baratheon look to be mistaken as anything else, especially by those who knew what they were looking for. She knew she had to do something. But what? That was the question. Leaving King’s Landing was not an option. She had no money, no place to go, and if she left she would be looking over her shoulder for more than just Lannister men. Cleome had worked for Bill the Bloodhound since she was twelve, alone in the world and willing to do anything for a bed to sleep in and a meal to eat. Bill got his name from his infamous practice of hunting down and killing women who left his service without his permission, as well as his uncanny talent for finding them. Unfortunately, in exchange for permission to leave Bill demanded five gold dragons, gold dragons that Cleome did not have. So leaving was simply not a possibility.

Cleome sighed and quickened her pace. She had no destination, but moving made her feel a little better, made her feel as if she had some semblance of control even though she knew better.

A hand reached out from the shadows and grabbed Cleome by the forearm, yanking her into a narrow alleyway before she even realized what was happening. Cleome cursed herself for being so stupid. She had been so focused on the gold cloaks that it dulled her awareness of the rest of her surroundings. She could hope that her mistake would not cost her her life.

She could not see her attacker, hooded and cloaked and enshrouded in shadow, but he was strong, and he pulled her further into alley. She went to scream and he shoved a rag in her mouth. The cloth was soaked in something Cleome could not identify, something sweet and sharp and cloying.

“I am sorry about all this,” her attacker apologized, his voice oddly pitched and lilting. “But you can never be too careful.”

Cleome felt her limbs growing heavy and her eyes closing of their own accord. Her mind clouded and her thoughts dissolved one by one until there were none left at all.

When Cleome came to, her first thought was of the throbbing ache in her head. The second was of Gendry. She had left him with Loren, a fellow mother working for Bill, and her four-year-old daughter Lyra, but she couldn’t leave him there forever.

The third thought she had was of herself. Where was she? The room she was in was richly furnished, well-lit, and could easily be anywhere in the Seven Kingdoms or possibly beyond. There were no windows, no sigils, nothing that even suggested where she may be. And before her, one of the strangest men she had ever seen sat in a gilded chair, eyeing her curiously. He was large and
impeccably clean. His bald head shined like polished stone and his clothes, though sparsely ornamented, were clearly of the finest make.

“Where am I?” she asked, if only to break the silence.

“Nowhere of importance,” the bald man told her. Cleome was shocked to realize the man before her was the very same who had attacked her in Flea Bottom.

“Who are you?” she asked, though she doubted the answer, if any, would be any more informative than the first one he gave.

“No one of importance,” he answered. “A spider, some call me.”

Varys. She had had enough highborn clients to know the name. The eunuch wrapped in mystery that, supposedly, knew every secret from Winterfell to Sunspear.

“So you have heard of me,” Lord Varys commented.

“Why am I here?”

“No, I am no one of importance. Neither are you,” Lord Varys said, ignoring her question entirely. “But your son… Gendry, is it not? Well, he’s another matter.”

Cleome could feel her heartbeat in her throat.

“How do you know of my son?” she demanded.

“Knowing things is a… specialty… of mine, Miss… Cleome, is it not? A very pretty name.” Lord Varys smiled when he spoke and his eyes twinkled, as if everything he said was a joke only he understood.*

“Why am I here?” Cleome asked again. She knew enough of lords to know their games, their riddles and their politics and their lies. But she did not know enough to know the rules, nor was she in any mood for games.

“You want to save your son. I know a man who can help. I’m just playing… matchmaker?”

Cleome heard a knocking sound behind her. She turned her neck to see a large wooden door, and the movement made her head spin.

“Lord Arryn has arrived, my lord,” a muffled voice announced from from the other side of the door.

“Send him in,” Lord Varys replied. Cleome could hardly believe her ears. The master of whispers and now the hand of the king?

Cleome had seen Lord Jon Arryn a handful of times in her life, but always from a great distance. When he stood before her, she found herself surprised by how much older he looked up close. His face was well-lined with wrinkles and his grey hair was thinning. He did not, however, look frail in the slightest. He had a strong and unyielding air about him that radiated a permanence of sorts, and Cleome could not say she had ever seen the like.

“I am sorry about all this, my dear,” Lord Arryn apologized, sitting where Varys had been not a moment before. Cleome’s eyes darted around the room, but there was no sign of the eunuch. It was as if he had simply vanished. A chill went down her spine.
“Lord Varys can be quite disconcerting, can he not? Part of what makes him so good at his job, I think,” Lord Arryn said, and against her better judgement Cleome slowly found herself relaxing in his company.

“Yes, milord,” she agreed timidly, unsure of what else to say.

“But as fascinating as Varys may be, he is not my concern, nor would I imagine is he yours,” Lord Arryn paused, contemplating his next words. “I am aware this might be a delicate subject, my dear, but are you certain your son is Robert’s?”

Cleome fought to hide the wave of irritation that surged through her.

“Entirely, milord. Gendry is his image. Hair like a crow’s wing, eyes like the sea. He’s big for his age, has been since the first, and he’s strong, too. Bent a spoon the other day,” Cleome finished. She doubted she would be able to withhold from making a scene if it turned out that he brought her all this way just to wave her aside.

“Pardons, my dear. I have offended you, that was not my intent. This situation is growing uglier by the day and I’m afraid it has taken its toll on my courtesies.”

Cleome nodded curtly.

“From what Varys has told me, you are aware of the current situation regarding the king’s bastards.”

She nodded again.

“I do not wish to cause any trouble, milord. I only want to save my son,” she swore to him, not caring if her desperation seeped into her voice.

“I know, my dear. I only want to help you,” Lord Arryn said.

“Then help me. Help him,” Cleome demanded. She realized she was raising her voice at a lord, but she did not feel apologetic in the slightest. Not when it came to her son.

“You must take him north, to Winterfell. Bring your son to Lord Eddard Stark and give him this letter,” Lord Arryn pulled an envelope from his doublet, the flap sealed with stamped wax. “Lord Stark will know what to do. Your son will be safe there, which is more than I can say for anywhere else in all seven kingdoms.”

“I am afraid, my lord, that leaving King’s Landing is not an option for me,” Cleome admitted.

“I am aware of your situation.” Lord Arryn smiled sadly. “But I was not speaking of you. Believe me when I say I would buy your freedom if I could, but I cannot. Such an act would draw too much attention, could be too easily traced. There are spies everywhere, and they would put the pieces together. Unfortunately, your son will only be safe once he passes through the gates of Winterfell, and not a moment before. I would not free you from a hound to throw you into the lion’s den.”

Cleome understood, though she did not like it. She had known for a while that saving her son would most likely mean being separated from him, but to hear it so plainly from another made the entire situation painfully real.

“Then who will take him?” she asked quietly.

“That is the problem,” Lord Arryn sighed. The matter was one he had contemplated long and hard...
without much success. “My men cannot take him for the very same reason you cannot take him. I was hesitant to bring you here—I did not want to give you false hope. But if there was even the smallest chance… you don’t know anyone who can take him?”

Cleome could feel her heart sinking until, suddenly, a thought suddenly popped into her head and, for the first time since she realized Gendry was in danger, she felt an inkling of genuine hope. “Actually, I just might.”

Chapter End Notes

*this actually IS a joke, in a very geeky and not terribly funny way. Cleome (one of my favorite flowers) is also known as a spider flower, which is why Varys compliments her on her name.

The title of this fic comes from the song "The Geese of Beverly Road" by The National, which in turn comes from the title of a novel by Cynthia Ozick. I am entirely unfamiliar with the novel, however, so don't expect this fic to relate to it in any way whatsoever, besides the title.

The title of this chapter is borrowed from the song "Secret Meeting" by The National.

Yes, you are seeing a pattern here. Expect it to continue.
Cleome says goodbye to Gendry, and Gendry says goodbye to King's Landing, even though he's too young to truly understand what that means.

Leesa, like most girls working for Bill the Bloodhound, had come to work for him as a final act of desperation. Unlike most of Bill’s girls, though, the desperation was not on her own behalf, but her younger sister, Ada’s. Leesa made every sacrifice she could so that her sister might have a chance for something better—and, in the end, it worked. Ada found employment and, in time, great success at one of the few respectable bakehouses in Flea Bottom (quite possibly the only respectable bakehouse in Flea Bottom). And it was in that bakehouse that Ada met a sailor who fell in love with her applecakes and, in time, the hands that made them.

So the sailor saved his pennies until his pennies became stags and his stags became dragons, and, eventually, he had enough to transition into making a respectable living on land. Only then, with coins in his pocket and plans in his head, did he propose to the sweet young baker’s aide who made the best applecakes in Westeros and all the Free Cities (he was a sailor, he would know).

He told Ada of his plans to open an inn somewhere along the king’s road, where there there were always weary travelers desperate for a hot meal and a soft bed—but he would need a partner, someone who knew their way around a kitchen, and that he would love it if she could be that person. Ada happily agreed (she’d had her eyes on him, too) but asked for one more thing: her sister.

Ada told her sailor of her sister’s sacrifices, of the horrors Leesa submitted to willingly so that she could live in relative comfort, and he found himself immensely grateful to this woman he had never met. Still, Bill’s blessing would put quite a dent in his pocket. Ada’s sailor promised to pay for her sister’s freedom—it was the least he could do, really—but that they needed to set up their inn first. The last thing they needed was to travel a good ways up the king’s road to find themselves short of coin with nowhere to go.

Ada was disappointed, but knew her sailor’s point was entirely valid. Besides, he gave her his word, and Ada had no reason to doubt his word. So Ada agreed on the condition that they made haste: the sooner they were wed and on the road, the sooner Ada could return for her sister.

That had been three moons ago.

Now Leesa stood with a letter written in Ada’s hand, saying that she was on her way back to
King’s Landing to collect her and to expect her within the fortnight. Leesa could not hold back her smile.

It had been a little more than a week since Leesa had received her sister’s letter, and she was full of anticipation. She had complete and total faith in her sister, but that did not mean she was not somewhat anxious. How could she be anything but, when something she had dreamed of for so long but never expected to actually have was so close she could taste it?

Leesa sat in a rickety chair before the fire in her small home, imagining all the things she would do once her life was once again her own. Her abode was entirely bare, with all her meager belongings packed and ready in two sacks by the door. Her sister might not yet arrive for a few days more, but there was no way to be certain. All Leesa knew was that when her sister did arrive, she would be ready: she had no desire to spend a second longer in this godsforsaken cesspool than was absolutely necessary. So when she heard a knock at her door, Leesa all but ran to answer it.

To say she was disappointed Ada wasn’t standing on her doorstep would be an understatement. Surprisingly, though, her disappointment was overshadowed by surprise: Cleome was just about the last person in all of Westeros she expected to see waiting at her door. The surprise quickly faded, as surprise is wont to do, and the true extent of Leesa’s disappointment washed over her, strong and bitter. She reminded herself that Cleome was hardly at fault and forced a smile. She realized she probably should give her guest some sort of welcome, but for the life of her Leesa could not think of a suitable greeting. Thankfully Cleome did not wait for her to speak.

“I need a favor.”

If Leesa was surprised before, now she was truly stunned. Cleome was not the type to ask for favors. Leesa had started working for Bill nearly ten years ago, and when she got there Cleome was already well settled in—how long she had been there, Leesa did not know. She never cared to ask. She had been fourteen, and she figured Cleome no more than a few years older than herself, but even that meant very little. Bill had no scruples about bringing young girls into his service, even unflowered ones. As Bill loved to say, there’s nothing that can’t be bought, and there’s nothing that I won’t sell.

Then again, the reason that Leesa had never heard Cleome ask anything of anyone was at least partly because Cleome barely spoke. No, Cleome was the type that simply did—a tragically rare breed—without being told or asked or even thanked, most of the time. She watched out for the younger girls (Leesa herself had been one of those young girls, once upon a time), pushing them towards the kinder, gentler clients and protecting them as much as she could from the truly despicable men who visited Bill’s establishment—an unfortunately large number. Leesa knew she herself could not claim to be even half so altruistic. Still, though, she was not cruel.

“Come in,” Leesa finally said, standing aside so that Cleome could pass. Her visitor gave her a nervous smile, one hand fiddling with a wheat-colored lock of hair.

“Young sister will be here soon?” Cleome asked.

“Yes. On the morrow or overmorrow, at the latest,” Leesa answered. Though she hadn’t gone and shouted her sister’s plans from the rooftops, but information had a way of traveling in Flea Bottom that was quite remarkable and entirely irritating.
“How far north is the inn?” Cleome asked.

There truly were no secrets in Flea Bottom, Leesa mused. Cleome wasn’t even much of a gossip, particularly compared to some. Leesa hated to think just how much those who put their time and effort into gossiping must know about everything and everyone. More than any Master of Whisperers, that was certain.

“North of the Neck, but only just. Land is cheaper up there. Why?”

To the surprise of both, Cleome burst into sobs. Unsure of what to do, Leesa put a hand on Cleome’s arm in an attempt to comfort her, but it was awkward and ineffective, so Leesa pulled back.

“My boy, Gendry, needs to go North,” Cleome admitted, her words strained and broken by gasping breaths.

“What?” Leesa asked, utterly confused.

“Take him, I beg you. He needs to go further than you—to Winterfell and Lord Eddard Stark—and I can’t take him there myself,” Cleome pleaded.

“To Winterfell? Why? What’s in Winterfell?” From the little that Leesa had heard of the place, it sounded like there was little up there but ice and snow and wolves. Flea Bottom was no haven, that was certain, but the frozen North hardly seemed like much of an improvement.

“I ask a great deal of you, I know, but I cannot answer the questions you ask.” Cleome placed a threadbare coin purse in Leesa’s hand and curled Leesa’s fingers around it. “This is all I have. If I had more, I would give it to you, but I don’t.”

“I’ll do it,” Leesa said, surprising herself, “but I won’t take your money.”

Cleome appeared equally surprised, and mildly confused. Leesa decided to elaborate.

“The gods have been exceptionally kind to me as of late—kinder than I ever dared to dream. The least I can do is pass that kindness along,” Leesa said. She returned the coin purse to Cleome, who reluctantly returned it to the pocket of her dress.

“Thank you,” said Cleome, looking as if the weight of the seven kingdoms had been lifted from her shoulders. Leesa merely nodded.

“One thing, however—when I get to Winterfell, what do I say to Lord Stark? I don’t think I’ve ever spoken to a high lord before.”

“Just tell him my son’s name is Gendry, that you’ve been sent on behalf of Jon Arryn, and give him this,” Cleome informed her, pulling the letter from a pocket in her dress and showing it to Leesa, bound with ribbon and sealed with wax, “he’ll know what to do from there.”

Leesa nodded.

“I’ll give it to you when you come for Gendry,” Cleome said, returning the letter to her pocket, “and whatever happens, don’t break the seal. Lord Stark must get this letter, and he must get it whole and unsullied. Gendry’s life depends on it.”

Leesa gulped nervously, but nodded nonetheless. She had nothing to say. The way their conversation had gone thus far, Leesa knew better than to waste her breath inquiring after the
letter’s contents.

“When you and your sister are ready to leave, knock on my door. I’ll have Gendry ready and waiting.”

Leesa nodded once more and wondered to herself when exactly someone had cut off her tongue.

“He’s a good boy, a quiet boy. Shouldn’t cause any trouble—he never has before,” Cleome added.

“Don’t worry, I’m good with children,” said Leesa, finally finding her tongue and using it to lie between her teeth. Or possibly not. Truth was, she had never really spent a prolonged amount of time in the company of a child. But Leese knew Ada was good with children—she looked after a friend’s brood of three some evenings. Regardless, she had already given her word, and a promise was a promise. She and Ada would work it out, somehow. They always did.

“I am forever in your debt,” Cleome told her, wrapping her shawl about her shoulders and readying to leave. It was only then, no longer blinded by surprise, that Leesa noticed just how haggard the other woman looked. Her eyes were ringed with darkened, almost bruise-like, flesh from lack of proper rest, and there were shadows in the hollows of her cheeks that had not been there before. In that moment, Leesa knew with absolute certainty that she was making the right decision.

“There is no need,” Leesa insisted, “I am not doing this in hopes of some future favor. I am doing it because I am able, and I know it is the right thing.”

Cleome smiled, and her smile was strained but true.

“You have my gratitude for always,” she revised, “is that better?”

“I can live with that,” answered Leesa, with a smile of her own.

And so it went. Ada arrived two days after Cleome’s unexpected visit, looking happier than Leesa had ever seen. Leesa immediately told Ada everything regarding her talk with Cleome and their arrangement. Ada, being the gentle-hearted person that she was, fretted only that they could not do more for the young mother and her son.

Leesa insisted on going to deal with Bill by herself, and Ada respected her wishes, though her agreement was reluctant. Instead, she spent the time securing Leesa’s meager belongings to the two horses she had brought with her. Leesa was in mild awe of the horses, but nervous as well. She had never ridden one. But horses meant traveling faster, and traveling faster meant getting out of King’s Landing faster, and getting out of King’s Landing faster was something Leesa could hardly protest.

Handing over her sister’s coins to Bill the Bloodhound was at once a great and terrible experience. Terrible, because she despised the idea of giving that reprehensible excuse of a man anything, not to mention five gold dragons, and great, because she knew that afterwards she would never have to give him anything ever again, or even look upon his ugly face. Leesa barely restrained the urge to spit at his shoes when she saw the covetous look in his eyes as he ogled the coins she had put in his palm. Somehow she managed, and instead simply turned and left, never looking back. She was free.

That done, Leesa knocked on Cleome’s door. Just as Cleome had promised, young Gendry was
ready, his few belongings packed into a drawstring bag. Leesa had seen the boy on a handful of prior occasions, but seeing him up close she was amazed at how little he looked like his mother. His hair was inky black while his mother’s was blonde, his eyes blue while hers were green. Her skin was pale and freckled while his was considerably darker, having an almost tanned appearance. Leesa did not know the boy’s father—Cleome never spoke of him, after all—but she would guess Gendry was his image.

Cleome thanked her repeatedly before reluctantly handing over her son. Leesa could see that the boy was large for having only seen two name days, but she was still surprised by his weight. Were children made of flesh or lead? she wondered, suddenly a great deal more thankful for the horses Ada brought.

Cleome pulled a capped wooden tube out of Gendry’s pack and showed it to Leesa.

“I put Lord Arryn’s letter in here for safekeeping,” she said before returning the tube to the pack and pulling the drawstring closed, knotting it twice just to be safe. “Don’t forget.”

“I won’t,” Leesa assured, taking the pack and slinging it over her own shoulder. Little Gendry reached out for his mother, not understanding the situation. Cleome grabbed her son’s hand and kissed the back of it, her eyes shining with tears.

“You must be brave, my beautiful boy,” she told him, and Gendry gazed at his mother with a level of understanding that shocked Leesa. “Maybe we shall meet again someday.” Leesa got the distinct impression that Cleome’s words were an attempt to comfort herself more than anything. She wished she could say something comforting, but such things had never been Leesa’s forte.

Cleome turned to Leesa.

“Take care of him?” she asked, and something in the way she said it broke Leesa’s heart. All Leesa could do was nod and promise she would while Cleome said her final goodbyes to her son. She then turned back to Leesa and thanked her once again. Leesa tried to be as reassuring as she could, but there was little she could do.

Then they were off, Leesa and the quiet young boy in her arms. The whole thing had lasted no more than five minutes, and Leesa could not help but think that something so significant should have been… bigger, somehow. But it wasn’t. It was quick and quiet and, yes, somewhat strange, yet still Leesa reflected that the whole situation did not feel nearly half so strange or so frightening as she imagined it would be.

Chapter End Notes

I realize the story is OC-heavy at this point. This will come to an end very soon. This chapter was filler, a necessary evil, and I can only hope it wasn't too dreadful. But Gendry needs to get to Winterfell and a few other snowballs need to be set in motion before the fun can happen, so bare with me. We’ll likely be traveling all over Westeros in the next few chapters (and maybe beyond, I haven't decided yet), and then we'll be in Winterfell for a while, and then... well, I guess you'll just have to wait and see, won't you? ;)

Chapter title comes from The National's "Baby We'll Be Fine".
The trip north on the king’s road was blessedly uneventful. For the first few days Gendry rode with Ada, as Leesa struggled to adjust to riding a horse. But she grew comfortable soon enough, and from thereon out Gendry came to ride with her. Ada insisted that she did not mind having the boy ride with her in the slightest, and though Leesa knew it to be the truth, Cleome had entrusted this task to her, and she felt she owed it to the woman to look after Gendry herself.

Looking after the boy proved surprisingly easy. Though Leesa had little experience with children, Ada informed her that Gendry was a most unusual case. He took the hours and hours of monotonous riding with little complaint, entertaining himself quietly by observing the various farms and flora they passed along the way. Cleome had certainly not been lying when she said her son was a quiet boy—they had been traveling a full day before Leesa even learned he could speak, and rather eloquently for his age, too.

The journey was considerably faster on horseback than it would have been on foot, and they arrived at the inn a mere nine days after stepping through the gates of King’s Landing.

Ada had told her sister all about the inn over the course of their travels—The White Tree, she and her sailor husband, Eryk, had decided to name it, after the unusual white-barked specimens that grew in the surrounding woods.

She had also told her sister that the inn was a work in progress, as it had been ransacked during the early days of Robert’s Rebellion and abandoned ever since. Once the inn came into view, Leesa could see that her sister spoke the truth. But she could also see considerable potential and obvious progress.

The inn was of a good size, with an upper and lower floor—and, according to Ada, a large cellar for storage. The simple layout of the building was well suited to the possibility of expansion in the future. The majority of the progress Leesa could see was on the roof, which was being re-shingled. The new shingles stood out from the rest. They had clearly been made from newly split wood, and were all the brighter for it. The contrast between the clean new shingles and the old ones, weathered with age and turning green around the edges with moss, made the roof keenly resemble the wings of molting poultry. But there was little that could be done about that, and the contrast would certainly diminish with time, anyway.

As much as Leesa had grown to appreciate the convenience provided by horses, she was overjoyed
at the prospect of spending a few days with both feet solidly on the ground. That, and a long, hot bath with soap.

Leesa had only met her sister’s husband on a few brief occasions before they left King’s Landing, but Eryk greeted her like an old friend nonetheless. Still, Leesa could not help but feel some discomfort in his presence. She owed him so much—far more than she could ever repay—and she suddenly felt a great retrospective empathy towards Cleome, and how she must have felt, standing on Leesa’s doorstep.

Leesa could hardly believe that was a mere fortnight prior. It seemed like an entirely different lifetime; and she supposed it was, in some regards.

The more she got to know Eryk and the more she saw him with Ada, the more Leesa approved of her sister’s choice of husband. Leesa could tell Eryk was a bit of a dreamer, and prone to absentmindedness to boot, but he was a good man, and his flaws were of the tolerable sort. Though he remained unusually stoic—especially for such a young boy—Leesa could tell Gendry was fascinated by Eryk.

It made sense, as Leesa doubted the boy had very little experience with grown men—particularly those, like Eryk, willing to give him the time of day. Leesa would hazard to guess that Eryk was the first man the young boy had met who paid him any attention.

After they had rested two days Leesa decided that they should continue on their way. Cleome had not explicitly stated that time was of the essence, but the desperation Leesa had heard in her voice lead Leesa to think it was. Ada insisted on coming with, and this time Leesa had no argument. She had no desire to travel such foreign roads alone—not to mention the fact that if she were to say that she had grown completely comfortable with riding on horseback she would be lying through her teeth.

Ada had never traveled to Winterfell either, but most of the handful of travellers she and Eryk had already housed were either from there or headed there, so she knew it should be about a four days’ ride.

Even at The White Tree, located at the southern edge of what was considered the North, Leesa noticed how much cooler it was, compared to King’s Landing. Near the end of the first leg of their journey, she found her teeth chattering as soon as the sun went down, even when she wore both shawls she owned, one over the other. Ada had noticed, and fretted, but she had no cloak to spare—only the one draped over her own shoulders. She had suggested that they might take turns wearing the cloak, but Leesa had shot down that idea with incredible speed. Ada’s cloak was hers, and as far as Leesa was concerned her sister had already done more for her than she could ever repay. Besides, free and cold was far more preferable than warm and, for lack of a better word, enslaved.

Cleome had packed Gendry a surprisingly heavy coat, and beyond that the young boy appeared to have an admirable tolerance for the cold.

After arriving at The White Tree, however, Eryk gave Leesa an old winter cloak of his. It was threadbare and ratty, dotted with holes and a good few inches too long, but it was far better than what she had before. As he bid her farewell before they set off on the second leg of their journey, her good-brother also handed her a small purse containing a half-dozen silver stags and made her promise to use the funds to purchase a proper cloak once they reached Winterfell. Leesa immediately protested, arguing that he had already been far too generous, but Eryk merely waved her off, insisting that he would be failing in his duties as a husband if he let his good-sister freeze to death. Leesa assuaged her guilt by reminding herself that she had the rest of her life to repay him.
and Ada for everything.

Washed and rested, the sisters and their temporary ward set off on the last leg of their journey on a cold, but blessedly clear, morning.

They rode through the gates of Wintertown in the afternoon of the fourth day, as anticipated. They had only stopped to sleep at night, eating their provisions on the road. A gruff but reasonable guard pointed them in the direction of one of Wintertown’s three inns and told them that the gates to Winterfell would be open the following day from dawn to dusk, when Lord Stark would be holding court. He also walked them to a furrier’s shop, where Leesa bought a proper Northern cloak with warm fox fur lining the inside and thick leather on the outside to keep the elements from seeping in. It was far heavier than anything Leesa had ever worn, but the warmth it provided was more than worth it. She was sure it would not be long before she grew accustomed to wearing it, and she would cease to even notice the weight. She reluctantly paid four silver stags for the cloak—more than she had ever spent on anything, save her freedom—before they turned in for the night at the inn recommended to them, The Smoking Log.

Ada eagerly took in all the details of the inn—the decor, the servers, the food, the layout of their room, even the material of the blankets—taking great care to remember each one. Leesa was sure her sister would take all of this new information and make good use of it. She would bet The White Inn would be undergoing even more renovations, now that Ada had such inspiration.

Gendry remained astonishingly well behaved and reserved for his age, quietly babbling to himself as he inspected his surroundings.

When it finally came time to sleep, Ada and Gendry quickly succumbed. For Leesa, however, sleep did not come quite so easily. She stared up into the darkness, the only sounds in the room Gendry’s quiet breathing and Ada’s not-so-quiet snoring (Leesa could not help but pity Eryk—she doubted he knew what he was signing up for in that regard).

Leesa stared up at the ceiling for what felt like hours, but could have been minutes, until she finally fell asleep.

Ada had a very particular way of waking people up. She coaxed the sleeper gently with her voice for all of five seconds, and, if that did not work, grabbed them by the shoulder and shook with all the force of an earthquake. As such, Leesa shot up in bed, still half-asleep but certain the world was collapsing around her. Once her mind finally cleared she let out a sigh of relief, quickly followed by one of exasperation.

“Must you always do that?” Leesa complained irritably.

Ada merely smiled and shrugged. “It works.”

It ended in a stalemate, just like the countless other times the sisters had had the same conversation over the years.

Leesa rubbed the sleep from her eyes and proceeded to dress. It was only at the last moment that
she remembered what day it was, and who they would be speaking with. She searched through her pack for the dress at the bottom—the nicest one she owned, brought along for just this occasion—and redressed once more.

“Where’s the boy?” Leesa asked, fiddling with the laces on her sleeves.

“Downstairs. He’s of an age with the inn keep’s youngest daughter, so they’re keeping each other company.”

“And the inn keep is alright with that?” Leesa had only had the briefest of exchanges with the woman—Edra was her name, if she remembered correctly—but she seemed extremely stern and almost frosty.

Ada chuckled.

“I think Audra’s planning their wedding.”

Well then, Leesa reflected, wrong on all counts.

“And what do you think?”

“Well, they do make a striking pair,” Ada answered, barely able to maintain her composure as she spoke, and dissolving into giggles as soon as she was finished.

Leesa could not help but join in with a chuckle of her own.

Winterfell’s main hall was less crowded than Leesa had feared it would be, but it was full nonetheless. There were no less than a dozen individuals in line before them who wished to hold audience with Lord Stark, and they had gotten there before the gates were even opened. Leesa could only be thankful that Gendry was such a well behaved boy.

Leesa reached into the large pocket of her dress for what was probably the fifteenth time, making sure Lord Arryn’s letter was still there (it was). Lord Stark concluded his talk with a haggard-looking farmer, who bowed before taking his leave. The line moved forward once more. Leesa did her best to remain calm.

Ada knew her sister too well not to notice her inner struggle. She squeezed her sister’s arm in a show of support. It was the only thing she could do.

Leesa had told her sister that she need not come along, encouraged her to go out and spend the day exploring Winterfell, but Ada had remained steadfast. In all honesty, now that they were here, in Lord Stark’s court with the man himself not fifteen yards away, Leesa was selfishly thankful that Ada had not listened to her.

“Next!” a sour-faced guard called out.

Leesa glanced forward, and realized that she was next. How had that happened?

“Come on,” Ada whispered in her sister’s ear, offering her a gentle shove in encouragement.

Leesa took a shaking step forward, Gendry in her arms, before slowly turning her gaze upwards to meet the steel grey eyes of Lord Eddard Stark.
I apologize for my absence, but I'm back! Good news is, the next update should take far less than three months. On another note, I'd like to ask you readers: what would you like to see in this story? Any thoughts, suggestions, etc.? Please let me know, I'd love to hear from you.
on a different day just like this one

Chapter Summary

In which things (finally) start to happen.

Chapter Notes

Title from The National's "Apartment Story".

284 A.C. — King’s Landing

Olenna Tyrell was a puppet master. A very happy puppet master, as her puppets were acting exactly as she wished them to—particularly her son, Mace Tyrell, Lord of Highgarden, the biggest puppet of them all. The poor boy (he had grey hair and a full beard, but in the privacy of her mind there was no way Olenna would ever refer to the great big lug she had birthed as a man) had no idea, of course, great big fool that he was (just like his late father). He considered his last-minute switch in allegiance a testimony to his own genius and tactical prowess, and Olenna was not about to set him straight; he was easier to manipulate at his most prideful (not that it was ever actually difficult, mind you).

Thanks to her puppeteering, the Tyrells had come out on the winning side. The upcoming summit was her victory lap. The heads of the great houses were convening in King’s Landing—which had finally settled down, almost a year after the new stag king had been crowned—with the goal of forging new alliances and strengthening old ones.

When Olenna had expressed her desire to accompany him to King’s Landing, her son had smiled fondly and approved her request, a self-congratulatory twinkle in his eye as he all but patted himself on the back for humoring his aging mother. Moron.

King’s Landing had mostly recovered from the destruction of the rebellion, and despite the change in king looked just like Olenna remembered from her last visit, many years before, when she was still a Redwyne. Still smelled the same, like shit and rot and disease. Olenna hadn’t minded it then and she didn’t mind it now. At least it wasn’t roses.

They ended up meeting in the Sept—the only room in the Red Keep large enough to hold all the representatives from all the houses worth half a stag and their egos—over a hundred men of an age with her son, all just as rotund and equally intelligent, bartering with infants and hypothetical heirs instead of gold and silver (though gold and silver was undoubtedly on their minds). Scattered among them were a handful of women—puppet masters, just like herself, the few clever and cunning enough to keep their wares on short strings without the fools even realizing they had any.

Olenna kept a wary eye on her oaf the whole time, knowing how easily he could be enticed by the shine of jewels or the shimmer of gold. A great big wingless magpie, just like his father. With her
other eye she searched the crowd, weighing her options. Though still at a tender age at eleven years of age, her grandson, Willas Tyrell, future lord of Highgarden, showed some promise. Under her tutelage, he might even manage to scrape together half a brain—which made finding the right match all the more important. Mace could make whatever (undoubtedly moronic) matches he liked with the other three, but not with Willas. She was actually fond of him—he was easily her favorite of her descendants. The others could all follow her husband off that cliff for all she cared. Margaery still hadn’t reached her first name day, of course, and could yet prove to not be an imbecile, but the odds were against her.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Walder Frey approaching—funny, how he never showed up late to something like this—so Olenna quickly steered her own half-wit in the opposite direction under the pretense of something-or-other. She would not share a great-grandchild with that weasel so long as she still had air in her lungs. There weren’t many causes she considered to be worth dying for, but she would not hesitate to hand herself over to the Stranger if needed to prevent that travesty.

So, no Freys. No minor houses. None belonging to the Reach—they were already sworn to the Tyrells and, besides, nothing started squabbles liked perceived favoritism. And all the riches of Casterly Rock wasn’t worth the headache that was the Lannisters, so not them either.

That easily disqualified more than half the room. She studied those that remained. There were the Baratheons, of course, but everyone was trying to get a piece of the new royal line, and Olenna really didn’t feel like putting herself through the political maneuvering it would take to secure such a match. Besides, things were still turbulent, and the Baratheons were a risky lot to throw in with.

Olenna didn’t like gambling. She liked winning.

So no Baratheons.

What houses were left? Arryn? That line was just about as fertile as the desert and as hardy as a cobweb. Florent? By the Seven those ears. She wanted her great-grandchildren to be at least reasonably attractive. What about—

Suddenly, Olenna knew the answer. Of course it had taken awhile to notice Eddard Stark—his lack of jewels or precious metals and his simple white-trimmed grey doublet hardly drew one’s attention, particularly in a room full of richly colored, glimmering nobles—but that was what convinced her it was the choice she should make.

The more she thought about it, the more certain she became.

Now all she had to do was convince her oaf—but, of course, lead him to believe that the idea was entirely his own. She had no doubt she would be capable of doing so. After all, his ego would do most of the work for her.

By that evening, Margaery Tyrell was betrothed to Robb Stark, heir to Winterfell, and Willas Tyrell was betrothed to the Stark’s first born daughter. The agreements were drawn up and signed and Mace was bragging of his brilliance to anyone who would listen before the ink even had a chance to dry.
Stannis Baratheon was no fool. He knew, from the moment his hot-headed elder brother declared war on the Targaryens, starting a rebellion that reached to all corners of the realm, that there were only two possible outcomes: marriage or death, both in the case of his brother and himself.

This thought did not particularly move Stannis towards any particular emotion. Very little did. It was just the truth, after all.

Sure enough, Stannis found himself promised to a daughter of House Frey before the ship carrying the last Targaryens was even beyond sight of the harbor (his brother was promised to Cersei Lannister, supposedly the most beautiful woman in all seven kingdoms, but Stannis was far from envious—the Lannisters were a headache). For a few weeks there, before the Tyrells had a sudden change of heart, it has looked as if his fate was to be death rather than marriage, so, really, to come out of his brother’s rebellion engaged to a Frey was an agreeable outcome as far as he was concerned. It wasn’t as if he expected to marry for love, or any such nonsense.

There were three unmarried female descendants of Walder Frey relatively of age with Stannis—two daughters and one granddaughter. In the name of good will, Lord Frey brought all three girls to Storm’s End for Stannis to see before he made his decision, as he and Renly were still recuperating, and in no shape to make the journey themselves.

Morya, Tyta, and Kyra were their names. Morya was easily the prettiest, though no great beauty, and Tyta was the youngest. But it was Kyra he chose in the end. She was easily the hardiest of the three, not having a word of complaint about the long journey—or anything else, for that matter. She had the sturdiest build—not the willowy, glamorous build of Morya, nor the slightly pudgy figure of Tyta, but sturdy—strong-boned, straight-backed, and wide-hipped. Functional and strong; two of the virtues Stannis valued most highly. Her nature was equally rational, and her face, while not the stuff of songs, was not disfigured or distractingly marred in any way.

So his decision was made, and they were married without delay nor pomp or circumstance.

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286 A.C. — Winterfell

Leesa handed Gendry over to her sister and curtsied so low her nose was mere inches from the floor. She hesitated from rising as long as possible—once she did she would have to speak, and she found her mind had gone terrifyingly blank.

She reached a hand into her pocket to assure herself Lord Arryn’s letter was still there.

“I-I have a letter for you, m’lord,” Leesa finally said, rising. She handed the tube containing the letter to a stony-faced guard, who then handed it to Lord Stark in turn. He regarded the whole thing suspiciously until noticing the wax seal.

He read through the letter with an unreadable expression on his face, before looking up to her, her sister, and most of all Gendry.

“This is the boy?” he asked. Though always stoic, Lord Stark undoubtedly looked more dour than usual. His brow was furrowed, and his lips pressed together so tightly that they were naught but a thin line across his face.

“Yes, m’lord,” Leesa answered, head bowed deferentially.
Lord Stark paused for a moment, weighing his options, before finally speaking.

“I think this discussion is better suited for the small council chamber.”

Leesa’s heart dropped to her stomach. Was that normal? Looking around, no one seemed terribly shocked, though some of the small folk queued behind them murmured grumpily. Her terror faded and she silently chastised herself for being so irrational.

Lord and Lady Stark rose from their seats. The stony-faced guard motioned for the sisters to follow, so they did, and he followed them in turn.

Ned saw the look on his wife’s face and knew immediately that she was putting two and two together to make five.

“It’s not what you think, Cat,” he whispered to her as they entered the small council chamber.

“And what would I be thinking?”

Her voice was steel and her eyes were ice.

“The letter is from Jon Arryn, and—” Ned paused as the two women and the boy entered the room. “Look at the boy, Cat. Just look at him,” he finally insisted as they took their seats at the head of the table.

Catelyn acquiesced, but only just, intending to give the boy the briefest of glances.

Once she did so, however, something caught her eye.

Eyes.

Those eyes. Where had she seen them before? They were not Stark grey, and Catelyn felt relief flood through her, tinged with guilt that she had been so quick to think the worst of her husband. No, the boy’s eyes were blue, darker than the sky but paler than the sea—and Catelyn was entirely certain she had seen them before. But where? And the hair, the pin-straight black hair darker than midnight. She felt as if the answer was right in front of her, as if it should be as plain to see as her own hand before her, but it was eluding her.

Blue eyes, black hair. What was she missing?

Lord Arryn. The boy had been sent with a letter from Lord Arryn. And that was when it hit her. Baratheon blue, Baratheon black—the boy looked just like the king. Robert was not the only Baratheon, but Renly was too young to have fathered the boy and Stannis was not known for frequenting pleasure houses. Or involving himself in anything considered even remotely pleasurable.

A royal bastard, then.

Catelyn sent her husband an apologetic glance. Though she was still far from forgiving him for his indiscretions, it had been wrong of her to make such assumptions.

“What one of you is the lad’s mother?” Ned asked. The two women before him looked somewhat similar—sisters, maybe? The one who had handed him the letter looked the older of the two. She was also a few inches taller than her companion, and though they both had brown hair, hers was far
darker, nearly black, while her companion’s was a chestnut shade, with an almost reddish tint. Their eyes, however, were the exact same shade of murky blue, wide-set and oval.

“Neither, m’lord,” the taller one admitted. “My name is Leesa and this is my sister, Ada.”

“Then where is she? Lord Arryn wrote that he handed this letter to her.”

“She could not leave King’s Landing. We were friends, and she knew I was leaving for the North, so she begged me to take him here, to you. She said it wasn’t safe for him in the Crownlands. Her name was Cleome.”

“And the boy’s name?”

“Gendry, m’lord,” Leesa answered.

Ned nodded. Her explanation was solid, and her details matched Jon Arryn’s letter. Besides, the boy was Robert’s spitting image—but Ned had one more question to ask, just to be certain.

“Gendry’s mother, what did she look like?”

Leesa appeared surprised by the question, but answered it easily nonetheless. “Pretty. Not very tall. Green eyes, yellow hair.”

Ned nodded. He sorted through everything in his head, steepled fingers pressed to his lips. All was silent for a few minutes. Leesa and Ada waited patiently. Catelyn looked between her husband, curious to know what he was thinking, and the boy, Gendry. She suspected he was of an age with Robb. She could not help but watch in amazement as the boy appeared perfectly content to look about the room quietly. Catelyn was quite certain she had never encountered such a quiet child before in her life.

“I think I just might have a solution that will prove agreeable to everyone, but there are others I must speak with first,” Ned finally said. “Can you return on the morrow? Just tell Jory here where you’re staying, he will send someone to collect you when the time comes.” His words were agreeable, but there was such a finality to his tone that neither Leesa nor Ada would dare argue even if they weren’t.

“Thank you, m’lord,” Leesa said, bowing once more. Ada repeated her sister’s sentiments and mimicked her bow as best as she could with Gendry in her arms.

Having handed over the letter, Leesa felt somehow lighter, as if some great, heavy cloak had been lifted from her shoulders.

“It goes without saying, I’m sure, that none of this should be spoken of beyond these walls,” Ned said, just to be certain.

“Of course, m’lord,” Leesa replied, and Ada nodded her agreement. From the look of relief on their faces, Ned was certain she spoke the truth, and he felt no anxiety upon watching them depart.

Their business concluded—for the day, at least—the sisters returned to the The Smoking Log for some well deserved rest.

Meanwhile, Lord Eddard Stark had a favor to ask of a very old friend.
friend of mine

Chapter Summary

More plans are made regarding Gendry’s future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Burton was a farmer.

His father, a baseborn Umber, had been a member of Winterfell’s guard for many years, which was how young Burton, better known as Tony, came to know Eddard Stark. They were only a few years apart and, both being of an unusually reserved disposition for their age, quickly grew to be great friends.

Which, for them, mostly meant coexisting in companionable silence while they worked on their individual tasks—Ned reading a book on the history of the North, or something of that ilk, while Tony polished armor. Though he spent more time cleaning swords and hauling them over to Mikken and back for repairs than anything else, having his father in the guard meant he developed a respectable skill with a blade—after all, he hoped to take after his father someday, and the Starks would never employ a guard who couldn’t protect anything. He had no dreams of knighthood or tourney-riding or any such thing, but a position in Winterfell’s guard suited him best out of the few options he saw available for his future. Indeed, shortly after his fifteenth nameday Burton found himself sworn in as a member of Winterfell’s guard.

But then Lyanna Stark disappeared, Lord Stark and his eldest son were killed, and the rebellion began. Tony had never pictured himself as a soldier, but he had always planned to serve House Stark, and Ned was his friend, so a soldier he became. His bride of not quite four moons (timing had never been his strong suit) was less than pleased, but sent him off to war with a kiss and a protective talisman on a chain woven from strands of her own reddish-blond hair. He promised it would never be removed from its place resting just above his heart, and, more importantly, not to do anything stupid. Her name was Brynn and Burton rightfully feared her more than any Targaeryen soldier he was likely to face. She was the only daughter of the miller, stuck in the midst of seven brothers, and could win a battle with a look just as well as the best of soldiers could with a sword.

So Burton followed Ned Stark and Robert Baratheon across the seven kingdoms, doing his duty, as he had promised Ned, but not putting himself at unnecessary risk, as he promised his wife. But then came the Battle of the Trident.

Rebel victory was all but assured—Rhaegar Targaeryen had fallen, as had Lewyn Martell, Jonothor Darry, and thousands of their followers. Their surviving forces had scattered, though some still fought, preferring death to living defeat. But the honor in it, the purpose in it, had gone. It was just hatred and bloodlust.

Burton noticed the crossbowman first, not fifteen yards away, his armor placing him in one of the minor houses of the Crownlands. He had his weapon loaded and raised, pointed at Lord Stark’s back, level with his heart. Burton himself was only a few paces from Ned—to far away to do
anything about the bowman, but close enough to do something. Burton saw the crossbowman fingering the trigger, almost as if time itself had slowed, and acted on instinct, tackling Ned to the ground.

The bolt missed Lord Stark, just as he had planned, but it didn’t miss his own shoulder (he hadn’t planned for that). Time seemed to speed up after that, as if to compensate, and most of the hours that followed remained a blur to Burton.

Next thing he knew, it was night, and he was lying on a cot in a makeshift healing hall (a large tent full of wounded men), a maester sitting at his left side and Lord Stark himself standing at his right.

He was being sent home. His shoulder would heal, he was told, but it would never be what it was—those were the exact words the maester used, but Burton knew what he really meant: his days as a guard were over.

What would he do now?

Ned promised that he need not fear—he would be looked after, provided for as need be; as would his wife and any children they should have. He also promised that he would find Burton a new position in Winterfell. A lordship and land could even be his if he so wished.

Burton said no to the lordship—he didn’t much fancy being a lord, and he was quite certain Brynn would make a terrible lady—but gratefully accepted the land.

“Maybe I’ll take up farming,” he told Lord Stark just before he made his return journey to Winterfell. Winter was slowly but surely yielding to spring, so the time was right, too, and he suspected that Brynn would be much more suited to farming than being a lady.

Lord Stark gifted Burton with nearly fifty acres of land just east of Winterfell, right along the Kingsroad, and from there it went much as Burton had expected it to: Brynn took to it like a fish to water, and he found himself enjoying his new work more than he had anticipated.

Brynn birthed their son, Jacob, less than a fortnight after Burton’s return. The babe had his mother’s wide brown eyes and his father’s golden brown hair, though it did have a ruddy tint to it. In the months that followed he proved to be a relatively calm baby, for the most part only fussing when he was hungry. As soon as he was capable of moving though, Jacob—or Cory, as he came to be known, though neither parent could explain how this came about—showed both a great affinity and fondness for taking apart or otherwise breaking things. His collection of toys quickly dwindled to little else but solid, sturdy wooden blocks, one of the few things his parents found he was incapable of deconstructing in any way.

Cory was followed by Jordan—who quickly came to be known as Jory—little more than a year later, and slowly but surely Burton found his life falling into a pattern. An unexpected, but undeniably pleasant, pattern.

The land Ned Stark had bequeathed to him was largely grassland, mostly flat or gently sloped, as suited to farming as any land found north of the Neck could be. In their first year Burton and Brynn tried just about everything, as neither of them knew much of farming.

They built a cottage, small but designed to welcome additions, a stable, a barn, and two pens. The first major purchase they made was a second horse to accompany Blue, the dappled grey mare Burton rode home from war (also a gift from Lord Stark), and a wagon to hitch them to, which they rode to the closest village, Stonecross, a little less than five leagues away along the Kingsroad. There they hired three farmhands—even if they could maintain a farm themselves, they certainly
couldn’t get one up and running alone—between the ages of three-and-ten and seven-and-ten, and then decided to stay for the auction the next day, where they bought a half-dozen chickens, three cows and a bull, two sheep, a goat, and a goose (Brynn had seen the goose attack a very large, angry-looking bull and immediately fell in love) to at least start to fill the structures they had built. Burton felt a bit like a character from one of the tales he had heard as a child, leading the lot of them home.

Months passed and they planted everything they could get their hands on, wheat and tomatoes and lettuce and strawberries, apples and peaches and plums, more types of berries than Burton ever knew existed. They quickly learned what was and wasn’t feasible for the northern climate, what grew better and what grew best. They found several plants worth growing for their own use, even if they were not practical for profit, but found many others that were. Crops like beets and carrots and onions, apples, winter rye, and certain varieties of cabbage. Many of the berries also proved well suited—the blueberries never amounted to much, but the blackberries grew well, and the raspberries took on a rather alarming life of their own, with one knee-high plant bought from a baker in Stonecross spawning over a dozen more in less than a year.

Brynn found she very much enjoyed gardening, watching and helping a crop go from seed to harvest, while Burton much more enjoyed caring for livestock. Together they made a successful team (though they already knew that). Two of the three farmhands they hired—Ben, a tall lad of five-and-ten who was good with animals and better with construction, and Silas, seven-and-ten and strong as an ox—decided to stay, building themselves a cottage to stay in rather than continue sleeping on straw pallets on the floor before Burton and Brynn’s hearth, though they always had a place at their table, and the two boys soon all but became part of their ever-growing family.

Burton often thought of Ned Stark, without whom none of the happiness had found would have been possible, but had not spoken to him since shortly after they both returned from the Rebellion. Even when he accompanied Ben and Silas to deliver goods to Winterfell, or sold produce in the Wintertown market, he only ever saw Lord Stark from afar.

Until one temperate evening two years more than two years after their return. The temperature had been fair, but it had been raining on and off for a week with no signs of stopping, and such moisture in the air always caused Burton’s shoulder to ache terribly. He headed in early, in too much pain to even attempt working further, to smoke his pipe in his favorite chair before the fire until dinner—the one thing he had found that provided him any sort of relief from the pain. He was nearly half asleep when Ben came rushing in. The boy nearly tripped over the door mat, but didn’t stop to take off his shoes, so excited he was.

“You’re scrubbing the floors tonight, young man! I want them spotless!” Brynn scolded from the kitchen. She had a strict no-shoes-allowed-inside policy and did not take well to it being disregarded (nor did she ever fail to notice when it was breached).

“There’s a lone rider coming in from the west—Winterfell, I think,” Ben announced breathlessly.

“Who was it?” Burton asked, now fully alert. Brynn poked her head out the kitchen doorway, also curious. She somehow had Jordan balanced on her left hip while also holding a mixing bowl in her left hand. In her right she carried a wooden spoon. Jordan had reached a stage where he was quite fussy unless he was being held, and Brynn quickly learned how to do most everything while balancing a toddler at the same time.

“I dunno, they were still a good bit away, and it’s getting dark, but… it looked like Lord Stark.”
Burton and Brynn just looked at him, disbelieving. Jory, perched on his mother’s hip, remained rather uninterested and Cory, sitting in his pen in the corner, was intently focused on chewing the corner of a wooden block instead of building with it.

“Telling tall tales won’t get you out of scrubbing the floors,” Brynn cautioned him, wagging her spoon in warning.

“I’m dead serious, mum. Looked like his horse, too,” Ben insisted.

Brynn frowned and turned to her husband. “You never warned me Lord Stark was coming! Otherwise I certainly wouldn’t be making cabbage stew!”

Despite there being far more important matters at hand, Ben couldn’t help but make a face at the mention of cabbage stew. He hated cabbage—he thought he had smelled it coming in, but had been hoping he was wrong somehow.

“I didn’t know,” Burton said.

Brynn looked ready to say something more, but a firm knock at the front door ended all conversation. She glanced from the muddy shoe tracks on the floor to the pathetic state of the parlor to the bowl of would-be drop biscuits in her hand and let out a long-suffering sigh.

“Would you get that?” Brynn asked Ben before returning to the kitchen.

Ben did as he was asked. Standing on the other side, just as he had anticipated, was Lord Eddard Stark, looking decidedly out of place.

Ben bowed his head respectfully. Burton rose from his chair and did the same.

“My apologies, Lord Stark. We weren’t expecting your visit,” said Burton.

“It is I who should apologize, intruding upon your hospitality like this,” Ned insisted, “and Ned, if you please, old friend.”

Ben watched the exchange slack-jawed.

“Only if you call me Tony,” Burton replied, “and you are always welcome here. None of this would even be ours if it weren’t for your generosity.”

“I think arrangements could be made,” Ned agreed with a smile, “but you give yourself far too little credit.”

“Said the crow to the raven,” Burton answered, eliciting a laugh from Ned.

“It is good to see you, old friend, it has been far too long,” the lord of Winterfell said, clapping Burton on his good shoulder.

Burton reciprocated the gesture. “I couldn’t agree more. But I doubt that is all that brings you out at this hour. Is it?”

“I do wish it were, my friend, but you are correct. I am afraid I have a favor I must ask of you, and of your lovely wife. It is a somewhat… delicate matter,” Ned admitted, his gaze flickering ever-so-slightly in Ben’s direction.

Burton caught on immediately. “Ah, yes. Certainly.”
Brynn, with her owl-like hearing and inexplicable but impressive radar for any mention of herself, appeared immediately. She left the bowl and spoon in the kitchen this time, but Jordan remained on her hip.

“Lord Stark,” she greeted, dipping into a curtsey. “I was not anticipating your visit, but you are more than welcome to join us for supper. It’s only cabbage stew, I’m afraid, but there’s more than enough to go around.”

“That is a very generous offer, and I might very well take you up on it in a little while. But right now there is a rather important matter I must discuss with your husband and yourself, if you please,” replied Lord Stark.

“Of course,” Brynn said. There was a glint in her eye that told Burton she, too, understood what Lord Stark was not saying. “Ben?”

“Yes, mum?”

“I need blackberries; I’ve decided to make jam tomorrow. Could you pick some for me?”

“Now?” Ben asked, confused.

“Yes,” Brynn answered, her tone leaving no room for further questioning, “and take Jacob and Jordan with you. Silas should be finishing up those fence repairs in the east field, bring him along as well.”

“How many baskets?” It was the one question Ben knew he could ask.

“As many as you can carry, and then a few more for good measure,” Brynn told him, handing Jordan over to the young farmhand. Ben held the infant nearly at arm’s length, as if afraid it would spontaneously combust, but said nothing. He just nodded and head off to do as he was told.

Ned waited until Ben was well out of earshot before he spoke.

“There is a great favor I’m afraid I must ask of the both of you. It is a matter of great delicacy, you see,” he began.

“. . .I have already spoken with Mikken, set up an apprenticeship for the boy when he gets older. But a forge is no place for a lad who’s only seen two namedays,” Ned concluded.

“You wish for us to raise the boy?” Brynn asked. Her tone gave little insight as to how she might have felt about the matter.

“To put it simply, yes. Though it would only be four, five years. Six at most—just until he’s old enough for Mikken’s instruction,” Ned clarified. “I’ve only met the boy once, but he seems a quiet, well-behaved lad. Catelyn was impressed, at least. I—”

“All right,” Brynn said, surprising both Lord Stark and her husband. Seeing the looks on their faces, she decided to continue: “this boy has no home. We do. Food is never short, but more hands are always welcome, even if they won’t be much help for a few years yet. Besides, if what you say is true, he might even be a calming influence on our brood. But I do have one condition.”

“Yes?” Ned asked, curious as to what it may be.

“If we are to raise this boy, we shall raise him as one of our own. I will not just hand him over to
this blacksmith once he’s old enough to hold a hammer. Winterfell is only an hour’s brisk walk, even less by horse. An apprentice he shall be, but a forge is no home, and I doubt a bachelor blacksmith—though a quality man I am sure—is much fit to raise a young boy,” Brynn said.

“I see no issue with that arrangement,” said Lord Stark.

“What shall we tell others? What shall we tell the boy?” Burton asked. He was just as willing to take in the boy as his wife, but some of the technicalities of the situation still concerned him. Lord Stark had not told them much about the boy, about why he was in such an unusual scenario or why it had anything to do with Lord Stark himself, but Burton trusted Ned. He was no idiot—he knew this boy must have some political value of some sort, no other explanation fit—but Burton had no desire to know the specifics. He had seen enough of politics in his brief career as a soldier to know he cared little for it. Not knowing simply meant he wouldn’t have to lie, which was no great loss in Burton’s book.

“He is an orphan—which is not far from the truth—that you took in at the wish of a friend—which is the truth,” Lord Stark eventually answered.

Burton nodded. He doubted that would suffice in the long run, particularly once the boy was older and started asking questions, but it would do for the time being.

“When should we expect the boy—Gendry, was it?” Brynn asked.


“Tomorrow morn is fine,” Brynn assured, before she suddenly frowned. “I do hope he’s not much bigger than Cory.”

“If the boy or any of you should need anything, you only need tell me. I shall happily bring clothes if that is what you require,” Lord Stark said.

Brynn waved him off.

“I’ve been needing to make some clothes anyhow—Cory will soon grow out of his. If you insist, though, a few yards of broadcloth or linen would never go amiss.”

Ned nodded solemnly. “You saved my life on the battlefield once, my friend, and you now aid me again even more than you know. I doubt I will ever be able to repay you.”

“It is true this is not the life I once imagined I would have, but nonetheless I have grown quite fond of it. In many ways, it is more than I ever dreamed, and I have you to thank for all of it. As far as I am concerned, there is no debt to repay. There never was,” Burton said.

Ned did not doubt Burton’s sincerity, but that did little to assuage his own guilt, and he vowed to himself that he would think of something. He would speak with Cat on his return. Maybe she would think of something.

Chapter End Notes

I do apologize if anything in this fic contradicts canon, but I have only read the books once and am only vaguely familiar with the various supplemental materials. It is only in writing this fic that I realize how little is explained regarding the common people of
Westeros and their way of life—at least as far as I noticed. So I pieced together what I could and tried to fill the rest in with something vaguely sensible (please do remember my comment in the preface regarding crayons vs. oil paints).

Chapter title from The National's "Friend of Mine".

Next time we'll be hearing from Catelyn and the Tyrells, and we'll get Sansa's birth! (yay progress!)
worry not

Chapter Summary

Gendry finally meets his new family, Catelyn considers her children's futures, and a quick look into the thoughts of young Willas Tyrell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

286 A.C. — Burton's Farmstead

Lord Stark returned the following morning with Gendry, as promised, accompanied by two women who introduced themselves as Gendry’s temporary guardians. He also brought over a dozen crates full to bursting with more bolts of fabric than Brynn had ever seen outside of a dressmaker’s (actually, upon closer inspection, she was quite sure she had seen some of these last time she had visited the dressmaker’s). Quickly glancing over the boxes, she saw several bolts of the broadcloth and linen in every shade imaginable and several patterns, along with numerous textiles she hadn’t mentioned to Lord Stark; furs and skins, even some silks and laces undoubtedly imported, from the South, or maybe even Essos. Brynn felt giddy just contemplating the other treasures she was sure to find inside, but protested Lord Stark’s extreme generosity nonetheless.

He waved her off, and Brynn realized that his ridiculously generous gift somewhat assuaged his guilt at asking favors of one he already felt indebted to, so she stopped protesting and settled for thanking him instead. The notoriously dour lord cracked a small but genuine smile, and Brynn counted it as a victory.

Ben and Silas were called over to move the crates into the parlor (she would figure out a more permanent placement for them later), and Brynn turned to deal with more time sensitive matters—she could explore her unexpected bounty later.

Brynn approached the two women standing somewhat awkwardly in the corner, looking unsure of what to do with themselves. She introduced herself and Jory, cocooned in the sling on her back. In turn she learned that they were Ada and Leesa, and they were sisters. She also finally met Gendry, who the slightly taller sister, Leesa, had balanced on her hip. Brynn quickly decided that Lord Stark’s description of the boy, though lacking in detail, had been accurate. He was a calm boy; quiet, but clearly not shy, as he studied her just as curiously as she studied him.

Brynn concluded her earlier concerns were justified—there was no doubt this boy was larger than Cory. She told the sisters as much, and was pleased to learn that he had a knapsack of clothes with him. She knew the boy was Southron—Lord Stark had said as much, though he failed to specify further. Brynn was quite certain it was not for lack of knowing, but as far as she was concerned it wasn’t really important, so she had not pressed. It only meant the contents of the knapsack probably were not quite appropriate for the Northern clime, but they would do until she could throw something warmer together.

As much as Gendry was large, he was also rather lean for a boy so young.
Were they certain he had only seen two namedays?

The sisters said they were, though they did not know his exact nameday. Leesa, after some contemplation, said that it was around the time of King Robert’s coronation—slightly before, she believed, though she wasn’t absolutely certain on that account.

Regardless, it made him a few moons younger than Cory. It also meant Gendry’s nameday was close to her own, so Brynn decided they would share. Every little boy deserved a nameday to celebrate, and she certainly didn’t mind. It would just make it easier to remember.

Brynn bent down slightly to be eye level with the boy and introduced herself once more. Gendry blinked his dark blue eyes and gave her what might have been a cautious wave hello, but said nothing.

Did he talk?

The sisters said he did, though not often, and was actually quite eloquent for his age when he did decide to speak.

Brynn offered to take Gendry from Leesa, who accepted after a moment’s hesitation. The boy seemed more hesitant, which Brynn could understand.

“Don’t worry,” she told the sisters as soon as she had Gendry settled on her hip, “we’ll take good care of him.”

And they did.

Winterfell

As soon as Catelyn heard about her husband’s agreement with the Tyrells, she vowed that neither Robb nor her unborn daughter—assuming she birthed a daughter—would have to deal with the same terror she did. True, everything with Ned looked as if it would work out for the best, the bastard aside, but after Brandon had died and she had fond herself thrust into marriage with a man she knew nothing of—well, she had never been so terrified in her life. Catelyn wouldn’t wish it on anyone, least of all her own children.

So she immediately struck up a written correspondence with Alerie Tyrell, formerly of House Hightower—a perfectly pleasant woman Catelyn had encountered at a few tourneys and such when they were both young, future good-mother to her children—and was pleased to find that she was equally enthusiastic about the matter.

As such, Robb and Margaery both grew up from the cradle hearing of their future spouse. Once they learned their letters they started up a correspondence of their own.

And when she finally birthed a daughter—Sansa—two years later, Catelyn renewed her vow to herself. It would be harder than it was with Robb and Margaery, who were less than a year apart in age, but Catelyn was determined to find a way.

It was just after Sansa’s birth that Catelyn and Alerie crossed ravens for the first and only time. Catelyn’s letter told of Sansa’s birth and both their health. Alerie’s letter held far less pleasant news. Willas had (very reluctantly) participated in a tourney less than a fortnight past, only for it to
end in disaster when Oberyn Martell unseated Willas, whose foot caught in the stirrup and pulled the horse on top of himself when he fell. His leg had been crushed and broke in three places. Despite the best efforts of several maesters (Leyton Hightower had sent over the best the Citadel had to offer as he heard of his grandson’s accident) fever had set in. The maesters remained hopeful, but even the most optimistic did not believe Willas’s leg would ever again be what it once was. At the time of her writing the letter, he remained in a near constant state of delirium.

Though Catelyn had never met the boy, she knew quite a bit about him through Alerie’s letters, and the news of his accident distressed her greatly. What had Lord Tyrell been thinking? The boy was still a moon shy of his fourteenth nameday, and, as far as Catelyn knew, had never expressed any particular interest nor shown a particular aptitude in such matters. Men grown and seasoned knights were often injured or even killed in tilts—it was almost a wonder nothing worse happened. Even the worst leg injury paled in comparison to a lance through the throat. Alerie had not explicitly stated her displeasure with her lord husband, but Catelyn could sense it, almost as if it had seeped into the paper with the ink. Catelyn knew for certain that if Ned even suggested such a thing with Robb or any of their future children, she would be irate. Thankfully, she also knew that Ned was far too sensible to ever do such a thing (besides, after what happened with his sister and Rhaegar Targaeryen, he wasn’t too keen on tourneys in general).

She sighed and put the letter aside—she would put it in the cedar chest with the rest of her carefully saved correspondence with Alerie later—and rubbed her temples. It was a terrible mess, it really was. It didn’t endanger the agreement between their houses—if the worst should happen and Willas should die, both his position as heir and his betrothal to Sansa would be passed on to his brother, Garlan—but maybe it was that in itself that bothered her more than anything, with how similar it was to her own story.

Though Sansa was only a few weeks old, Catelyn had lost count of how many times she had been told her daughter looked the very picture of her. True as that may be, the last thing Catelyn wanted was for her daughter’s life to mimic hers as well. Yes, everything had turned out for the best, but what were the odds of that happening a second time?

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Highgarden

When Willas finally returned to the world of the living nearly three weeks after his accident, his mother was watching vigil at his bedside. Once she was quite certain he was indeed on the mend, she told him there was bad news and good news. The bad news was his left leg would never be what it once was.

The good news was that his future wife had been born.

“Her name is Sansa,” Alerie told her son, “and Lady Stark writes she has the Tully look.”

Willas failed to see how this was good news. Of course, even half-delirious from milk of the poppy, he knew better than to tell his mother as much.

Instead, he just said, “Wonderful,” and hoped his mother would leave it at that.

She did, rising and saying she would return as soon as she informed his father and the others of his awakening.
Finally alone and able to wallow properly in his own misery, Willas let his head fall back and hit the mountain of goose down pillows with a *thwack* and a groan that had very little to do with the pain radiating from his leg and a whole lot to do with his twice-damned but inevitable marriage.

Just wonderful.

Chapter End Notes

I know this chapter is short. Originally there was quite a bit more in Highgarden, but it involved a significant time jump, so I decided to move it to the next chapter (which will be significantly longer than this one).

Also, I realize that I changed Robert's coronation from 283 A.C. to 284 A.C. I have no great reason for it, it just suits this story better.

Next time: time jump! Also, more from the Tyrells, Starks, and Gendry (as well as his adoptive family).

Title from The National's "Apartment Story".
All things are well

Chapter Summary

In which Willas deals with some of his issues and Gendry meets a lot of people.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

291 A.C. — Highgarden

Alerie loved all of her children, but liked to think she was not blind to their faults. This included when her usually intelligent first born started acting incredibly stupid in certain regards—namely, his future union with Sansa Stark.

Of course Alerie understood Willas’s melancholy disposition following his accident. He had to adjust to living with a leg that could no longer do everything he wished it would, and never would again so long as he lived. He had to adjust to several paths that had always been open to him suddenly disappearing—difficult, even if he had never shown the slightest interest in any of them. It would be difficult for anybody, but for a boy who had only just seen his fourteenth name day—well, Alerie figured he was entitled to some wallowing, just so long as it was only a temporary state.

Indeed, in most regards, Willas adapted, found a new normal. He transferred his love of horses from horse riding to horse breeding, switched from practicing with swords (he was rubbish anyway) to a bow and arrow, which better suited his injured leg, and he found more interesting besides. In most regards, Alerie was actually quite proud of how Willas dealt with his injury and its consequences. Apart from one.

Any mention of Sansa Stark or anything vaguely related to Sansa Stark (Starks, Tullys, Winterfell, the North) sent him off sulking like there was no tomorrow.

Alerie had hoped it would wear off in time, but it was going on five years now.

The final straw for Alerie had come at supper that evening. Seven-year-old Margaery had been excitedly prattling on about the contents of her latest letter from Robb—he finally managed to hit the target in archery practice and had a new baby brother, Bran. Arya, now two years old, never stopped talking and was singlehandedly driving everyone insane, while Sansa—cue Willas’s scowl. Margaery, thankfully, took no notice, but Alerie certainly did, and resolved to get to the bottom of her son’s unusual behavior at once.

After supper, Septa Nysterica collected Margaery for her evening lessons. Margaery protested, wanting to join Garlan and Loras for their evening ride (she was seven, practically a lady, and perfectly capable of riding a horse unaided, thank you very much), but her protests fell on deaf ears. Loras and Garlan excused themselves soon after, wanting to go on aforementioned ride before it got too dark, and Willas rose soon after.

Alerie waited until she could no longer hear the gentle clack of Willas’ cane against the marble
She found her eldest son in the library, sitting in his favorite armchair with his bad leg propped on an ottoman.

“What’s wrong with you?” Alerie asked her eldest son, opting for a direct approach.

Willas started, having been too absorbed in his reading to notice his mother’s approach.

“Beg pardon, mother?”

“Stupidity really doesn’t suit you, dear. What if your grandmother saw? You would lose your position as favorite,” Alerie said, only half teasing.

“To who? Garlan? Loras?” Willas replied wryly, knowing the exact odds of either of those things happening.

“Don’t be mean,” Alerie chided, though she smiled. “Margaery is still young and impressionable.”

“Indeed,” Willas agreed, before turning serious. “But I still remain at a loss, I’m afraid.”

Alerie sighed, remembering that for all his intelligence and knowledge, Willas was still a boy, even at eighteen. Then again, his father was also still a boy, and a great deal older besides. At least there was still hope in Willas’ case.

“Sansa Stark,” Alerie said, watching her son’s face fall as expected.

Willas realized his emotions were displayed across his face too late, and though he quickly schooled his features into a more neutral expression, he knew better than to deny to his mother what she had so clearly seen. At the same time, however, he had no idea what to say, and consequently said nothing at all.

Alerie realized that she would have to do the talking.

“By all reports she is a sweet, beautiful child who shows every sign of one day becoming a kind and beautiful woman. Most would go so far as to say you are fortunate in your intended, but you do not appear to agree. Why?” she asked.

“I am certain that she will grow to be kind, and beautiful, and everything else you claim. Just as I am certain I will continue to be crippled, and a good thirteen years her senior, for the rest of my days. Even the sweetest of dispositions would not keep her from growing to resent me—and the worst thing is, I can’t even blame her. I imagine I would feel much the same in her position,” Willas explained softly.

“Oh, Willas,” Alerie sighed. She almost wanted to chuckle, but knew that her son would react poorly if she did. “You have a limp—you’re hardly deformed. In fact, I would go so far as to say you’re a striking young man, though I know you don’t believe it. Besides, there are more important things: kindness, affection, loyalty. Thirteen years is a gap, yes, but hardly too far out of the ordinary. There’s nine years between your father and I, and I like to think we turned out all right. Just be the best husband you can be. That’s all anyone can do.”
“I am being ridiculous, aren’t I?” Willas admitted. “I’m sorry, mother. I don’t know what came over me.”

“You’re human, my dear, that is all. Just stop making faces every time you hear mention of the Starks, or we just might end up with an actual problem,” said Alerie.

Willas smiled despite himself, and Alerie considered the whole exchange a smashing success.

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Winterfell

Gendry met Jon Snow when they were both five years old. He, Jory, and Cory had all accompanied Burton on his weekly delivery trip to Winterfell, as they often did when the weather was at least reasonably fair. They were just moving the very last of the crates when Vayon Poole approached in a hurry, speaking of an upcoming visits and short notice and a need for extra deliveries. Realizing the matter would take a good long while to resolve, Burton gave each of the boys a few pennies and sent them off to Wintertown, bidding they return before noon, not quite two hours hence.

Excited by the prospect of the coins and the confectionery they could purchase, the boys rushed off to Wintertown, leaving their father to discuss ledgers and other far less exciting, but necessary, prospects with Winterfell’s steward.

After they had stuffed their faces with apple cakes and pear tarts and iced currant bread, they managed to find a gang of local children and quickly integrated themselves, as children so often do.

After a little while, Gendry quietly bid his farewell to the group, who were in the midst of a rather cut-throat game of King-of-the-Castle. It was all a bit chaotic for his taste; besides, he wanted to take the opportunity to get a good look at the forge where he would be starting his apprenticeship in just a few years.

It was there that he met Jon Snow, pleading with the blacksmith to let him borrow one of the tourney swords he knew had been dropped off that morning for polishing.

“Please, Mikken? I won’t get any better using this all the time,” Jon argued, referring to the wooden practice sword he held in his right hand.

“Have you brought this up with Ser Cassel, little lord Snow?” Mikken asked. Gendry didn’t know the blacksmith, but nonetheless he could tell the blacksmith was not going to give in to the boy’s demands, even though he did appear to be amused by the whole situation.

“Well, yes, but—”

“And what did he say?” Mikken interrupted.

“No, but—”

“At least you’re honest,” Mikken granted, “but even if I did have a mind to let you borrow them, it wouldn’t do for me to be going against the wishes of Rodrik Cassel, understand?”
The boy mumbled something that must have been an agreement, because Mikken smiled and ruffled the boy’s dark brown hair.

It was only then that Mikken noticed Gendry, watching from across the yard.

“What are you doing here, boy?” Mikken asked. His words were gruff, but his voice was kind.

“My name is Gendry, ser. I’m to be your apprentice,” Gendry said.

“Aye, I know that. But what are you doing here now?”

“I was curious. I wanted to see where I would be spending a good deal of my time,” Gendry answered truthfully.

“Indeed you will. You’ll have plenty of time to grow sick of the sight of it later, and trust me, you don’t want to rush that process. Go, do something fun. You’ll have to come back soon enough,” Mikken said, before turning back to Jon. “Little lord Snow, since you’re so eager for sparring, why don’t you see if you can wrangle up a practice sword for Gendry here? You could use a new opponent, and Gendry here’ll need a strong arm.”

Jon looked Gendry over, considering Mikken’s suggestion, before he spoke.

“All right,” Jon eventually said. “Are you any good at sparring?”

“I don’t know. Guess we’ll find out,” Gendry said with a shrug. It must have been the right thing to say, because Jon smiled.

And that was how Gendry met both his future mentor and his best friend in the span of five minutes, even if he didn’t realize it just yet.

Gendry returned home that afternoon covered in scrapes and bruises which Brynn hhm and humphed over, but Gendry could happily say that he gave as good as he got.

Over the next few years, Gendry saw Jon on a handful of occasions. They continued to get along well, but it wasn’t until Gendry started his apprenticeship under Mikken that they truly became friends. Their friendship grew quickly, as those between children often do, until they were close as brothers. They bonded over swords and feeling like outcasts—the noble bastard and the Southron orphan.

Jon told Gendry of his desire to make his father proud and his wish for Lady Catelyn to look at him with something other than disdain. He spoke of his friendship with Robb, but also his terrible jealousy, and the guilt it caused him. He spoke of Sansa—pretty, proper, distant Sansa—and Arya, who clung like a bur to his side from the time she could walk, much to her mother’s chagrin (they hardly sound related, Gendry had commented, to which Jon only replied, they don’t look it either), and even Bran, who was really just a baby. If there was one thing that Gendry got from listening to Jon, it was a heartfelt appreciation for his own family, large and chaotic as it was, even if it wasn’t his by blood.

Though he didn’t have half so much to say, Gendry spoke, too. He told Jon of Brynn and Burton, who always treated him like one of their own; of Ben and Silas, who had stuck around though the years and might as well be uncles; and of his siblings: Cory and Jory, who were born before he
joined the family, and the others who came later—the twins, Rory and Bess; Serra, the only one who looked like she could be a blood relation of his; Evie, who looked just like her mother; and baby Lya, who kept them up all night with her fussing.

Mikken teased them for chattering like ladies in a sewing circle, but so long as Gendry managed to finish his work and finish it well—and he always did—Mikken really didn’t mind, and Gendry knew that. (Though he would never admit as much, Mikken was a real soft-hearted bastard, and Gendry knew that, too.)

Gendry was nine years old when he met Arya Stark.

Though he had been apprenticing under Mikken for over a year, the man still refused to let Gendry work on swords. Whenever Gendry would ask (which was often), Mikken would just say that he “wasn’t ready just yet”, much to Gendry’s never ending frustration. So on days like this one, when Mikken was forging a sword—a broadsword ordered by Rodrik Cassel to be a nameday gift for his nephew—and didn’t have time to make it a lesson for Gendry (though he never got to help, he usually got to watch), Gendry was given a sack of whatever needed finishing and sent off to the courtyard.

It was a nice enough day, and the fresh air was pleasant, but sharpening arrowheads was far from Gendry’s favorite task. Besides being tedious, the steel dust always seeped into his skin, leaving his hands looking dirty and smelling of metal for days, no matter how often he washed them or how hard he scrubbed.

Jon soon joined him, which wasn’t unusual in itself. What was unusual, however, was that he hadn’t come alone. Though Gendry had never met the girl before, he knew at once that she was none other than Arya Stark. She looked the right age—older that Evie, but younger than Serra—but more than anything, it was her striking resemblance to Jon that gave her away: the similarly long face, the dark brown hair, the grey eyes—even if hers were several shades lighter, less charcoal and more silver.

“What are you doing?” she asked, studying the file in his hand curiously.

Gendry mused that it was a good thing he had been able to identify her by her appearance, because he clearly wasn’t going to get an introduction.

“Sharpening arrowheads,” he answered, figuring that a blunt question deserved a blunt answer.

“Do you make arrows?” Arya asked. “I thought you were a blacksmith.”

Gendry tried to recall if he had ever met anyone so skilled at making questions sound like demands. He couldn’t think of anyone.

“No. The fletcher does that,” Gendry answered, “and I’m not a blacksmith. Not yet, anyway. I’m his apprentice.”

“Who’s the fletcher?”

“Murch is his name. He also serves your father—a huntsman, I think.”

Arya considered all the information for a moment.
“Sounds boring,” she finally declared, and Gendry somehow knew, beyond a doubt, that she was speaking of him and not Murch.

“What Arya meant to say was ‘hello,’” Jon said, finally able to get a word in. He was trying to look stern, but failing to hide his amusement at his sister’s behavior.

“Arya said *exactly* what she meant to say,” Arya told her brother with a huff. “She also says that Jon shouldn’t try to be Septa Mordane, because we already have one of those.”

“It’s all right,” Gendry assured Jon. “It wasn’t hard to figure out.”

Gendry really didn’t need to specify any further.

Jon nodded his understanding, and then turned to Arya.

At least, he turned to where Arya had been five seconds ago. Now there were just empty cobblestones.

“Where did she go?” Jon asked, panic quickly setting in. Lady Catelyn already hated him enough, thank you very much.

Gendry smiled and looked pointedly at something over Jon’s right shoulder. Jon turned once more, then sighed in equal parts relief and exasperation. Robb was practicing at swords with Theon, and Arya was pestering them to let her join.

“I guess we’re too boring for her,” Gendry mused.

“I suppose so,” Jon agreed.

And that was how Gendry met Arya Stark.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from The National's "Apartment Story".

I'm just curious: what's everyone thinking about season 5 thus far? It's clearly steering away from canon, which is both interesting and terrifying. And while I would love to see Gendry back on the show, I also really, really, *really* don't want to see Gendry back on the show, at least not the way things are right now. Here's why:

If Gendry makes an appearance, I think it will be so that Arya can kill him.

I realize this sounds crazy (or maybe it doesn't?), but hear me out: the Faceless Men want Arya to become "No One". It's clear they are going to put her through a series of tests to prove she has truly left "Arya Stark" behind—and what better final test then to have "No One" kill someone Arya Stark was very close to? And if they do decide to test Arya in this way, it would only make sense for the target to be Gendry. Why? Because Jaqen H'ghar was there when they were headed to the Wall and in Harrenhal. In all the time he has known Arya Stark, Gendry has been her closest friend.

What do you guys think? Had this occurred to anyone else? Am I just being ridiculously paranoid? I'd love to hear from you.
Next time: We finally hear from Robb and Margaery.
we'll be all right

Chapter Summary

In which a lot of people are concerned about a lot of things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Robb knew he would be Lord of Winterfell one day—and though he would not be Lord in name until his father passed, he would take on a good deal of the responsibilities associated with lordship just as soon as he came of age. He had known this for as long as he had known anything. He also knew Margaery Tyrell would one day be his lady wife, and had known that for just as long.

But it had always felt so distant, too far away to cause any concern. At least, it had until now, on the eve of his sixteenth nameday. Suddenly the “distant” future felt terribly close, because sixteen felt far closer to eighteen than fifteen ever did. Also, sixteen was incredibly close to seventeen, which, as he had just learned, would be when he would wed.

If Robb were to be completely honest, the prospect was mildly terrifying.

He had known her, in a way, since he was a young boy. He still wrote her no less than once a moon turn, and often more. He knew she was close with her mother and all three of her brothers—even Willas, despite the eleven years between them. He knew she loved flowers and horses, and that she preferred ink drawing to needlework (she thought she was better suited to the former, and lacked the proper patience for the later). He knew she was smart and witty and had a surprisingly wicked sense of humor.

But he had no idea what her voice sounded like, or what she looked like when she smiled. He had no idea what she looked like at all. Sure, he knew from various reports that she had brown eyes and brown hair, but that didn’t exactly paint a picture, did it?

He didn’t know how many glasses of wine she had with dinner, or if she even liked wine. Maybe she preferred iced honey milk or some Southron drink he had never even heard the name of. For every one thing about his future wife that he knew, Robb could think of a hundred things that he didn’t know.

Margaery Tyrell was at once a close childhood friend and a stranger he had yet to meet. He guessed that would change soon enough, but the knowledge did little to ease his nerves.

Robb wanted nothing more than to speak to someone, but to whom? He was too proud to speak of it with his father, and if he spoke of it with his mother he might as well tell his father and all of Highgarden, too, because that was exactly who she would tell, no matter how many times he swore her to secrecy. There was no point asking Jon, because if there was one individual in all of Winterfell more clueless than him when it came to women, it was Jon, and there was even less of a point asking Theon, because his father’s ward would undoubtedly suggest a visit to the Wintertown brothel. That was Theon’s answer to everything.

Who else was there?
And suddenly Robb realized that there was someone who would understand, that there was one person whose counsel just might do some good: Margaery herself.

Feeling like he had just made a breakthrough, Robb pulled out a blank roll of parchment and a quill and started to write.

Sansa tried to pretend as if her father’s announcement at dinner had no effect on her at all. She knew Robb tried to do the same, and she could only hope she was more successful than he was, because her brother might as well have had I’m absolutely terrified tattooed across his forehead.

Sansa both understood why her brother was terrified and, at the same time, realized he was ridiculous for being so. Because there was an important distinction between their situations that Sansa knew her brother failed to notice: he knew Margaery, he liked Margaery, and, most importantly, anyone with half a brain could tell she liked him too. No one, no matter how kind or well-mannered she might be, wrote someone twice a moon’s turn without fail unless she really liked him. Sansa knew it would take her brother a good long while, but she had faith he would get there eventually.

Still, it did nothing to help her own situation. It might not be her wedding coming up in a year, but her father had said that all of Highgarden’s court would be coming to Winterfell for the festivities, and all undoubtedly included her own betrothed: Willas Tyrell, Margaery’s eldest brother and heir to Highgarden.

Much like Robb, she had grown up hearing stories of her betrothed. She knew that Willas was extremely intelligent and that he had been in a terrible riding accident shortly after she was born which left him with a pronounced limp. She also knew that he was thirteen years her senior, which, at the present moment, meant he was exactly twice her age.

He probably thought she was a silly child. Which, Sansa granted, was understandable.

Still, she worried.

She knew he was kind—he wrote her every year since she was six, and his letters always arrived the morning of her nameday, without fail (she always wrote him back with her thanks, and for the past few years even wrote him on his nameday, but lacked the nerve to do anything more). His words were always eloquent and kind. Tied to every letter there was a rose. It took her a few years to realize that these were the roses he bred himself. Each year it was a different variety, leaving Sansa to wonder just how many varieties he grew. She figured she would learn soon enough, once she moved to Highgarden.

It took her a few more years to notice how he filed down the thorns so smooth to the stem that it had never before even occurred to her that anything was missing. The realization left her with a stupid smile on her face, and left her in too good a mood the entire day to even react to Arya’s constant criticisms (the day after that, however, was another matter).

Willas was a good man, and Sansa knew in her heart that he would treat her well. But she didn’t want him to treat her well because he was a good, honorable man. She wanted him to treat her well because he liked her—because he wanted to (because he wanted her—no, no, she wasn’t going to think like that, but she was and now her face was Tully red to match her hair). So Sansa stayed up and worried and plotted and planned for the upcoming year.

It would be a crucial one, after all.
Arya was seconds away from pulling her hair out. She was only ten, but she didn’t need to be any older to know that her siblings were idiots. Except maybe for Bran. She still had some hope for Bran.

The rest of them, not so much.

She had long known of her siblings’ stupidity, but following Robb’s sixteenth nameday it reached a whole new level. Robb got all broody over his upcoming marriage, but his poor raven was getting more use than ever, and the last time Arya nada seen the creature it looked as if it would like nothing more than to be shot down by some overenthusiastic hunter on its next journey to the reach. (Due to the frequency of his correspondence with Margaery, their lord father had given Robb a raven of his very own for his tenth nameday. Robb named the bird Blackbeak, which was a stupid name if Arya had ever heard one.)

Sansa was even worse, if that were possible, because she hid it better than Robb in public, leaving Arya to deal with the brunt of it in the relative privacy of their lessons—like she really needed another reason to hate needlework.

Jon was brooding, too. He was always brooding. Somehow, he was still her favorite brother. She had made peace with his near-permanent scowl. But as of late there had been something more bothering him. She could tell. What really bothered her, though, was that he refused to tell her what it was. Needless to say, her favorite brother was not her favorite person at the moment.

Arya stabbed her needle through the fabric stretched across her embroidery hoop. She couldn’t decide which of her siblings’ faces she most wanted to stab, so she settled for pretending the abused fabric was all of them.

She needed to get away. Now.

Arya surveyed the room out of the corner of her eye. Sansa was asking Septa Mordane about some sort of technique (which made no sense, as Sansa was merely stitching yet another rose—how many ways could there possibly be to embroider a rose?). The septa took Sansa’s work into her own hands and began to demonstrate. All the other girls crowded around to watch, and Arya saw her chance.

Carefully setting her work aside, she cautiously stood. No one looked her way, so she tiptoed to the door as quickly as she dared, not even breathing until she reached the relative safety of the hallway. It took all of her self control not to break into a run, but somehow she managed to keep an agonizingly slow but silent pace until she was safely out of earshot. Then she broke into a sprint as if the Stranger himself were after her, and didn’t stop until she reached the forge.

Gendry didn’t have to look up from his work to know it was Arya—no one made noise quite like she did. Not even Hodor, though the man was a good foot more than twice her height and easily five times her weight. Gendry found it particularly amusing, considering that Arya was also capable of moving quiet as a cat when she wanted to. Such a thought, of course, brought his sister's cat to mind, and upon further contemplation Gendry realized just how accurate the comparison was, because cats—at least, Serra's cat—were also capable of making an ungodly amount of noise when they weren't being eerily silent.

He looked up from his work with a sigh and a scowl that was really just for show, and they both knew it.

“You’re not betrothed, are you?” Arya asked. Arya had asked him plenty of random, inappropriate,
or otherwise strange questions over the years, and Gendry liked to think he had gotten used to it. Clearly, though, he wasn’t quite as used to it as he would like to believe, because he very nearly dropped his hammer on his foot.

“What?” he spluttered. It certainly wasn’t the smartest thing that had ever passed through his lips, but it was all he could come up with at the moment.

Gendry decided to put his hammer aside. The last thing he needed was to break his toe. Again.

“Robb’s getting married next year, and he’s been moping about the castle for days over it. Sansa’s betrothed will be coming with the party from Highgarden, and she’s even worse. Jon’s brooding too, even more than usual. I don’t know why—it’s not like he’s betrothed to anybody—and he won’t tell me,” Arya vented. “So don’t get engaged. Apparently it just makes you mopey, and if I have to deal with one more mopey person, I’ll die. I swear it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, m’lady,” Gendry answered dryly. Arya gave him a very unladylike slap on the arm.

“I’m not a lady,” said Arya. She didn’t know how many times they had had this conversation, but it never seemed to get through to him. “But Jon, has he spoken to you?”

He knew Arya well enough to know that she was seriously concerned.

The time for jokes was over, then.

If Gendry were to be completely honest, he had had some concerns of his own regarding Jon. The last time they had spoken, Jon had mentioned joining his uncle Benjen at the Wall. He had tried to play it off casually, but Gendry could tell it was something Jon had already given a good bit of thought. But Gendry knew Jon hadn’t told Arya. He doubted Jon had mentioned his idea to anyone besides him and, possibly, his lord father.

“Not of anything concerning, no,” Gendry said, trying to stay as close to the truth as he could. He disliked lying, particularly to his friends, but it simply wasn’t his secret to tell.

Arya nodded, though she didn’t look entirely convinced. Gendry promised himself that he would speak with Jon about the matter next time he saw him to fend off the guilt that threatened to creep in. Though he wanted to, Gendry could not think of anything else to say, and settled for pounding a horseshoe into shape instead.

Arya, usually talkative, was for once in an equally quiet mood, and sat perched on the sill, silent. She was deep in thought, a vague frown on her face and a slight furrow in her brow. Gendry always found it easy to tell when Arya was preoccupied with her thoughts, because when she was any bit tuned in to her environment, her eyes were always moving—observing, searching, plotting. It was only when she was deep in thought that her gaze remained fixed in any position for any sizable period of time.

Her frown deepened slightly, and Gendry felt guilt creeping over him despite his best efforts.

He really needed to speak to Jon.

Margaery was pleased to receive Robb’s letter—she was always happy to hear from him—but by the time she got through it, she was mildly alarmed. She hadn’t known she was getting married.

Well, that wasn’t exactly true. She had always known she would marry Robb someday, but she had
no idea the date had been set.

And only a year away, no less.

Margaery had immediately gone to her mother, only to find that her lady mother was equally surprised. By this point, Margaery had a good idea of what had happened, but she still wanted to check at the source. As such, she found herself waiting impatiently outside her father’s solar, knocking for what was probably the fifth time.

She pressed her ear to the door and heard something that sounded suspiciously like snoring.

“Father?” she called. It was quite possibly louder than necessary, but Margaery’s patience was running thin.

“Do, uh, come in,” she finally heard after several seconds of mumbling and rustling. Margaery entered the solar, not needing to be told twice.

“I was just looking over some numbers,” her father, Mace Tyrell, Lord of Highgarden, told her, gesturing towards the texts before him on the desk in an attempt to subtly wipe the small line of drool from his chin. Margaery nodded but said nothing. She doubted her father had ever gone through ledgers on his own, particularly not of his own accord, but decided to look at his attempts to convince her (or anyone else, really) otherwise as amusing rather than irritating.

“Of course,” Margaery said. “I just wanted to speak with you for a moment about my wedding.”

“Wedding?”

“Yes. You see, I received a raven from Robb Stark this morning. Imagine my surprise to learn that a date had finally been set. And in just a year’s time, too.”

“Ah, yes.” Mace paused for a moment, brow furrowed. “Didn’t I tell you about that?”

“No,” Margaery immediately answered.

“I was certain I had. Are you sure?”

Margaery barely resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“You must have told your other daughter,” she replied sarcastically.

“I suppose,” Mace answered, and Margaery knew that her visit had exceeded his attention span. “Is that all?”

“I suppose,” she quoted back to him. And it really was—she had only needed to check to verify that Robb’s letter was accurate, which her father had more or less confirmed in his roundabout way. But Margaery couldn't help but continue. “Though I was thinking of riding to Dorne to train with the Sand Snakes—only for a little while, of course. Willas is quite friendly with Lord Oberyn. I think I could convince him to train me, don’t you?”

“Certainly, my dear.” How her grandmother managed to birth a son like her father would never cease to amaze Margaery.

“Oh, and father?” Margaery called, halfway out the door.

“Yes, sweetling?”
“The ledger is a dark blue book with gilded binding. The one you’ve got is *A History of Rose Breeding*, which I strongly suggest you return to Willas. He’s been looking everywhere for it.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from The National’s "Apartment Story".

What's everyone thinking of Season 5, now that we've reached the halfway point? I'm finding it incredibly stressful, which, considering it's a fictional universe full of fictional characters, may or may not say some possibly concerning things about my state of mind. Also, is it just me, or is the current death rate among major characters not sustainable? I mean, I understand that they're trying to show how book canon no longer applies and no one is safe, but I think we get it. (Also, I'm counting Jorah as dead here, because Grey Worm has already used up this season's miraculous recovery quota.)

Next time: Arrivals in Winterfell, and I try to figure out how to introduce orphaned direwolf pups in an AU universe where the original symbolism no longer fits. (The Eagles drop them off? No wait, that's Tolkien. Damn it.)
In the end, another week and a half passed before Gendry got a chance to speak with Jon. Though he had seen him several times, all the earlier visits had been either too short or in Arya’s presence.

The day was clear and unusually warm, so Mikken had shooed him from the forge early and told him to enjoy the weather. Jon had clearly heard something similar, because Gendry found him idly wandering the courtyard. (Arya was nowhere to be seen. Gendry supposed she wasn’t able to escape her lessons.)

After a brief discussion, the two friends decided to take a few longbows out into the Wolfswood for some archery practice. While the longbow was not usually the weapon of choice for either of them, the fine weather had left the practice yard a little crowded for their tastes.

They were just setting up their targets when Gendry figured it was as good a time as any to broach the issue.

“Arya can tell something’s wrong,” he said bluntly. He and Jon had been friends far too long to bring up such an issue any other way.

Jon’s hands faltered in adjusting the target’s height, but when he turned to Gendry he didn’t look surprised.

“I know,” Jon answered with a sigh.

“You have to tell her,” Gendry continued.

“I know,” Jon said once more.

“She even came to me about it, not two weeks ago, asking if I knew anything.”

“What did you tell her?” Jon asked, almost demanding. Gendry turned to his friend of ten years with his brows raised as if to say seriously?. Jon ducked his head, properly chastised.

“That I didn’t know—you hadn’t said anything,” Gendry said. “Which is, as we both know, a lie. You know how I feel about lying.”

“I do,” said Jon, clearly relieved, “but thank you.”

“It wasn’t my secret to tell,” Gendry answered simply. “But, really? You actually thought I would tell her? You do realize, I hope, that if I had, you wouldn’t just be hearing about it now.”

Jon winced. He knew Gendry spoke the truth. Arya was utterly incapable of hiding her true
feelings, especially when it concerned other people. It was, at once, both one of her best and worse qualities, for as much as Jon admired her for it, he knew full well it would get her in a great deal of trouble some day.

“I know,” Jon said once more. Finally satisfied with the target’s placement, he took a few steps back just to be certain.

“You have to tell her soon. It’s only going to be worse the longer you wait.”

Jon frowned.

“There’s something else, isn’t there?” Gendry asked.

“There’s so many things I don’t know where to start,” Jon admitted. “Things are going to change—they already are—but I don’t think Arya realizes it just yet, not really. And I get the feeling there’s a lot that I don’t even know, and if that’s true…I don’t know. It’s stupid, but I feel like we’re all standing on the edge of something, just waiting to be pushed over, and that telling Arya would push her over. Something has to, something will, I just really didn’t want it to be me.”

“What do you mean?” Gendry asked, genuinely concerned.

“I think Father has always indulged Arya because she reminds him of his sister. He’d chuckle when she would show up for dinner covered in mud, give her a fond smile when he saw her chasing me and Robb around, wearing Bran’s clothes,” Jon smiled at the memory. “But that’s changing, just like everything else. Arya could always make our father smile, was always just about the only one who could ever make him laugh. But now, now I catch him watching her sometimes, and he just looks incredibly sad.”

“Why, do you think?”

“Have you noticed that Arya hasn’t been around as much lately?” Jon asked him, and the immediate response of no died on Gendry’s tongue once he gave the matter some thought.

He still saw Arya most days, but her visits had gotten shorter. Also, she had started showing up at odd times—early in the morning or in the evening just before he started for home. Gendry had figured that she had found someone or something more interesting to occupy her time.

“I guess. I mean, I do still see her fairly often, but they have become shorter, and rather oddly timed,” Gendry answered.

Jon’s brow furrowed, and Gendry couldn’t help but think he almost looked surprised. “Oddly timed?”

“Early in the morning, late in the evening. I always warn her about coming over here in the dark on her own, but as you well know she never listens.”

Jon frowned once more.

“Is something wrong?” Gendry asked.

Jon shook his head to clear out his thoughts. “No, no. I do have a favor to ask of you, though.”

Gendry knew a redirection when he saw one, but let it go.

“What?”
“I want to give Arya something, before I go—a sword of her own.”

“I can speak with Mikken for you—”

“I’m not asking Mikken,” Jon interrupted. “I very well know Mikken has never so much as touched half the swords forged with his mark as of late.”

“What makes you say that?”

“The maker’s mark. When it’s one of yours the angle’s slightly different—just enough to notice if you’re looking at them side by side. I think it’s because you use your left hand,” Jon explained.

“Mikken’s been good to me,” Gendry defended. It was the truth, too. Sure, the blacksmith was gruff and far more generous with critiques than praise, but he was fair and skilled at his craft.

“I’m not arguing that,” said Jon, “I’m just stating facts. I don’t want just any longsword. I want something for Arya, something that suits her. I know Mikken had you study different styles of swords and sword fighting from all over Westeros and Essos—you complained about it enough. Is there anything out there that might suit her better?”

Gendry went through what he knew, dozens and dozens of illustrations and diagrams that had been all but branded in his brain. Nothing from Westeros would be ideal—even the slightly shorter and narrower style of longsword favored in Dorne would still be too big, and greatswords were out of the question. No one smaller than Gregor Clegane could even dream of using a greatsword for non-ceremonial uses. So he quickly moved to Essos and its numerous, varied cultures with their numerous, varied blades. A Dothraki arakh would be both impractical and just too bizarre. The bastard swords favored in Leng and Qarth and Slaver’s Bay were considerably larger and heavier than the average longsword, so they wouldn’t work either. And then it hit him: Braavos. The Braavosi were known for their slight stature and their equally slight swords. Yes, that just might work.

Jon saw a smile creep over his friend’s face. “So you thought of something?”

“I think I might have. I’ll have to look into it a little more, but yeah, I think so.”

“Excellent,” Jon said, grinning, before pulling an arrow from his quiver. “Now, my friend, are you ready to lose?”

“Your words wound me, truly,” Gendry answered dryly, though his smile betrayed him.

Gendry was sitting at the table in the front parlor when the howling started. It was nearing the Hour of the Ghost, and he had been working on some sketches for Jon—every since Jon had brought up his idea that afternoon, Gendry hadn’t been able to get the idea out of his head.

Gendry wasn’t certain he was really a night owl by nature, he preferred to work in peace and quiet, and, considering his family, the middle of the night was the only time he could hope to have that. As such, Gendry was no stranger to howling, to various calls and cries in the night. But this was unlike anything he had ever heard before. He found himself jumping to his feet, though he didn’t know why.

He had nearly convinced himself that he had imagined the noise when it sounded again. A door
opened down the hall and Burton rushed out, crossbow in hand. Brynn followed closely behind with a lamp. Both were still in their nightclothes.

Gendry could hear rustling and mumbling from all angles—it seemed everyone had been woken.

Whatever was outside howled once more, but softer. Gendry found himself relaxing slightly, but only for a moment. Seconds later, a very loud and feminine scream rang out, shortly followed by an equally loud string of curses by a much more masculine voice.

*Ben and Laurel*, Gendry thought, full of worry for the farmhand who had become an uncle in all but blood and his new wife.

Burton must have had the same thought, because he took the lamp from Brynn and ran out the door without a word of explanation. Gendry found himself following right behind before he could think better of it.

Ben and Laurel were easy to find in the dark, for they too had a lamp. They were huddled together just a few paces away from the giant oak tree not a stone’s throw from their cabin, speaking in hushed but urgent tones.

Seeing no obvious danger, Burton relaxed his hold on the crossbow.

“What’s going on out here?” he asked. Ben and Laurel both turned, noticing Burton and Gendry for the first time. Ben had grown from a tall, broad boy into a tall, broad man. Though he had had gotten plenty of attention from the young ladies of Stonecross and Wintertown, he had only married less than a year ago at the age of thirty-one. It had caused quite a stir, not only because of how long he had waited, but because of who he chose in the end: Laurel, the eldest daughter of Stonecross’s most renowned stonemason, who had long been cast aside as a spinster in the eyes of many. Aside from being twenty-six, she was not considered terribly attractive. She was extremely tall—shorter than Ben, but not by more than an inch—and flat-chested, with a freckled face and a wide smile that drew attention to the gap between her two front teeth. But she was kind and had a wicked sense of humor and they were happy together, which was all that really mattered as far as Gendry was concerned.

Ben merely pointed in the direction of the tree, and Laurel held out the lamp so that they could see. Lying at the base of the tree, covered in blood, was the largest wolf Gendry had ever seen, easily the size of a horse.

“Is it dead?” Burton asked.

“We think so,” Laurel answered. “It was whimpering when we first found it, trying to move, but it’s gone still since.”

Gendry moved closer to the beast, cautious despite their talk of its being dead, until he was close enough to reach out and touch its snout, if he so wished. In such proximity Gendry could see with absolute certainty that the beast was indeed dead, its eyes slightly open but glazed, entirely still. But not entirely quiet.

Following a hunch, Gendry walked around to the other side of the tree, and was stunned with what he found: five new-born wolf pups, barely visible in the weak starlight, so young their eyes were not yet open. But, unlike their mother, their soft whining attested to the fact that they were still very much alive.

“Tony! Ben! Laurel! You need to see this!” Gendry called.
Upon seeing the wolf pups, only Laurel gave an audible reaction, and even then it was no more than a soft “oh”.

“Direwolf pups?” Ben asked, incredulous. At that, Gendry turned.

“Direwolf?” he repeated.

Burton chuckled. “Aye. What did you think the creature was?”

“A wolf,” Gendry answered, feeling just a bit stupid. “A really, really big wolf. How could a direwolf be here? There aren’t any direwolves south of the Wall.”

“There weren’t any direwolves south of the Wall,” Burton corrected. “But now there are. Five, it would seem.”

“Six,” Laurel interjected softly, kneeling in the nearby bushes. She reached into the briars with her free hand and carefully pulled a sixth pup from where he was caught in the spindly branches. He was smaller than the others, and Gendry could tell that, underneath the blood and dirt, his fur was as white as new snow.

“It would be kindest to kill them now, would it not?” Ben asked, eyeing the pups sadly.

“No,” Burton answered immediately, his voice firm.

“They won’t make it anyway, not with their mother dead,” Ben argued. “Even if they did, somehow, we can’t have grown direwolves prowling around—we’d lose all our livestock, or worse.”

“It is not our place to decide their fate,” said Burton.

“Then whose?” Ben questioned.

“Direwolves have been the sigil of House Stark since the Age of Heroes. We must bring them to Lord Stark—there are six here, one for each of his children. It must be his decision,” Burton said.

“I’ve never known you to be superstitious,” said Ben.

“Aye, I’m not. I’m not one to look for signs from the gods. But I’ve seen enough to know it would be folly to assume that this is not.”

Ben nodded, though he did not look entirely convinced. “I suppose we’ve got deliveries to make to Winterfell tomorrow anyway.”

“Indeed we do.” Burton picked up two of the pups and took the runt from Laurel, awkwardly balancing all three in one arm while he carried his lamp and crossbow in the other. “Gendry, lad, take the others. They’ll sleep in the parlor tonight. Wouldn’t do to have them freeze before morning.”

Gendry did as he was told and picked up the other three pups. They were unpleasantly slimy and smelled of earth and blood.

He wondered whether Brynn would be more dismayed over the prospect of five direwolves temporarily residing in her parlor or the unfortunate state of his and Burton’s shirts.
It was Burton’s usual day for deliveries, but the moment Ned saw his old friend he knew something was out of the ordinary.

And it wasn’t just because the large crate he was carrying was whimpering.

“My lord,” Burton greeted, bowing his head respectfully. His three eldest sons, Gendry, and the farmhand accompanying them followed his example and did the same (Ned recognized the farmhand as one that had been around for a good while, but couldn’t recall his name. Silas, maybe?).

“Farmer Burton,” Ned replied, nodding his head in acknowledgement. “Everything is well, I trust?”

“Indeed it is, Lord Stark,” Burton assured. “However, there is something I need to speak with you about, and I’m afraid it can’t really wait.”

“I have a few minutes,” Lord Stark granted, knowing that his old friend would not be saying so if it were not true.

Burton took a large, covered crate from Gendry, and Ned knew right away that it wasn’t their usual order of new potatoes. He could have figured as much from their unusually nervous body language, but it was the whining coming from within the crate that really gave it away.

Burton put the crate down on the cobblestones and pried off the lid.

“What do you intend to do with them?” Ned asked once he got a good look at the contents, not seeing what any of this had to do with him.

“Direwolf pups, my lord,” Burton corrected. “Not quite a day old. Their mother died birthing them. I would’ve brought the body, but it would never fit in the cart. Besides, we had to burn it before it attracted scavengers.”

“What do you intend to do with them?” Ned asked.

“That’s why I needed to speak with you, my lord. I do not believe it is my place to make such decisions.”

“Why? They were born on your land, were they not?”

“Land that only belongs to me because of your generosity. I would not presume to know the will of the gods, but they are not known for being overly concerned with the business deals of men. The land might still be considered Stark land in their eyes,” Burton reasoned, and Ned could find no fault with it.

Burton had done the right thing, as far as Ned was concerned, but that didn’t mean the Lord of Winterfell was overly thrilled. The pups presented yet another decision to be made. Like Ned didn’t have enough of those already.

Ned sighed and put the lid back on the crate before picking it up. It was heavier than he anticipated. A nearby guard rushed to take it from him but Ned waved him off. Just because he was Lord of Winterfell didn’t mean he wasn’t capable of lifting boxes, even if they were heavier than he had expected them to be.
“What’s that?”

Ned turned to see Bran watching him curiously. Arya was close behind, chest heaving and face red with exertion. Looking back to Bran, Ned saw that his son held not one, but two practice bows.

The rest was rather easy to piece together.

If Ned had any doubts, Arya quickly removed them. Noticing that her brother was distracted, Arya snatched back her bow and smacked him across the back of the head with it for good measure. Gendry, who had watched all the while as he finished unloading the cart, had to bite back a smile.

“Ow, Arya!” Bran snapped, rubbing the spot where a lump was already forming.

“Serves you right, stealing my bow! Maybe I’ll do it again!” Arya swung the bow in a manner far better suited to a club. Bran dodged the attack, but just barely.

“All right, all right! Enough!” Ned shouted, putting himself between his children. He would have restrained them both, but he was still carrying a crate full of direwolf pups.

“What’s in the box?” Arya asked, losing her interest in both Bran and her bow. One of the residents of the crate let out a loud whine, as if responding to her question.

Suddenly, the siblings who had been actively fighting one another mere moments before were on the same side, standing shoulder to shoulder without even the slightest pinch or shove, united against their new opponent: him.

Ned sighed, getting the feeling that Burton was right about a Stark deciding the pups fate but was wrong about which Stark it would be. Glancing to his old friend, Ned found himself to be on the receiving end of a look that was half amused and half sympathetic—Burton, after all, had ten strong-willed children of his own.

Before Ned could decide what to do, Arya took the decision away from him and into her own hands, as she was wont to do, by reaching up and snatching the lid off the crate when Ned unthinkingly looked away for a moment (Catelyn always lamented it as one of Arya’s worst traits, and at that moment Ned couldn’t help but agree).

“Puppies!” Arya and Bran shouted in tandem.

“These are direwolf pups—not pets,” Ned corrected sternly. At least, the thought it was sternly. His children seemed to disagree. Either that or they were just ignoring him, and Ned wasn’t sure which scenario was preferable. By this point, Burton had returned to help his sons and the kitchen staff move the deliveries inside.

“What do you mean to do with them then?” Bran asked, before his eyes widened and he gasped, figuring out the answer on his own. “No! Father, you can’t!”

Though Arya was not quite as perceptive as her brother, Bran’s outburst clued her in as well.

“We’ll care for them all on our own, won’t we, Bran? We’ll do everything ourselves,” she bargained.

“We promise!” Bran added.

Ned sighed. “Very well. But you will care for them yourselves and, more importantly, train them yourselves, and train them well. And if they die, for they still very well might, you will bury them
yourselves. Understood?"

Bran and Arya nodded eagerly.

“Very well. Go get your brothers and sister and bring them here. There is more to be discussed and I’d rather do it all at once.”

“I’ll get mother too!” Bran shouted as he raced off, but Arya hesitated.

“What about Jon?” Arya asked quietly.


Arya’s smile was blinding as she turned to race after Bran, and any lingering doubts Ned had about his decision melted away.

Chapter End Notes

Episode 9 man. Episode 9. That's all I've got to say. I've had the feeling that Shireen was in trouble for a while now, but I had thought Ramsay Bolton was going to kill her. Honestly, that was one of the most unsettling scenes I've seen in a very long while (its striking similarity to the final scene of The Wicker Man certainly didn't help).

Has anyone else noticed that Melisandre is running the show?

Anyway, I wanted to give a quick shout out to Appirinia. While I did not use her exact suggestion for introducing the direwolves, it provided the spark of inspiration that resulted in what I did end up writing, so many thanks for that.

I hope everyone is still reading and enjoying. While a lot more happens in the next chapter, it should be up before too long, as it's already half written.

Chapter title comes from The National's "This Is The Last Time".

Next time: Preparations for Robb and Margaery's wedding begin in earnest.
298 A.C. — Dragonstone

Stannis did not love his wife. He felt no guilt over the matter, as he knew full well she did not love him either. None of this bothered him. She respected him, and he her, and that was really all he had hoped for.

Well. That, and an heir—which was what bothered him. Because while his wife very much had the Frey look with her weak chin and dull, mousy hair, she had not inherited her grandfather’s prolific nature. He had chosen her because he saw her as being sturdy; strong and of a passive disposition. He was right on all accounts. She had survived eight pregnancies and their results: two miscarriages, five stillborns, and one daughter. All five of the stillborns had been male. If Stannis had been a religious man, he probably would have taken it as a sign, or even a punishment from the gods. Thankfully, Stannis was not a religious man.

He was, however, a patient man, which was why he was sitting in his solar in the small hours of the morning, going over Maester Cressen’s notes from court earlier in the day. There had been one particular concern brought forth by a rather profitable—and therefore, important—merchant, and Stannis was not overly satisfied with the solution they had come to. With some distance and more time to think on the matter he hoped to come up with something better. Anyway, he had a surplus of time on his hands at the moment, so he might as well do something productive with it. After all, the shortest of his wife’s labours had lasted eleven hours, and the longest nearly three days. Maester Cressen had been particularly convinced that the latter occasion would end with the death of both mother and child. He was half right. The former had resulted in Shireen.

It came as quite a surprise then, five hours after he had retreated to his solar to escape the screaming (he might not love her, but he didn’t like to hear to her scream), a breathless but beaming Maester Cressen came knocking at the door.
“You have a son, my lord,” was all he said.

While Stannis would never love his wife, he knew that he would never come closer than he did seeing her with their son in her arms for the first time, all but glowing with victory. She proudly presented his heir to him, a large babe with a head of dark hair wrapped in a blanket of black velvet and Baratheon yellow silk, though her arms trembled with exhaustion. Stannis knew little of infants or child-rearing, but the boy struck him as the very picture of health, all pink skin and alert blue eyes. As if trying to prove as much to his father, the infant wriggled one arm free of its confines and waved his tiny fist in the air.

“Have you chosen a name?” Stannis asked. He knew many lords took the task of naming their children upon themselves, but Stannis saw no reason to—he had an heir, the rest hardly mattered to him. Besides, he trusted his wife and her good judgement not to pick something entirely reprehensible, like Walder or Robert.

“Steffon,” Kyra announced with pride. “Steffon Baratheon.”

Stannis nodded. “A strong name. Fitting.”

It was as close as Stannis would ever come to praising anyone.

300 A.C. — Wolfswood, east of Winterfell

Arya ran as fast as her feet could carry her. The light was dim and growing ever darker, but she knew the way—it was a straight shot east from Winterfell’s courtyard; easy enough to remember. Unfortunately, she didn’t know the narrow, winding path quite well enough to anticipate low-hanging branches or exposed roots, so she had tripped no less than half a dozen times already. She had at least one new tear in her trousers and was certain that her calves were in a sorry state, scraped and bruised and smudged with dirt. She doubted her knees fared any better. A particularly ambitious briar had sliced her left cheek, and Arya could feel the sticky trail left behind by the lone drop of blood creeping down to her jaw slowly beginning to crust at the edges. She would fare much better if slowed down, even just a little bit, but to do so would be rational and Arya’s state of mind was far from rational at the moment.

It was only once oak and ironwood gave way to young apple trees marking the edge of the farmland that Arya finally paused, remembering just how large the farm was and the large number of people besides Gendry who lived there.

She could just go up to the door, she supposed, but that would undoubtedly mean speaking with someone other than Gendry, which in turn meant needing to behave properly—something Arya struggled with at the best of times. But what other options did she have? She had come this far already.

Luckily, the gods seemed to be on her side for once, and spared her from having to think of an answer.

“Arya?”

Arya turned to see Gendry standing not five yards away, an axe slung in a leather holster across his
back and his arms laden with fresh-chopped firewood. She silently thanked the gods before remembering that she was angry with them—and just about everyone else for that matter.

“Jon’s taking the Black. He’s going to the Wall; he’s leaving and,” to her horror, Arya found her eyes welling with tears, “…and he’s never coming back.” Arya felt her rage slipping through her fingers, leaving her feeling tired and empty and so, so sad. She wanted the anger back—it was so much easier to handle—but the more she tried to hold on to it the further away it slipped.

The tears streamed down her face and the salt stung the cut on her cheek. But even through her tears Arya noticed the flicker of a most unexpected emotion crossing Gendry’s face: relief.

“But you knew that already, didn’t you?” Arya accused, putting the pieces together. Anger was beginning to creep back in and she welcomed it.

“Aye,” Gendry admitted. He hated the lie to begin with and saw no reason to continue it.

“How long?”

“Three moon’s turns—nearer four, at this point.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Arya was nearly shouting, but she didn’t care. She could feel her rage once again threatening to give way to despair, and she just wasn’t willing to let that happen. It wasn’t fair to blame Gendry, but he was there, and it was easier to maintain her anger when it was aimed at such a close target.

“I wanted to—believe me, I did. But it wasn’t my secret to tell,” Gendry answered evenly. He had a temper—possibly even worse than Arya, if he were to be honest with himself—but it was for that very reason that he kept a much tighter rein on his than she did hers. Besides, he had had nearly five more years of practice controlling it than she had (though something told him that five years, in her case, wasn’t going to make much of a difference).

Arya refused to look at him, which made it difficult for Gendry to gauge her reaction. He put the firewood down and then inched his way closer to her in the same way one might approach a potentially dangerous animal.

Once she was in arm’s reach he cautiously rested a hand on her shoulder in an attempt at comfort, unsure of what else to do. Surprised by the contact, Arya turned to look at him. Gendry swore under his breath, unable to help himself. He gently framed her face in his hands before he could think better of it, tilting her chin slightly to get a better look at her cheek.

“Gods, Arry!” he chastised. “Did you crawl the whole way here through the gorse?”

Arya pulled away. “And what if I did?”

Gendry rubbed the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, silently counting backwards from five. He had to remain reasonable, because he knew Arya certainly wouldn’t be.

“Come with me,” he finally said.

“Where?”

“Back to the house. Someone’s got to clean those.”

“Who, you?”
Gendry snorted. “Brynn. She raised the three idiots and the rest of us besides—probably just as good as your Maester Luwin when it comes to scrapes, and, at the moment, much closer.”

Arya frowned and the movement pulled at the cut. She was feeling so many things she couldn’t even identify half of them any more.

“What do I say?” She had met Gendry’s mother many times, but only on a scant handful of occasions had she visited his home, and not in many years besides. If her lady mother knew she would have her head, and Arya had more than enough grief to deal with already.

“I’ll go ahead and deal with everything, all right?” Gendry told her. “But you’ve got to promise me you’ll be waiting here when I get back.”

“All right.”

“No, Arya, promise me.”


“I’ll only be a minute.”

Arya nodded and Gendry headed towards the farmhouse.

Gendry was only gone a minute, just as he promised. In that time, Arya only seriously considered making a run for it twice, which she thought very impressive.

“All right, come on,” Gendry said, retrieving the firewood from where he had left it in the grass. He was surprised by how quickly he managed to convince Arya to let Brynn look at her wounds. He supposed it could be that he had suddenly grown much more convincing, but he knew better than that. Arya had been looking for a fight when she arrived—and hadn’t been above challenging the shrubbery, evidently. But at some point in their discussion all the fight just drained out of her, and afterwards there was something in her gaze, something beyond the exhausted anger and hurt and betrayal, something that Gendry could not place. He wished he could remember exactly when in their conversation her attitude had changed, but for the life of him he could not pinpoint it. Had he said something? A sensible conclusion, he supposed, only he could not quite bring himself to believe it.

He glanced back to make sure Arya was still following. She was.

It wasn’t just Brynn in the parlor, because it never was. Laurel was sitting with Bess in the corner, teaching the younger girl some sort of knitting technique, and Serra was cross-legged on the rug before the fire, cat in her lap and a book on her knee. The younger ones were all in bed. Gendry had no idea where Cory, Jory, and Rory were, but he was certain that wherever they were they were up to no good. Regardless, Gendry was just thankful that they weren’t there. Those three were the worst gossips Gendry had ever had the misfortune of knowing, and he had met Jeyne Poole.

Seeing Arya’s cheek, Brynn clucked like a mother hen (though Gendry had never heard a chicken make it sound so admonishing).

“The light’s no good, we’ll have to go closer to the fire,” she said. “Gendry, bring the stool.”
Gendry did as he told, moving the stool in front of the fireplace. Serra graciously moved out of the way. Shadow—the oversized furry mass she called a cat—was less amiable about the relocation. She stalked away and out the door in a huff, looking to kill any smaller creatures that made the mistake of entering her territory. Most likely one of their corpses would make its way into someone’s slipper before morning came, but Gendry couldn’t bring himself to care so long as it wasn’t his.

“Hello, Arya,” Serra greeted, blue-grey eyes twinkling in amusement. She and Arya were not terribly close, her being two years older and possessing different interests besides, but they had been acquainted for many years, and were genuinely fond of one another.

“Hi, Serra,” Arya replied in kind. “Book any good?”

“Well, it’s *The Reign and Legacy of Jaehaerys the Wise*, so it’s not exactly the most exciting thing I’ve ever read. Interesting, though.”

“All right, take a seat,” Brynn instructed Arya. Turning, Arya saw that the woman had a bowl of water and several cloths, as well as a few jars full of substances Arya couldn’t identify. But they didn’t look pleasant.

Arya absently scratched at her arm, not even noticing she was doing so. Brynn, however, did. Gently rolling up Arya’s sleeve to reveal her forearm, Brynn saw the telltale signs of nettle stings. Several of them. Checking the other arm, Brynn was not surprised to find a similar sight.

“Looks like you found the nettles, too,” Brynn commented drily. “Gendry, be a dear and go pick some dock weed? And don’t be stingy. Actually, just bring me a whole plant, okay?”

“Sure,” said Gendry, moving towards the door. He was not even halfway there when he stopped and turned back, having realized something rather important. “Which one is that again?”

“Honestly, Gen. You’re hopeless,” Serra scolded, beating her mother to it. “I’ll do it.”

Despite her harsh words, Serra looked more amused than anything as she pulled on her slippers and grabbed her cloak from the rack.

“Thanks,” Gendry called after her as she took the lantern off its hook by the door and headed out into the night without so much as a backwards glance.

Behind him, Arya hissed, and Gendry cringed, recalling countless incidences from his youth when he had been in the very same position and had made the very same sound.

“Is that *salt water*?” Arya asked incredulously.

“Yes. Now hold still,” Brynn said.

It was nearly an hour before Brynn considered Arya’s wounds cleaned and dressed to her satisfaction, in which time Laurel had left, and Bess had retired for the night shortly after. Though Arya had dozens of scratches over her body, Brynn only deemed two of them—the one on her face and another on her left leg—as requiring bandages, which, in this case, were thin strips of boiled linen adhered with something that, to Arya, looked very much like honey (actually, the more Arya thought of it, the more she was convinced it *was* honey).

Meanwhile, the nettle stings that Arya had barely felt when she had gotten them made themselves
very well known. If there was one thing to be said on behalf of nettle stings, it was that they
certainly distracted her from the discomfort of Brynn treating her wounds.

Serra returned and made a salve from the dock weed, which Arya gratefully and generously
slathered over both arms.

“Thank you,” Arya said. As the time had passed she had only grown more aware of how stupid and
childish her actions had been, and felt quite embarrassed about it all—though she would never
admit as much to anyone, of course. After all they had done for her, Arya knew they deserved far
more than a thank you, but that was all she could think to say.

“I was sorry to hear about Jon. I know how close you two are,” Brynn said softly, inspecting
Arya’s arms one last time just to be certain.

“Gendry told you?” Arya asked, though the answer was obvious.

“Aye, moons ago. Soon as Jon told him, I’d imagine. He tells me everything, after all,” Brynn
admitted, much to Gendry’s embarrassment.

“Mam,” Gendry protested from where he sat on the opposite side of the room. He had been sent
there—out of the way, that is—the better part of an hour ago, and had quietly waited all the while.

“It’s true,” Serra chimed in. She had returned to her book and her cross-legged position on the rug,
but was hardly absorbed in the material enough to miss an opportunity to embarrass her favorite
brother.

Arya smiled delightedly.

Gendry flushed bright red to the roots of his hair and scowled. “Well, I won’t be doing it again,
that’s certain.”

“Oh come now, don’t be dramatic. It doesn’t suit you,” Brynn said. “You may try, of course, but
you’d boil over like a kettle before a fortnight passed—as you very well know.”

Gendry grunted but said nothing. There was nothing he could say, after all. Brynn was right and he
knew it.

Brynn returned her attention to Arya. She could tell the girl needed a little mothering, and from
what Gendry and the lad himself had told her, she doubted Arya could go to her mother about
anything regarding Jon Snow. “I understand, you know. Better than you might think.”

Arya looked at her skeptically.

“My husband was a member of your father’s guard during the rebellion.”

“I know,” Arya interrupted, before realizing she was being rude. Maybe her lady mother was right
about her needing to work on that. “Sorry.”

“Not at all,” Brynn said, waving away her apology. “Your lord father has told you stories, then?”

“Some,” Arya answered, knowing her answer just about as far from the truth as it could be without
being a bald-faced lie. Sometimes her father would go so far as to start to tell a story before he
realized what he was doing and shut up like a clam. A few times he had actually finished a story,
but never in her presence. She just heard the tales second-hand from Jon.
Brynn smiled in a way that made Arya feel completely transparent. “Burton and I had barely been married a fortnight when he decided to follow Lord Stark into battle. When he told me I made him repeat himself, because I couldn’t bring myself to believe what I’d heard. I’ve never been so angry in my life. He tried to calm me down, of course, but it only made it worse. Men are often like that, you’ll find—but they mean well.” Gendry made a sound of protest which Brynn ignored. “So, you see, I did the only thing I could think to do.”

“What?” Arya asked. Serra had put down her book by now and was watching her mother with interest. She had never heard this story before.

“I hit him. Socked him right in the nose. Broke a finger in the process. Broke his nose, too,” Brynn admitted with what might have been a hint of pride.

“You did not!” Serra gasped, slack-jawed.

“He always said he broke his nose as a boy when he slipped on the cobblestones,” Gendry chimed in. After all, it was Burton’s go-to “walk, don’t run” cautionary tale. He had no idea how many times he had been told it as a child, just that it was far more than he had ever cared to hear.

“Yes, that was the first time he broke his nose. I’m sure he never told you it was the last,” said Brynn. Gendry merely shrugged in response.

“What did father do?” Serra asked.

“Well, he swore quite a bit. I apologized. Soon as the bleeding stopped, he showed me how to throw a proper punch—using the other hand, of course. This thumb here was swollen something awful,” Brynn said, wiggling her right thumb.

“Did it help?” Arya asked, and even though he couldn’t see her face Gendry knew exactly what expression she was wearing, as well as where her thoughts were headed. Luckily for Jon, however, Brynn also noticed.

“I’m not saying you should hit your brother. I would strongly advise against it, in truth. What I’m saying is that, when it comes to the people we love, we all do stupid things. But if someone loves you, they will forgive you, just as long as you give them a chance,” she said. “So give Jon a chance. I don’t know why he’s decided to join the Night’s Watch, but I do know that it wasn’t because he doesn’t love you. And in being careless you won’t just hurt yourself—you’ll hurt the people who care about you.”

“I understand,” Arya said, feeling properly chastised.

“Take some time to calm down, then talk to your brother. And don’t forget to listen, hard as it may be. Don’t let him leave with bad blood between you, or you’ll both regret it,” Brynn promised.

“I know.”

Brynn glanced out the window, trying to gauge the time. “You should start heading back soon if you want to make it back unnoticed.”

“I’ll take Blue, bring her back. It will be quicker that way,” Gendry offered. “No one should be out at this hour, but I’ll stop at the tree line, just to be safe.”

Arya was not yet twelve, but if someone saw him taking her back to Winterfell in the small hours of the morning it would be a disaster, and they all knew it, regardless of the truth.
“So you won’t tell?” Arya asked, nervous.

“No, I won’t. But you’ll have to think of some explanation for why you looked like something that direwolf of yours dragged in, so I can only hope you have a more creative mind than I,” Brynn said, before turning to Gendry. “Be careful.”

Gendry nodded.

“Ready to go?” he asked Arya. She nodded, wiping the half-dried tears from her cheeks and hopping off the stool. She wrapped her arms around Brynn in a hug, which the older woman warmly returned. In that moment, Arya couldn’t help but wish that her own lady mother was a little more like Gendry’s. She felt terrible for thinking so, but it didn’t make it any less true.

Arya thanked her one last time, exchanged goodbyes with Serra, and then followed Gendry out the door.

Blue was a large horse, though very docile, and Gendry had to lift Arya into the saddle. They rode in the dark in a companionable quiet. The moon was setting but there were still a few hours before the sun would rise, and it was so dark that Arya could hardly make out her hand in front of her face. Gendry hadn’t brought a lantern—too much of risk of being seen—but assured her that Blue knew the way to and from Winterfell enough to travel it in her sleep, never mind the dark. Arya decided she wasn’t in a position to question anyone else’s navigational skills.

The trip was just as uneventful as anticipated, and Gendry left Arya off at the edge of the woods, as promised. She waved goodbye one last time before slinking off into the dark. Gendry waited until she turned into the courtyard, and then some, just to be certain, before heading back.

By the time Gendry made it back to the house, Brynn and Serra had gone to bed. It was a chilly night, though, so they had left the fire burning, which Gendry appreciated. This was one particular occasion in which it would be far more difficult to creep around in the the dark than not.

Shadow had returned in the meantime, as well, and had taken up residence in the chair closest to the fire. She lifted her head to inspect the disturbance. Finding only Gendry, she soon settled back down and resumed dozing. At a glance, the thick ruff of fur about her neck looked wet in places, but the inky color of her fur made it impossible to tell whether it might be from water or the blood of her victims, or quite possibly both. Gendry saw no obvious signs of carnage left about on the floor, which was good enough for him.

He crept down the hall, avoiding the noisier floorboards with the sort of ease only brought about by years of practice, and quietly climbed the ladder up to the loft he shared with Jacob and Jordan and Rowan. He could hear Jory’s distinctive gravelly snore, which could only mean that the three of them had also returned in his absence. Oh well. Gendry supposed it would have been too much to expect everything to go smoothly. At least they hadn’t returned while Arya was still around. He could only hope Cory and Rory were also asleep. In the near perfect darkness of the loft, it was impossible to tell. He had nearly made it to his bed and was already congratulating himself when he managed to step on something quite pointy. Gendry managed to keep from cursing as he hobbled the rest of the way to his bed, but the damage was already done. Damn Rowan and his tools and his allergy to putting things away.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here?” came a very awake and infuriatingly smug voice from somewhere to his left.
“I’m not sure, Cory. Maybe Rory could shed some light on the situation?” came Jory’s perfectly timed reply.  

Gendry didn’t have to wait to hear the strike of a match to know that he’d been had. He sighed irritably. There was little else he could do.  

“Why certainly,” answered Rory as he lit a candle. The one light couldn’t quite reach the corners of the long room or the highest parts of the slanted ceiling, giving the room an eerie illusion of being much larger than it was. The room was just about as clean as any space shared by four teenage boys could be, which meant it was still a disaster, but only smelled faintly of sweat. Looking to the floor, Gendry confirmed that what he stepped on had indeed been a hammer.  

“Real funny,” Gendry deadpanned, before turning to Rory. “And, really? I could’ve broken a toe!”  

“Ah, but you didn’t,” Rory replied, as if he was somehow responsible for what they both knew was pure luck on Gendry’s part.  

“Now, now, Gen. Don’t think you can distract us from the matter at hand,” said Cory.  

“What would that be?” Gendry asked shortly.  

“You,” all three answered.  

“Yes, Gendry, where were you?” asked Jory.  

“I could ask you lot the same,” Gendry snapped.  

“We’re always out,” said Rory.  

“Besides, you’ll find out soon enough,” Cory added with a smirk. Well, Gendry had expected as much.  

“But you, on the other hand…” Rory continued.  

Gendry rolled his eyes but said nothing.  

“I don’t think he’s going to tell us anything,” said Jory.  

“No, brother mine, I don’t think he shall,” said Rory.  

“We’ll just have to guess then, won’t we?” said Cory.  

“Indeed!” answered the other two. Gendry’s fingers itched to wring their necks. If he actually had a mind to, it would hardly be difficult. He had a good four inches on Jory, the tallest of the three, and years in the forge meant he probably had more strength in one arm than in all six of theirs combined. Alas, they were his brothers and he loved them. At least, that’s what he repeated to himself on a near daily basis.  

He should have just slept in the parlor. The rug wasn’t his bed, but it was far better than this. Regardless of how he felt about Serra’s cat, the creature was clearly more clever than him.  

“You know, I think I have an idea,” said Rory.  

“You don’t mean…” Jory piped in.  

“I think he does!” added Cory. “And you know what? I think he might be right.”
“It does make sense,” Jory decided. “Well, it sure took long enough!”

“Indeed,” Cory agreed, slapping a hand on Gendry’s shoulder, “we were all getting quite worried, you know.”

“Thought all that heat in the forge might have addled your brain,” Rory added solemnly.

“What are you on about?” Gendry finally gave in, unable to take any more of their talking in circles.

“Only that you’ve got a girl,” answered Cory.

In retrospect, Gendry realized it should have been obvious, but it hadn’t. Actually, it took him completely by surprise, and in his surprise he was stupid enough to reply with:

“What? No!”

Which was, of course, just about the worst thing he could have possibly said.

Cory, Jory, and Rory’s faces lit up as if they had just stumbled upon some great treasure. Then again, as far as they were concerned, they had.

“Doesn’t explain why he’s so mopey, though,” Rory commented.

“Unless she ended it. You know, maybe Gen didn’t—”

“If you finish that sentence, Jory, I will murder you,” Gendry warned.

Jory did not finish his sentence, but he did pout like a boy half his age. “You’re no fun.”

“Let’s see if we can guess who it is,” challenged Cory.

“It’s not like there’s a shortage of choices. Lucky bastard,” Jory teased. “Let’s see… there’s Rose.”

“Who?” Gendry asked, unable to help himself.

“Oh, ouch,” Rory commented.

“The shoemaker’s daughter. Tall, red hair, brown eyes, freckles. The shoemaker in Wintertown,” Cory added, seeing Gendry was about to ask another question. Gendry glared but said nothing and Cory knew his guess had been spot on.

“Say, Rory, she lives south of her father’s shop, doesn’t she?” Jory asked.

“I do believe so.”

“Interesting. Then why does she walk past the forge nearly every single day? Isn’t that north of the shoemakers?”

“Maybe she thought no one would notice?” Cory interjected.

“Well, Gendry certainly didn’t!” Rory concluded, and the three shared a laugh at their brother’s expense.

“Hmm… who else?”
“Willa, the wheelwright’s daughter,” Rory contributed.

“Don’t forget her sister, blonde Jeyne,” added Jory.

“Thank you, brother mine. And on the subject of Jeynes there’s tall Jeyne.”

“Gap-toothed Jeyne.”

“Stonecross Jeyne.”

“Ah, yes, we can’t forget the maidens of Stonecross.”

Gendry felt a muscle in his eye twitch. Nothing was worth this kind of torture. *Nothing*.

“Alyce and Violet and Bett and Grace.”

“Don’t forget Ivy.”

“And Bessa.”

“O-ho, yes!” Cory said with a laugh. “Who could forget Bessa?”

Gendry shuddered. Bessa worked in Stonecross’s lone small tavern, *The Stone Crow*. She was a good ten years older than any of them, had a reputation for providing certain… services, and looked at Gendry in a way that made him feel like a piece of meat. A very naked piece of meat. It was terrifying.

“No, no, not any of them,” Rory decided.

“Wait, I’ve got it!” Cory said, triumphant. “Elinor!”

“Ella’s just a friend,” Gendry protested. She was the only daughter of the innkeeper at *The Smoking Log* and Gendry had known her since they were kids—for as long as he could remember, actually, now that he thought about it.

“Ella, is it? Do you have pet names for all your friends, Gen?” Cory teased.

“Why, I do believe he’s blushing!” said Jory, and Gendry realized it was true, much to his horror.

“Can I sleep now?” he snapped.

Cory and Jory laughed hysterically. Rory smiled, but seemed somewhat subdued. Gendry figured he was finally getting tired.

“All right, all right,” Jory relented once he finally calmed down. “That’s it for tonight. I make no promises about tomorrow, though.”

“Even if you did I wouldn’t believe you,” Gendry told him bluntly.

“And rightly so,” said Jory.

They all said good night and returned to their own beds before Rory blew out the candle. Gendry finally felt himself starting to drift off when Cory’s voice, unusually loud and clear in the pitch dark and otherwise silent room, pulled him right back:

“And we can’t forget the *Stonecross* shoemaker’s daughter, Daisy.”
“Now you’re just fucking with me,” Gendry sleepily accused.

“Oh yes, yes I am,” was Cory’s unapologetic response.

Chapter End Notes

Title from The National's "This is the Last Time".

This chapter took a lot longer than I had anticipated for two reasons: life and Poldark. But mostly Poldark. And any of you out there who aren't watching Poldark should be watching Poldark. And for the Americans out there, Episode 3 is this Sunday on Masterpiece. I don't care if you haven't seen the first two. This is really the first important one. Also, abs. Really glorious abs. Usually shirtless stuff doesn't do much for me, but hot damn.

It's quite fascinating, actually, because I can't even quite pin down why or how it's so different, but it really is. I mean, there's nothing on display that you wouldn't see regularly on cable TV (actually, there's less—not enough to even try to make a comparison with GoT), but there is something scandalous about it, in the best possible way. To quote my best friend, a rather raunchy college student: "Oh my goodness! Poldark!". I honestly regret not filming her reaction. It was hysterical. I'd never seen her scandalized before in eight years of friendship. Up until then I didn't even think it possible.

Also, Ross and Demelza are gorgeous and adorable and amazing and wonderfully canon and while someone does row away in a boat to (probably) never be heard from again it's a minor character who does not have glorious abs so it's all okay.

One more thing: there is no Poldark fanfiction. Literally zero (okay, maybe more like 20, but it's pretty damn close). It is a sad state of affairs and someone really needs to do something about it. Not me, because I am putting all my fanfic-writing energy into finishing this behemoth in a reasonable amount of time. But if anyone out there might consider writing Poldark fic, know that you will have at least one reader/reviewer/friend for life (*waves hello*).

Long story short, I watched the entire eight-part series twice in a week (on my own the first time, with aforementioned best friend the second) which put a damper on my writing. But after a few days reflection it actually served to reenergize my muse. I definitely plan on posting the next chapter within the month, and it's going to be a big one.

Next time: Robbaery wedding plans. No, seriously. I mean it this time.

(It's kind of fitting that my longest chapter ever has my longest end note ever).
you can't imagine (how i hate this)

Chapter Summary

In which it is the day after and Arya continues to be her own worst enemy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Most of the day following Arya’s panicked visit was a blur to Gendry.

He woke to the sound of screeching, somehow feeling more tired than he did when he had finally gotten to sleep. From the light pouring through the one small window, he could tell he had slept much later than he had intended. He wondered how late he would have slept if it weren’t for Brynn hearing of the other three’s shenanigans.

Cory, Rory, and Jory were well acquainted with this particular form of wake-up call, and so mainly looked sleepy in the face of her rage.

Gendry half-listened as he scrambled around the room in search of clean clothes, putting them on as he went. From the repeated mention of Farmer Teague, Gendry concluded that he had been the target of whatever it was they had done. No surprise there.

He stumbled into the parlor, only to discover Serra and Bess already there, entertaining two visitors: Teague’s younger daughters, Wylla and Ruth. They must have joined their father when he had come calling with his complaints, and chosen to stay after he left.

Wylla was sixteen and nearly as tall as Laurel. Ruth was fourteen and at the opposite end of the spectrum, petite with delicate features. Gendry thought she looked very much like a mouse.

Serra saw the sizable bags under her brother’s eyes and sympathetically pushed a plate of brown bread slathered with blackberry jam in his direction, inviting him to sit.

He gratefully accepted the invitation. The unanticipated visitors meant Gendry had to scrap his original plan, which was to stuff his face with the first thing he could find and then run out the door. Oh well. He was already hopelessly late.

As Serra poured him a mug of blackberry tea, she told him the full story of what happened, with some help from Wylla and Ruth.

Apparently, the three idiots (her words) had disassembled Farmer Teague’s goat pen and reassembled it on the roof of his house, goats included, where the terrified creatures proceeded to eat holes right through the thatch.

“Didn’t they do that before?” Gendry asked, realizing moments later that that probably wasn’t the best response.

“No, I believe you’re thinking of an incident last year with the milliner. It was his chickens,” Serra said.
“Still, I consider it a disappointing lack of originality on their part. Lazy, really,” Wylla added, sounding more amused than anything.

Gendry washed down the last of his breakfast with the last dregs of his tea and said his goodbyes before heading out the door.

Mikken noticed his apprentice’s pitiful state when he rushed in late, but the boy hardly ever preformed any less than admirably and never missed a day, so he said nothing.

Usually, Mikken spent every third day working in the smithy of Winterfell proper and left Gendry to his own devices in the Wintertown forge. Today should have been one of those days, but after getting a good look at Gendry he decided it would be best to stay and keep an eye on the boy instead.

It wasn’t clear if Gendry noticed the deviation from their usual schedule, but if he did, he made no comment on the matter. He did, however, attempt to turn one of Harwin’s daggers into a horseshoe. To be fair, the blade could hardly be called an inspired piece of craftsmanship.

Jon visited shortly after midday, but, seeing the state Gendry was in, only stayed long enough to confirm their sparring plans the next day. Jon gave him an odd look on the way out, but Gendry thought little of it. He would give himself an odd look, too, if he could.

Arya was roused by knocking at her door, much to her despair. Everything hurt.

“Lady Arya?”

She groaned into her pillow. Helen was one of her favorites among the servants—a cheery middle aged woman who rarely questioned Arya’s feeble excuses—but her voice was one of the last things she wanted to hear at the moment.

“Lady Arya, dinner will be served in less than an hour, and no one’s seen you all day. Your lady mother’s growing concerned.”

Well, that certainly woke her up. Arya jumped out of bed and, oh wow, that was a really bad idea. She hissed and leaned her weight against the dresser.

“Thank you, Helen. I’ll be out shortly,” Arya answered, doing her best to sound normal.

“Are you all right?” Clearly, her best wasn’t all that great.

“Yes, yes. Everything’s fine.”

“Do you require any assistance?”

“No! No, really. I’ll be out shortly,” Arya insisted. She was suddenly very grateful it was Helen on the other side of the door. If it had been any other servant they would have barged in no matter what she said.

“All right.”

Arya breathed a sigh of relief as she heard Helen’s retreating footsteps.
Arya changed into a clean tunic and pair of trousers before carefully pulling off her bandages and tossing the evidence into the fire. Picking up the dusty hand mirror off the vanity, she used the basin of water she was supposed to use to wash her face every morning to wash off any remnants of the ointments Brynn had used. Satisfied, she took a moment to inspect the cut on her cheek. It certainly didn’t look any better in the light of day, but it seemed to be healing fine. She ran through her story a few times in her head just to be sure she had it straight before finally leaving the sanctuary of her room.

There was something she really needed to do before dinner.

Once she made it out into the fresh air of the courtyard she was pleasantly surprised to discover that someone had let Nymeria out of the kennel in her absence. Catelyn had decided that the direwolves were not to be allowed into the keep—and, more specifically, their quarters—until she deemed their training satisfactory. Thus far, only Sansa’s Lady had succeeded in this venture.

Nymeria was already the size of a hunting dog, so Arya no longer had to bend over to scratch behind her ears.

“I let her out this morning.”

Arya turned to find Jon standing a few yards away, Ghost at his side.

“Thanks,” she said. Taking it as a sign that she wasn’t going to kill him if he approached, Jon came closer.

“Where have you been all day?” he asked quietly.

“Sleeping,” she said. Jon turned to look at her, just in case she was joking. It was only then that he noticed her cheek.

“What happened?”

“Wasn’t looking where I was going,” Arya said.

“When?”

“Last night.” Arya figured she couldn’t be angry with him for withholding the truth from her if she did the same to him, so she didn’t.

“And where were you going?” Jon thought it over for a moment. “It was to Gendry’s, wasn’t it?”

“How—”

“I stopped by the forge earlier today. He was asleep on his feet.”

“I needed to get out. I couldn’t take it. The walls were closing in on me.” They still are, she added in her head.

“That doesn’t explain how this happened,” Jon argued, gesturing to her cheek.

“It was dark. I lost the path. I might have been running.”

Jon repeated the last bit under his breath, incredulous.
“Gendry’s mother cleaned it and everything. Maester Luwin couldn’t have done better,” Arya said, feeling the need to defend herself.

“I’m sure she did, Arya. That’s not my concern.”

“Then what is?”

“Don’t you see,” Jon began, before suddenly realizing something: she didn’t. Not at all. It was so easy to forget that Arya, for all her cynicism, was still incredibly naive in some regards.

“See what?” Arya asked, growing impatient.

“Nevermind, it’s not important.”

“Tell me,” she insisted.

“I was being stupid, Arya. That’s all. I just wish you’d be more careful.”

“I know,” Arya said, deciding to let it go.

Recalling Brynn’s advice, she pulled Jon into a hug before she could talk herself out of it. Jon froze for a moment before returning the hug fiercely, resting his chin atop Arya’s head. A bit of twig caught in the tangled mess that was her hair poked his cheek, and he smiled.

“I’m still mad at you,” Arya told him. But her face was buried in his doublet, so it sounded more like “mhmmph”.

Jon understood her anyway.

“I know,” he said.

By the time she and Jon headed to dinner arm in arm, Arya felt much better. At least, she did until she remembered what dinner meant besides food. But by that time it was too late to run. Her mother reacted just about as well as she had expected her too, but Arya was pleasantly surprised by how well her stories went over. What happened? She went out for an early morning ride and wasn’t paying attention to where she was going. Where had she been all day? After her ride she decided to take a nap and slept later than she meant to.

In the end, Arya got off with a good five minutes of chastisements and a reluctant promise to go see Maester Luwin as soon as she was finished with her dinner. By the time the food was brought to the table, everything was back to normal. And Robb had a stupid grin on his face, which could only mean one thing.

“So, what did she say?” Arya asked, serving herself a generous helping of potatoes, followed the lemon roast chicken and carrots. After a moment’s deliberation, she took some of the spinach. That looked good, too. If she had looked to her left she would have noticed her mother purse her lips in disapproval.

“What?” Robb said.

“Who?” Jon added.

“Margaery. You’re wearing your Happy Margaery face,” Arya explained, only confusing her brothers further.
“My *Happy Margaery* face?” Robb repeated, incredulous.

“Yes. You see, there used to be just the one Margaery-wrote-me-a-letter face, but in the past few years you’ve developed several others,” Arya answered between bites. “I named them for convenience. There’s the Happy Margaery face, the Sad Margaery face—”


“See? Theon gets it,” Arya said, gesturing her fork triumphantly in Theon’s general direction.

“That’s ridiculous,” Robb scoffed.

Arya raised a brow. It struck Jon that she was getting quite good at that.

“No, I did,” Robb admitted.

“And did whatever she wrote make you happy?”

“Well, yes.”

“Then what are you trying to say, exactly?” Arya questioned.

Robb frowned.

“What about Sansa, then? Does she have a Willas face?” Robb asked, conceding defeat but redirecting Arya’s further efforts.

“Not really. She just turns a very particular shade of pink,” Arya answered without hesitation.

“Arya!” Catelyn and Sansa scolded in tandem. Robb, Jon, and Theon burst into laughter. Bran was too much of a mother’s boy to laugh when Catelyn was scowling. Rickon giggled though he had no idea what he was supposed to be finding funny because he didn’t want to be left out. Ned managed to maintain a stern frown, but it was undermined by the laughter in his eyes.

Arya smiled triumphantly.

They ate in a comfortable silence for a while.

“What about you, Arya?” Sansa asked, finally working up the nerve.

“What about me?” Arya replied, rising to the bait. She couldn’t see where Sansa was headed, but Jon could, and his eyes widened.

“You and the blacksmith, of course.”

Jon winced. Catelyn snapped her head around so quickly that his own neck ached just watching her, because there was no way that didn’t hurt. Robb and Theon fell silent. Bran looked as if he was trying to solve a complicated equation in his head. Rickon was entirely confused. Ned looked equal parts haunted and nervous, as if he was seeing a ghost from the past and a specter from the future at the same time. A voice in Jon’s head told him there was something important in that, something within his reach but beyond his grasp. He ignored it in favor of a much more immediate concern: Arya.

*Arya was furious.*
Jon grabbed Arya’s forearm underneath the table. *Don’t do anything stupid*, he tried to tell her in the gesture. He hardly expected her to take any notice, but he had to try anyway.

“How dare you! He’s my friend!” Arya shouted. She made to have a go at Sansa, but Jon held her back. “Let me go!”

Sansa looked genuinely afraid.

“I’m sorry, Arya. I didn’t mean it, I swear! I was just angry,” she begged.

“You’ll thank me later,” Jon told Arya, only holding her tighter the more she struggled.

“Enough.” Ned commanded. He didn’t shout, but his tone was sharp enough to cut through the chaos, leaving a ringing silence behind. Everyone had stopped and turned to look at him, even Arya. “Arya, to your room. Stop in with Maester Luwin on the way, but nowhere else. Jon, go with her, make sure she does.”

Jon nodded. Arya moved of her own volition towards the door, but Jon kept a firm grip on her arm just in case.

After Jon had escorted Arya out of the room there was an uncomfortable silence that lasted long after their footsteps had faded into silence. No one knew what to do. In the end, it was Catelyn who broke it.

“You never told us what Margaery wrote,” she said.

“Oh, yes, um,” Robb looked sheepish at having forgotten, “she and her mother wish to come early. With your permission, of course. They want to help with the planning.”

“How early?”

“They would like to leave at the new moon.”

Catelyn quickly made the calculation in her head. “Robb, that’s in five days.”

“Well, the trip takes a moon’s turn, possibly more,” Robb argued. “It won’t be everyone. Just Margaery, her mother, Loras, a few maids, and some guards.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes.”

Catelyn sighed. “Ned?”

“Your call, love.” He wasn’t about to be dragged into any battles he didn’t need to be in. He was already dealing with far more than he would like.

“Very well,” Catelyn said after some deliberation. “Let Margaery know we would be happy to receive them at whatever time they wish.”

“Excellent! I’ll write her right away,” Robb said with a grin, all but leaping from the table and rushing out of the room to do so.

Short yet another person, the table looked both underpopulated and terribly lopsided. Catelyn sighed once more, unable to think of anything else to do.
Rickon still had no idea what was going on, but some instinct argued strongly against asking any questions about the matter.

“Can I have more potatoes?” he asked instead.

Arya and Jon walked through the halls silently. He could still feel the anger radiating off of her like heat from a fire. They stopped by the Maester’s Tower. Luwin, a wise man with considerable knowledge of the Stark children, saw Arya and decided against asking any questions. The only time he said anything at all during their visit was to comment on how clean the wound was. Arya just nodded.

The walk to Arya’s chambers was just as quiet, but once they reached her door Jon felt compelled to say something.

“Life’s not fair. But you know that already,” he said. “You’re clever, Arya. Clever enough to know you’re only hurting yourself. Too clever to be acting like this.”

Arya moved her head so slightly Jon couldn’t tell if it was a nod or not. It wasn’t the response he was hoping for, but he knew it was the best he was going to get.

They stood silently in her doorway for a little while. Jon wanted to say more. He couldn’t help but feel that if he said the right combination of words in just the right way, he could get Arya to understand. But he couldn’t think of what those words might be.

So he just said, “I love you, little sister,” and hoped that would do.

Arya watched Jon walk away down the corridor. It was only once he rounded the corner and disappeared from view that Arya finally went into her room, closing the door behind her.

The sky had grown dark by the time someone tried to intrude on Arya’s solitude. She tried ignoring the knocking, but it persisted.

“Go away!” she shouted from her nest of pillows. In had been hours since Jon’s departure and his advice, though well intentioned, was long forgotten. With only her own thoughts for company her anger only grew. By now she was full of self-righteous fury and little else, with breakfast missed and dinner interrupted and supper withheld as punishment.

“That is no way to speak to your father, Arya,” came the unamused voice of Eddard Stark from the other side of the door.

Oops. Arya immediately went to open the door—but only a crack.

“I thought you were a maid. Or mother.” Arya had been expecting her lady mother to come knocking at some point. She was looking forward to it, even; she had worked out exactly what she was going to say (or, more likely, shout).

“That is no way to speak to your mother, either. Or the maids, for that matter,” Ned said, in no mood for games.

Arya said nothing. She didn’t try to close the door, but she didn’t open it any further, either.
“Well,” Ned continued after a long silence, “I had thought you might be hungry. But I can see that I’m not wanted here.”

He moved to go and, as he did so, the plate in his hands caught the light from the wall lanterns, drawing Arya’s attention to it for the first time. Its contents were covered with a cloth napkin, and Arya’s mouth watered as she imagined what might be underneath.

“No!” Arya pleaded. “No, please, I’m sorry. I’m so hungry.”

“The food is only part of the deal if you agree to talk. And to listen.”

Arya made a face. She had expected nothing less, but it was somehow all the more unpleasant actually hearing it.

“If you won’t talk to me, your mother will come up here instead—and we both know how well that would go. But if you agree to let me in and listen to me—and I do mean listen—I’m certain that could be avoided. Also, I have lemon cakes,” Ned bribed, knowing where the real strength in his argument lay.

Arya weighed her options for a moment. Her stomach audibly grumbled its vote.

“All right,” she finally acquiesced, stepping back and holding the door open wide enough for Ned to enter.

Arya took the plate of food and sat cross-legged on the foot of her bed. Her lady mother hated eating in bed. Even when they were sick. If you’re well enough to eat solid food, you’re well enough to walk to the dining hall, was her unchanging and unyielding response to any protestations.

Ned made no comment and allowed Arya her little rebellion.

Arya lifted the napkin, revealing the plate’s contents. In addition to the promised lemon cakes there were thick slices of bread slathered with soft cheese, a small bundle of grapes, and some slices of cold ham. She was quite certain nothing had ever looked so good.

As she dug into her meal, Ned took a seat in one of the two chairs before the fireplace. “You know the first thing I must ask you, Arya, and believe me when I say I enjoy saying it just as little as you do hearing it, so bear with me: is there any truth in what your sister said?”

Arya looked up from her food, her cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk. She glared, refusing to dignify so stupid a question with a response.

“I need to hear you say it, Arya,” Ned insisted.

Arya swallowed her food so that she could respond. “No, of course there isn’t. He’s my friend.”

Arya paused as a terrible thought entered her head. “Mother’s going to take him from me, isn’t she? Just like she’s taking Jon!” she accused.

“Stop there, Arya. Your mother is not sending Jon away. He made his own decision, and we should all respect that.”

“Well, she gave him no reason to stay!” Arya argued. “I can’t lose Gendry too. I can’t!”

“Arya—”
“He’s done nothing wrong! Sansa’s just a rotten liar!”

“Arya! Calm down and listen. You promised, remember?” Ned reminded her. Though she wasn’t happy with the situation, Arya stopped. A promise was a promise, after all.

“I never doubted you, Arya. I just needed to hear you say it to be absolutely certain,” Ned explained. “You are fighting me when there is no fight to be had.”

Arya opened her mouth to argue before realizing that in doing so she was only serving her father’s case and shoving it full of the last of the grapes instead.

“I understand why you are upset, Arya. But you need to control yourself. You cannot fight everything and everyone. You will not only hurt yourself, but others, too, and I can promise you that it will not be those upon which you wish harm,” Ned continued. “I want to help you, Arya. But I cannot do that if you won’t help yourself. Do you understand?”

“But I can’t, don’t you see? You want me to be a proper lady like Sansa, but I can’t be. Even when I try to pretend I can’t maintain it for any time! I’m no mummer,” Arya said.

“You’re right, Arya. You are not Sansa, nor will you ever be. But you are wrong, too. I am not asking you to be Sansa. Your mother is not asking you to be Sansa, either, despite what you may think. Furthermore, Arya, you are a lady. You have been ever since the day you were born. Always remember that, for that is the truth.”

“Then what do I do? I can’t… I can’t…” Arya trailed off, not knowing how to properly describe what it was she could not do, only in her bones that she simply couldn’t.

“Only you can answer that, I think. But I can suggest,” Ned added, trying to give what little help he could, “that you begin by not antagonizing your mother—or your sister. Do some things you would rather not, and do them graciously. If you can show that you are willing to compromise, others are far more likely to do the same, including your mother.”

Arya considered this for a while before speaking.

“I promise to try,” she finally said.

“That is all I ask.” Ned rose from the chair, feeling considerably better than he had when he had sat down. He hoped Arya felt the same, but he couldn’t say. For all her outspokenness, his youngest daughter was quite difficult to read.

Arya picked up the last of the lemon cake crumbs with her finger before handing over the empty plate to Ned. If Ned didn’t already know better he would have thought it was plucked straight from the cabinets, so clean it was.

“Wait!” Arya called just as Ned reached the door.

He turned.

“You never answered me, before,” she said nervously.

Ned frowned, confused.

“About Gendry,” she specified. “Nothing will happen to him, right?”

Ned sighed. “No, Arya. Nothing will happen to the boy.”
Ned turned to leave once more, and once more Arya called him back.

“Promise me?” she said.

He froze. *Promise me, Ned.*

The words echoed through his head in two voices far more similar than he would have liked. In that moment he was only half there, on the threshold of Arya’s bedchamber. The rest of him was in another place and time, being asked the same question, and giving the same answer:

“I promise.”

“Something must be done, Ned. Arya’s wild, and only getting worse,” Catelyn said. It was well into the night and the Lord and Lady of Winterfell sat before the fire in the Lord’s Solar, all the children put to bed. Most of the servants had retired for the night, and, for at least a few hours, the castle was quiet and still.

“I already spoke with her, Cat,” said Ned with a sigh. From the day she was born, Arya had reminded him of Lyanna. The resemblance had only grown in time, and Ned had grown to despise it. It was becoming more and more difficult for him to look at his youngest daughter and not see the ghost of his sister instead. More and more the ghosts managed to escape from the shadowy corners of his mind, and every time it grew more difficult to put them back. Arya’s words earlier that night had taken him by surprise, and, therefore, so had the ghosts. They were running loose still, despite his best efforts, and Ned knew it was only going to get worse.

“That’s not enough, Ned! The Tyrells will be here before we know it… I was supposed to have more time!”

As was I, Ned thought.

“You know what I wish to do, Ned,” Catelyn told her husband, not realizing just far away his mind was. “At this point, I really think it *must* be done. But I would rather do it with your blessing.”

“Arya’s still a child,” Ned argued, though his tone had no fight in it.

“But for how long? Soon she’ll be twelve. Another year and she’ll be thirteen. Some girls are married at that age, Ned. Others not much older are mothers. And you heard Sansa at dinner, Ned. If Sansa is saying such things *now*—”

“Sansa herself admitted there was no truth to it,” Ned interrupted. “She didn’t even believe it herself, Cat. She just wanted to upset Arya, and she succeeded.”

“Even so, if Sansa can even imagine such things now, what do you think others will say later? In two, three years’ time? And if that weren’t enough—well, you see the boy more than I do. You don’t need me to tell you that he looks more and more like Robert every day, or that Arya is growing to look a good bit like Lyanna—if the wrong person *saw*, Ned…” Catelyn trailed off, the disaster unfolding in her mind like some mummer’s show.

“I know, Cat. Believe me, I know. But what would you have me do? Send the boy to the Wall?” Ned asked. Catelyn guiltily glanced off into the fire, and Ned knew at once that the thought had not only crossed her mind, but appealed to her.

“You know full well I can’t do that, Cat. He’s done nothing wrong, first of all, and Mikken needs
him,” Ned continued. “Arya was terrified when I spoke to her earlier. She knows that things are going to change drastically for her, though I don’t think she truly realizes just how much. With Jon leaving and everything else that is just around the corner… she will need a friend. How could we take that from her, too?

“She could make new friends,” Catelyn argued stubbornly. It was moments like these that reminded Ned that Arya was much more her mother’s daughter than either mother or daughter believed.

“And I’m sure she will. But she would never forgive us if we took this one from her. Besides, I doubt we could even if we tried.”

“But—”

“No, listen, Cat,” Ned insisted. “You say you worry about whispers—whispers that haven’t even been spoken yet, I might add—because Arya is getting older. So it Gendry. How old is he now? Fifteen? Sixteen? He’s a handsome lad with a steady, respectable job and a promising future. He’ll find himself a girl soon enough.

“I think you do the boy a disservice, Cat. There may be a good deal of Robert in his looks, but, even if I don’t know the boy well, I know enough to know that, in his heart, there is much more of the man who raised him than the one who sired him. Burton’s as good as a man as you’ll find anywhere, and he wouldn’t raise a boy who was any less, even if that boy was not his son by blood. Especially then, if anything, I believe. He certainly wouldn’t raise a boy who, at sixteen, would even look at a girl of eleven or twelve or even thirteen as anything other than the child she is, Arya or otherwise.

“I do agree that we should keep an eye on it, Cat; it’s only sensible. But nothing more. Give it three years, that’s all I ask. The boy will have found some nice girl from Stonecross or Wintertown by then, maybe even have started a family of his own, and by the time Arya’s old enough for people to start with that kind of talk, there will be nothing there for them to talk about.”

“Three years,” Catelyn reluctantly agreed. “And if you’re wrong?”

“If I’m wrong, if in three years’ time the boy is still unattached and there is some reason for suspicion, then we will do things your way, whatever that may be.”

Catelyn nodded, satisfied. “I do hope you’re right, Ned.”

_So do I_, Ned thought.

They sat in silence for a little while, Ned watching the fire and Catelyn watching Ned. In the many years since Robert’s Rebellion she had seen him like this more often than she could count. It was a very particular expression, haunted and distant and something else that Catelyn couldn’t put her finger on. Something told her that it was always the same thing on his mind when that look crossed his face, something from the war that had latched onto him and refused to let go, even after all these years. If anything, she had noticed it with increasing frequency in recent times, and she was growing concerned. Early on she had hoped that at some point he would trust her enough to share his burden with her, but as time went on and she gained his trust but not his secrets, she gave up on learning whatever it was that haunted him. She just had to trust his judgement and believe that his secrecy was for the best.

“Is something else bothering you, love?” she asked after a little while. Even after all these years, she still wanted to give him the opportunity, just in case.
Ned turned to look at her, and, in that moment, he wanted nothing more than to tell her. Not just about Arya and Lyanna, but everything. The words were on the tip of his tongue. Just a few sentences and he wouldn’t be alone any more. It wouldn’t even take a minute. It would be so easy.

But Ned knew better. He had had his chance, years and years ago, to share this burden. He chose not to then, and had to live with it now. To do anything else would be folly. Secrets never aged well. To dig up one buried so many years in the past would only cause pain, and he knew no one would suffer more than Cat. So instead he said, “it’s just been a long day.”

“Indeed it has,” Catelyn agreed. “I believe I shall go to bed,”

She got up from her chair and moved to stand at his side, taking his hand and weaving her fingers with his.

Ned raised their joined hands to his lips and kissed the back of hers. “Goodnight, love.”

“Goodnight,” Catelyn replied, squeezing his hand one last time. *I'm here.*

Ned forced a smile for her sake. *I know.*

Then she went, leaving Ned alone with his ghosts.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, longer chapters seem to be becoming a thing. I'm not sure how I feel about this one, but it's only me looking at it, and, as I'm sure many of you know, it can be hard to judge your own work. That being said, if anyone would be willing to beta this or even just bounce around ideas, please let me know.

Also, if Arya's interrogation of Robb comes across as vaguely Socratic, that's probably because I just finished reading Gorgias.

Chapter title comes from "Graceless". I figure you can guess the band by now.

Next Time: The wedding creeps closer and Margaery finally arrives in Winterfell. Also, we meet Farmer Teague for the first time.
(i'm getting) nervous

Chapter Summary

In which we meet Farmer Teague, the Stark sisters get new dresses, the forge proves a popular place, and Margaery grows nervous.

Chapter Notes

I tried to get this up in time for Arya x Gendry week, but failed. So here's my contribution, even if it is a day late.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning, following nearly a full day of chastisement, Brynn all but dragged Cory, Jory, and Rory all the way to Farmer Teague’s without so much as breakfast. After all, they would have hardly come willingly, even under better circumstances.

In some ways, Burton and Farmer Teague could have been considered rivals, though neither ever thought of themselves as such. Farmer Teague was well established in both Stonecross and Wintertown. He was the ninth of his name, and his family had farmed the same land for as long as anyone could remember—since the Age of Heroes, some said. And for nearly as long, the Farmers Teague had been known for four things: sheep, flax, wheat, and plums. As such, Burton made the conscious choice not to farm any of those things for profit, meaning the two farmers actually got along very well. Besides, Farmer Teague had a soft spot for Brynn. He had known her since she was in pigtails—he and his father had been the primary suppliers of wheat for her father’s mill, after all.

Farmer Teague never hesitated to show Burton the tricks of the trade, particularly in the early days when Burton had absolutely no idea what he was doing. Looking back, Burton could not imagine how he might have managed those first few years without Teague’s advice and support. Since then Burton had become a proper farmer in his own right and did all he could to repay the man that helped him get there. Farmer Teague had no sons, only three daughters by his second wife. Having long been widowed for the second time and nearing his sixtieth nameday, Teague had long given up on the prospect of producing a male heir and continuing the Teague line. As such, he had come to look at Burton as a protege of sorts.

All things considered, Farmer Teague was an ideal neighbor.

He was also, unfortunately, the most boring man in all of Westeros. It was quite possible—or even, indeed, most likely, as Burton’s wife and children never failed to remind him—that Farmer Teague was so forthcoming with farming advice because that was all he ever talked about, and Burton was just about the only person who actually wanted to hear it. If given the opportunity, Farmer Teague would probably teach a shoemaker the best way to scythe or the most efficient way to fence a pasture.

Even Burton had his limits. He was only human, after all. Of course he wanted to be the best
farmer he could be, but one could only hear so much about the merits of red versus blue flax or the best wood for fencing or the Potato Blight of 282 A.C. before going truly insane.

Burton liked to consider himself a brave man—he had fought in Robert’s Rebellion and taken a crossbow bolt for Eddard Stark, after all—but he was not aboveducking behind a hedge if he heard Teague coming down the road known as the Stone Road that ran through their two properties, connecting the village of Stonecross to Wintertown. Brynn chastised him for it, reminded him of how good a neighbor Teague was and so on and so forth, but that didn’t stop her from conveniently picking the lowest hanging blackberries when she heard Teague’s distinctive, tuneless whistle. None of their kids were above jumping into a ditch to avoid being seen (though Serra did prefer to climb up a tree instead when possible). One particularly memorable time Cory had made the mistake of diving into a ditch full of stinging nettles. Brynn had had little sympathy. While she did make a vat of salve to treat the burns, she also made him gather all the required duck weed himself, and told him that she hoped he had learned his lesson. Cory had. He always looked before he jumped after that.

But there was no escaping this time. Brynn wasn’t leaving until she and Farmer Teague had come to an agreement regarding the terrible trio’s punishment that was deemed sufficient by all parties. Except for the trio themselves, of course. They had no say in the matter.

Farmer Teague had been waiting, and opened the door without their needing to knock. He offered Brynn tea and scones, and her sons disapproving glares. All three of his daughters were sitting at the table, finishing their breakfast.

Brynn politely declined. She had left Addie and Lya under Bess and Serra’s care and needed to be getting back. Teague nodded, and they got straight to business.

Wylla and Hannah, Teague’s eldest daughter at eight-and-ten, quickly lost interest, but Ruth, Jory noticed, kept glancing back over at them. He followed her line of vision to his eldest brother and, suddenly, all the pieces clicked together. For a moment Jory felt incredibly clever (he liked to consider himself the brains of the operation, after all), but soon he recognized himself for the fool he was, about to serve a long and grueling punishment that was merely collateral damage in his brother’s bizarre ploy to spend more time with Ruth. Jory looked to Rory to see if he had also realized they had been duped. He had.

While the simplest solution would be to have the boys fix the damage they caused, their many talents did not extend to thatching, nor would Teague trust them with such a job even if they did. Instead, the three boys would be at Teague’s disposal for the next fortnight, starting immediately. Both satisfied with the agreement, Brynn parted amicably. Her sons were left to their fate, though one of them was far less upset with the prospect of their punishment than the other two.

When Catelyn sprang a surprise visit to the dressmaker’s just a few days after Robb’s announcement, neither Sansa nor Arya were terribly surprised, because every trip to the dressmaker’s was a surprise—given any notice, Arya was liable to conveniently disappear. Though Arya was far from pleased, her father and Jon’s advice had made a far greater impact than she would ever admit, particularly once she had had a few days to contemplate the matter. Besides, she and her mother had reached an agreement concerning visits to the dressmaker’s a long time ago. Arya didn’t have to pretend to be happy with the situation, but she had to stand still and do as asked and was not allowed to speak (unless, of course, she had something to pleasant to say—a scenario which had yet to occur).
The dressmaker poked and prodded and measured Arya, directing all questions about style and cut and color to Catelyn. The dressmaker was familiar enough with Arya to know the state of things. Sansa, of course, chattered all the while and happily answered all questions regarding her own dress order herself—pending, of course, on a nod of approval from Catelyn, which she got more often than not.

In the end, two new dresses were ordered for Sansa and three for Arya. To both of their questioning glances, Catelyn only told Arya, “you need more dresses.”

One of the dresses in question sounded horribly frilly and ornamented to Arya, and she was unable to withhold an audible whine. Catelyn looked at her youngest daughter sharply and reminded her of the Tyrells’ imminent arrival.

“You’ll need something suitable to greet them,” she said.

Nearly a week passed before Gendry saw Arya again. He had seen plenty of Jon, and had heard enough from him to know that nothing was seriously wrong. Still, he was relieved to see her.

The day had been a slow one. It was one of his days handling the Wintertown forge on his own. It was actually quite lucky that Arya had not shown up earlier, because he had spent the better part of the morning working on Jon’s surprise present for her. Of course, even if she had seen him working on the Braavosi style blade, she would have no reason to suspect it was for her, but Arya was far too curious and willful for her own good. Gendry could easily imagine her worming the information out of him, one way or another.

But Ella had shown up around midday as she so often did, arms laden with various blades belonging to guests of The Smoking Log in need of various services. Many of the issues were quite simple—mostly polishing and sharpening—and Gendry had actually reached a good stopping point for the day on Arya’s blade, so he invited Ella to stay a little while. He guessed the blades she had brought him would hardly take an hour, and then she wouldn’t have to worry about coming back to retrieve them.

“I don’t want to be a bother,” Ella said, “I see you’re working on something already.”

She put the blades down on a table and brushed off the dirt they had left on her apron, frowning as she noticed a rather dark stain one of them had left behind. At least she had had the foresight to wear an apron over her dress today.

“It’s all right, really. I was just finishing with this for the day anyway,” Gendry insisted, putting the red hot metal aside to cool.

“What is it, exactly?” Ella asked, hopping up on a ledge. Growing up in an inn, she had seen all sorts of blades, but nothing resembling the one Gendry was currently working on. It was nowhere near finished, of course, but even her untrained eye could tell it would be closer in length to a broadsword than a dagger but not half the width of either.

“A secret, I’m afraid,” Gendry told her, looking over the blades she had laid out on the table.

“The three on the left need polishing, the two on the far right, sharpening, and the two in the middle, both. At least, that’s what the owners requested. Also, the third from the right is off balance, but the owner wants an estimate before agreeing to do anything. He said he hit it against a
rock and it hasn’t been the same since. Didn’t say why, though,” Ella said before blowing a few errant strands of hair out of her face. She was the only person Gendry knew who had genuinely yellow hair, bright and sunny like the goldenrods that sometimes grew on the roadside.

“This one?” Gendry asked, holding up a broadsword in a red leather scabbard.

“That one,” Ella confirmed.

Gendry unsheathed the sword and swung it around a bit. The balance was definitely off, but it was an easy enough fix

“A gift for someone, then?” Ella asked.

“After a fashion,” was Gendry’s noncommittal answer.

Ella nodded, realizing she wouldn’t be getting any more information out of him. She wasn’t terribly bothered—living in an inn, she heard far more than her fair share of gossip.

“How’s your mother?” Gendry asked. While Ella usually handled the dealings with the forge for The Smoking Log, Audra stepped in on occasion.

“She’ll be thrilled to hear you asked,” Ella said with a smile. “Stressed about the additions, though. The rain’s been interfering.”

“Should you still be done in time for the arrivals from Highgarden?”

“Not the Lady Margaery and her mother, but the rest. You wouldn’t think it to hear mam speak, but, assuming no major disaster, things should be just fine.”

Gendry nodded. He couldn’t help but glance over to her as he worked, his brothers’ teasing comments echoing through his head. Ella was five-and-ten, and really quite pretty, with her bright hair and hazel eyes and wide smile. There was even something very charming about the small gap between her two front teeth.

They had spent about five minutes in companionable silence when Arya barged in. As usual, she had already begun talking before she even bothered to look.

“Gen—oh,” she said, stopping her tracks, noticing Ella for the first time. “Hello, Ella.”

Arya was actually wearing a dress today, and though it was slate gray and as simply designed as a dress could be, she still looked uncomfortable. Gendry noticed that her cheek appeared to be healing well.

For the frequency with which they both visited the forge, it was surprising how rarely their visits overlapped. Gendry hardly minded, though, because the few occasions they did seem to have an oddly tense air. He had no idea why. They got along just fine, as far as he could tell.

“Good afternoon, m’lady,” Ella greeted with a slight tilt of the head.

Arya bit her lip in a way that told Gendry she really wanted to tell Ella off for using her proper title, but was trying really hard not to.

Silence reigned once more, though less comfortable than before. Gendry took full advantage of the easy refuge his work provided. Arya wracked her brain to think of some reasonable excuse to stay. Ella split her time between looking out the window and studying the smudge on her apron, as if
somehow she could will it to disappear.

A solution came in the form of a passerby—William, the only son of Unwin, who was one of the best breeders of horses in all the North. At six-and-ten, William was well on his way to succeeding his father, and served as an ostler at The Smoking Log. Gendry knew him quite well because he also often assisted Joseth, the farrier, who used the forge as a base for his shoeing services twice a fortnight, on the full moon and the new moon (the rest of the time, Joseth served as a member of Lord Stark’s guard).

Ella hopped down from her perch. “There’s something I really must ask Will. Could I come pick the blades up later?”

“Course,” Gendry said, “and tell your one with the red scabbard that the fix would only be a couple stags.”

“Thanks! Sorry!” She called as she ran out the door. “Will! William!”

Arya felt herself relax once Ella left the room.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Arya said. “I mean, I didn’t realize there was someone here.”

“It’s all right,” Gendry assured. “Are you?”

“What?”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m getting there, I think,” Arya said after a moment’s pause. “Mother’s hardly let me out of her sight. I meant to come sooner, but…”

“Really, Arya, it’s all right.”

Arya nodded. “I just wanted to thank you again, and apologize. I shouted at you, and I shouldn’t have. You hadn’t done anything.”

Gendry shrugged. “I understood then, and I understand now. It’s okay.”

Arya looked as if there was something else she wanted to say, but before she could, Jon rushed in. The forge was proving very popular today.

“Arya! Lady Catelyn’s looking for you,” Jon told her.

“But I just finished my lessons less than an hour ago—Septa Mordane said I was done for the day!” Arya argued.

“That may very well be, but she’s looking for you anyway, and she’s determined. It won’t be long before she’ll be headed this way, mark my word,” Jon warned.

Arya groaned in frustration.

“Come on, Arya,” Jon pleaded, holding out a hand.

Arya huffed once more, but took Jon’s hand anyway. She waved goodbye as Jon pulled her out the door. Gendry waved back before returning to his work.
In all her excitement, Margaery barely noticed the days growing colder as they crept further and further north. She might not have noticed it at all if it were not for the constant inquiries from her well-intentioned handmaidens as to whether m'lady would like a heavier cloak, or perhaps a blanket to drape across her lap. She mostly refused them, and while she was at it she made sure to let them know they were free to use her blankets themselves, for they seemed far more in need of them than she did. All three of them refused, clearly out of some sense of propriety and not genuine disinterest. Margaery sincerely wished they had not, though, because by the time they reached The Twins, their lips consistently maintained a concerning blue tint around the edges and their chattering in the late evenings and early mornings could get so violent that Margaery grew worried for the wellbeing of their teeth.

Margaery had left most of her closest companions in Highgarden, trusting them above all others to oversee the few remaining preparations that could not yet be moved to Winterfell—the beadwork on her dress and some necessary adjustments to the Tyrell bridal cloak, among other things. It was for the best, she supposed, as only three of her usual companions would remain with her in Winterfell after the festivities ended: two of her ladies-in-waiting, Meredyth Crane and Alysanne Bulwer, and only one of her cousins, Megga Tyrell. All the others had various duties that kept them in the Reach.

It could not be helped, and Margaery felt no bitterness towards any of them, but still she was nervous. As much as she knew Robb in some ways, from the hundreds of letters she had received over the years, he remained a stranger in others. But even more than her future husband, it was the thought of her future home that gave her anxiety. For all the travelers and storytellers that frequented the court at Highgarden, there was disappointingly little to be heard about anything north of White Harbor. In all her life, she had not come across a dozen people who had visited Winterfell—and Margaery had met a lot of people in her life. She had asked Robb a good deal, and he had described things to the best of his ability, but Robb, despite having the best of intentions, was not a wordsmith. He tried, though, and that was what really mattered. Margaery just reminded herself that once she did arrive in Winterfell, she would have the rest of her life to find out for herself exactly what sort of place it was. She just had to get there first.

She leaned her cheek against the cool window of the wheelhouse and watched as her breath condensed on the surface. Only a few more weeks to go.
BURTON, known to some as Tony, and BRYNN, Gendry's adoptive parents, and their kids,
—CORY (Jacob), 283 A.C.
—JORY (Jordan), 285 A.C.
—Twins RORY (Rowan) and BESS (Elsabeth), 286 A.C.
—SERRA, 287 A.C.
—EVIE (Eveline), 289 A.C.
—BARRY (Berwyn), 291 A.C.
—LYA (Lysara), 294 A.C.
—ADDIE (Adelia), 297 A.C.
And their farmhands, including
—SILAS
—BEN, also Ben's wife, LAUREL

----some of their neighbors----
FARMER TEAGUE, twice widowed, and his three daughters from his second marriage,
—HANNAH, 282 A.C.
—WYLLA, 284 A.C.
—RUTH, 286 A.C.
BEEKEEPER CARDEW, who lives with his nephew and heir,
—LOCKE
UNWIN, a renowned horse breeder and trainer, widowed, and his children,
—WILL (William), 284 A.C.
—Triplets MARY (Amaryllis), MEL (Camellia), and HOLLY, 287 A.C.

----in Wintertown----
AUDRA, innkeeper at The Smoking Log, and her daughter,
—ELLA (Elinor), 285 A.C.
MIKKEN, Winterfell's blacksmith and Gendry's mentor
MURCH, the fletcher, a guard at Winterfell
JOSETH, the farrier, also a member of Winterfell's guard

Next time: The first of the Tyrells arrive in Winterfell (no, seriously).
mistaken for strangers

Chapter Summary

In which time has passed, and all of Winterfell (im)patiently awaits the arrival of Margaery Tyrell.

Chapter Notes

Long time, no see! Classes were killer, but I'm on break now (woo-hoo!). I must say I'm trying to get back into the swing of this story (it doesn't help that I left my notebook in my dorm three states away), but I don't think I'm quite there yet. I really do need to rewatch GoT—and, better yet, read the books. This chapter's a little OC-heavy, which I don't like doing, but there's some stuff I needed to set up. Don't worry, we'll be seeing a lot more of the Starks next chapter! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time passed. Arya’s cuts healed. Sansa’s Lady became the first direwolf to pass Catelyn’s tests and be allowed inside, followed closely by Bran’s Summer and Robb’s Grey Wind. At some point Ghost started coming in, and while Catelyn looked displeased she said nothing. After all, Ghost was well-behaved and as quiet as his name would suggest. It took a few weeks, but eventually Nymeria was reluctantly allowed in, barely passing Catelyn’s inspections. Arya maintained that it was going perfectly until Jeyne Poole of all people happened to walk by, inspiring Nymeria to bare her impressive teeth. But she didn’t bite her or even approach, and that was what really mattered, wasn’t it? Arya argued (as far as she was concerned, though, Jeyne deserved no less—but Arya kept that bit to herself), and Catelyn reluctantly agreed.

By that time everyone had grown quite lazy, and Shaggydog started finding his way inside even though he was all but feral, listening to no one but Rickon or Ned (sometimes). Thankfully, Shaggy seemed to prefer the outdoors most of the time. That didn’t stop the servants from peeking their heads out to check both ways before daring to step into a corridor, though.

The weather cleared, and with a little overtime work the building of the additions to The Smoking Log were brought back on schedule, much like Ella had anticipated.

Gendry finished Arya’s blade and stamped it with Mikken’s mark before handing it over to Jon, who carefully hid it away in the corner of his room and waited for an opportunity to present itself.

The terrible trio did their penance at Farmer Teague’s, which included rebuilding the goat pen and repairing the fencing of all twelve of his grazing pastures. Their punishment ended up being cut a day short, because while Teague was quite possibly the most dull man in Westeros, he was, surprisingly enough, not an idiot. Nor was he blind, which he would very well have to be to miss the pining looks Burton’s eldest son sent his youngest daughter. The not an idiot part came in his noticing that those attentions were not exactly unwanted.

Though he tried to act the part, Cory was obviously not as thrilled with the early dismissal as he
should have been. Jory and Rory would have been amused if they were not already thoroughly disgusted with the whole thing.

“Never again,” Jory warned his older brother as the three made their way home on that final day, sore and tired and full of splinters.

“You say that every time, but you always change your mind eventually,” Cory dismissed.

“Yeah, well every time we aren’t pawns in some hare-brained wooing scheme, Florian.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Cory insisted, though twin glares shut him up rather quickly.

It was anticipated that in the moons before the wedding hundreds and hundreds of smallfolk and nobles alike would come pouring in to Wintertown and the surrounding villages, and in the fortnight leading up to the big event—or quite possibly sooner—the typical weekly street market would become a daily affair, dawn to dusk, and Brynn intended for both their stalls—one selling produce and the other selling jams and other miscellany—to be open and running all the while.

She had plans for all the extra income that were many years in the making—namely, her very own glass garden. She had found a book on the subject of building and maintaining a glass garden many years ago, and from that day on she was determined to have one of her very own. She didn’t want anything half so fancy or large as the one at Winterfell, just something functional, so that she could have real strawberries in the dead of winter. Brynn had written notes and drawn up plans and even marked the ground where she wanted it to go. All she needed now was funds. She had already saved a good sum over the past ten years, and believed that the surplus provided by the wedding and the crowds it would draw would be enough to reach her goal and even exceed it. She really, really wanted to have a glass garden before the next winter, and was determined to do everything she could to make it so.

The Lady Margaery and her mother had not even arrived yet, and the wedding was still a good five moons away, but already the nobles and smallfolk alike were busy with preparations.

Burton and Ben and Silas got up an hour before dawn every morning and worked straight through till dusk to get all the extra planting done. The terrible trio were disappointed to find that their early dismissal from Teague’s only meant working equally long days under the all knowing and all seeing eye of their father. Nine year old Barry helped as much as he could, which meant he spent most of the day running messages back and forth between Burton and Brynn, fetching things, and filling canteens. Even Gendry pitched in on the days he finished his work in the forge early. His assistance was particularly useful in clearing the aptly named Bramble Field so that it could be planted—they had never cultivated it before, but they had never had such a large crop before, either—as it required burning all the eponymous brambles away, and Gendry was much more familiar and tolerant with the heat and presence of fire than any of the others. It made sense, considering his training, but watching him (from a considerable distance that still felt uncomfortably warm), Brynn couldn’t help but think that there was more to it than that, something beyond what could be taught.

Despite Rory’s frequent protestations to the contrary, the girls did not have an easier time of it, just a different one. Brynn believed there was no time like the present, and she really wanted that glass garden. It didn’t matter that there were still five moons left—fruit could be dried and preserves could be made more than a year in advance, after all, so there was no point in waiting. Brynn ruled from the kitchen, where she did most of the actual making of preserves herself, though with
assistance from Laurel and sometimes Serra.

It was not that Bess was banned from the kitchen, just that when sugar was involved she was never invited. Though she vehemently swore otherwise, she had a gigantic sweet tooth, and everybody in her family knew it. No one else, though. She was incredibly skilled at hiding it—so much so that she was nearly ten before Brynn even realized that she was behind all the sweets that had vanished over the years, which had, until then, had been blamed mostly on the terrible trio, and even Gendry on a few occasions. It was only once Brynn caught her eldest daughter in the act that the truth revealed itself, and even that was sheer coincidence. Brynn had woken for one reason or another in the middle of the night and heard someone creeping about in the kitchen. She had thought it was a mouse (Shadow was notoriously inconsistent when it came to vermin: sometimes she kept not only the house but a good three mile radius free of rodents, other times she would idly watch a rat scurry across the kitchen, entirely unbothered), so she went to investigate.

It wasn’t a mouse. Just nine year old Bess, stuffing her face with apple cakes.

Even once the whole family knew the truth and kept a careful eye on her, Bess still managed to regularly sneak off with whatever sweet things happened to be in the house, no matter how well hidden their rightful owner had thought they were. She really couldn’t help herself. Her siblings’ feelings about the situation ranged from amusement (when she stole something from someone else) to serious irritation (when she stole something of theirs).

Despite gorging on sweets whenever possible, Bess maintained an elegant figure with a waist that, if anything, seemed to narrow as she got older. With her loosely curled blonde hair, heart-shaped face, and large, doe-like hazel eyes, it was hard to believe her capable of any sort of thievery and downright impossible to convince anyone who was not personally familiar with her sweet-stealing tendencies.

So in times like these Bess was always given tasks that kept her out of the kitchen. Blackberry picking would have been the obvious solution, as it was blackberry jam Brynn was known for and fresh blackberries were too tart for Bess’s taste, but Bess detested getting her fingers stained. She realized by the age of seven or so that her mother would never accept vanity as a sufficient excuse and would do as asked with minimal complaint, but the extreme caution she used meant she moved at a tragically slow rate that no amount of cajoling or criticism could hasten.

So instead she was sent to their three fields across the river where the quince trees grew. Harvesting the fruit required quite a bit of climbing, so it was more within Serra’s usual domain, but quince was thick-skinned and pale-colored and, most importantly of all, unpalatably bitter. Serra hardly minded her older sister doing the picking instead—it wasn’t as if she needed an excuse to climb trees.

Occasionally Brynn made marmalade from the fruit because Burton liked it, even if no one else did, but mostly she used it in smaller amounts to thicken other preserves.

Everyone was busier than they ever remembered being before; which was why Gendry had no idea what to do with himself when, for no particular reason, business at the forge dwindled down to next to nothing just a few days after he finally handed over Arya’s finished blade to Jon. It was a day when both he and Mikken were working in the Wintertown forge. There was still a good hour until midday, but they had done all there was to do. They had even cleaned.

“Go on,” Mikken said, in his usual gruff way, though Gendry also detected something which could very well have been amusement.

“What?” Gendry asked.
“Leave. Go home. Or don’t—makes no difference to me so long as you’re here tomorrow morn, bright and early,” said Mikken.

“Are you sure?” Gendry asked. Mikken often let him leave early on days when work was slow, but that a few hours before dusk at most, not mid-morning.

“Aye. It’s a fine day, and there’ll be work enough once those flowery Southron folk get here. No one south of the Neck knows how to care for a blade, far as I’m concerned. Good steel too, more often than not. Criminal—that’s what it is.”

Gendry just nodded. Though he supposed he himself could be considered a Southroner, Gendry knew better than to take offense at anything Mikken said about Southron folk. He also, however, knew better than to encourage him, and decided to make his leave quickly before Mikken truly worked himself into a lather.

“Boy!” Mikken called. Gendry turned.

“Might as well deliver those over to the inn on your way,” he said, gesturing towards a canvas bundle propped against the wall. Gendry knew full well that it contained several freshly sharpened and polished daggers because he had wrapped it himself not an hour before.

Gendry nodded and retrieved the package before heading back out again.

The way to The Smoking Log took Gendry through the heart of the merchant’s quarter. Though the streets were wider there than anywhere else in town, it was crowded tight. It was market day, and market days were always busy, but rarely like this. It seemed half the town was there, including nearly all the young people. Passing through the large courtyard at the very center of Wintertown—a common meeting place—Gendry noticed several familiar faces gathered together in a corner. He frowned, feeling almost as if he had stumbled across a party he hadn’t been invited to, but then Ella caught sight of him from her perch on the wall and waved, smiling widely.

“Gendry!” she called, just in case he had missed the unspoken invitation to join. Will, who she had been talking to, looked up and also waved a greeting.

Gendry headed over. He was in no rush to get back home. After all, as soon as he did, he would be put to work again. It wasn’t as if he was even being lazy, just taking a breather.

“I didn’t think you took breaks,” Gendry told Will in greeting. The other boy snorted.

“You’re one to talk,” Will retorted with a smile. Though they were of an age, black haired and blue eyed and tall, with Gendry standing just a hair above Will, no one would ever say they looked alike. While Gendry was broad and muscular, Will bore a striking resemblance to the horses he worked with—or, at least, the foals, all gangly legs and arms and very little coordination. Will also had a narrower face and unusually prominent ears.

“You really are,” Ella agreed. “What have you got there?”

“Delivery for you, actually. Figured I’d drop it over on my way out,” Gendry said, handing her the package.

“You’re off early,” she commented.

“So is everyone else, it seems,” Gendry said.

“Mother managed to work herself into a headache so bad she had to go lie down, so I snuck out for
a little peace while I had the chance. Gods know when I’ll be able to say that again. Will was
twiddling his thumbs in the stables so I dragged him along with me.”

“Why do you say that?” Gendry asked.

“You haven’t heard? The Lady Margaery and her mother will be here any day now. I’ve heard
they’ve already gotten a raven from Cerwyn, though that might just be a rumor. Soon as they do
get here, though, I know I won’t know another moment’s peace until the very last guest has left.”

“Is that what all this is, then?” Gendry asked. A few of the more savvy vendors had brought
baskets of their wares down to the courtyard from their market street stalls and were gathering
small crowds.

“I think that’s some of it,” Ella said after a moment’s pause. “Also it’s market day and the sun’s
shining. And some days are just special, I think. Different, even if no one knows why.”

Gendry nodded his agreement.

“My sisters have been wanting new hair ribbons,” Will said, catching sight of a vendor selling
ribbons and other baubles, “I should get them now, before I forget. I’ll be back.”

Will nearly tripped over a loose cobblestone on the way but managed to regain his footing at the
last moment. Gendry smiled and Ella shook her head fondly.

“What do you think it will be like?” Ella asked. “All these Southron visitors, the festivities? I hear
there’ll be singers and dancers and mummers and all sorts coming with them.”

“I hadn’t given it much thought,” Gendry answered honestly.

“You don’t remember anything about what it was like in the South? From when you were little?”

“Nothing,” said Gendry. Brynn had told him some about the women who had brought him north,
and he had even asked Ella’s mother Audra once—she would have seen more of them than Brynn,
after all—but Gendry wasn’t sure if the fuzzy images that came to mind when he thought of the
two sisters were actual memories or the product of wishful thinking and his imagination. And on
the rare occasion he ever thought of the woman who birthed him, his mother by blood, green eyes
and blonde hair came to mind, paler than either Bess’ or Ella’s, but Gendry had no idea if there
was any truth to that. As for the place, he had no idea whatsoever. He knew he was born
somewhere south of the Neck, but that left half of Westeros. It could have been the Crownlands or
the Reach or even Dorne for all he knew. Wherever it was, he certainly had no memory of the
place. Though he knew they did not know the specifics, it was possible Brynn or Burton had a
better idea than he did, but Gendry had never cared enough to even bother asking. He had a home
and a family and a profession, which was far more than most, and for that Gendry was incredibly
grateful. He was too happy where he ended up to care much about where he came from.

“I’m sorry. It was silly of me to ask. I mean, I can’t really remember my father’s face and I was
nearly five then.” Ella’s father had died of the spring sickness. He was not the only one, either.
Will’s mother, already weak from childbirth, also succumbed, among many others. Though the
summer had proven prosperous and longer than any in living memory, it had not started out well, at
least not in the North. Though it did not compare to the Great Spring Sickness of 210 in either scale
or severity, the wave of disease that swept through did a great deal of damage, especially in
Wintertown. Gendry himself was lucky enough to be spared, but Ella had gotten sick, as had Silas
and Burton and Jory and Rory, though they all managed to pull through. It had been touch and go
for a few days with Rory, who was just an infant at the time. One of the lesions left by the disease
never quite healed right, leaving a scar the size of a gold dragon on his forehead. Luckily for him, it was located just below his hairline and easily hidden beneath his bangs.

“I’m just excited, you know? It’s something new, something different,” Ella continued.

Gendry nodded even though he didn’t really know. It struck him that he might be the only person in all of Wintertown who did not have strong feelings on the matter, one way or another.

“Does life here bore you that much?” Do I bore you that much?

“No! No,” Ella insisted, ducking her head to hide her blush. “But the people coming through the inn… I hear so many stories, stories of incredible things. Oldtown and Lannisport, the cliffs of the Stormlands and the beaches of Dorne… for someone with a greater imagination, I’m sure the stories would suffice. But me, well, I’d like to see some of them for myself. Someday. Stupid, isn’t it?”

“Course not,” Gendry reassured.

“You’re sweet,” Ella said with a wide smile, sunny as her hair, and now Gendry was the one blushing.

“Ella!”

Ella turned. Will was standing by the vendor. He held two ribbons in his hand and was clearly looking for her opinion. Ella’s brows rose to the vicinity of her hairline.

“Mother have mercy,” she whispered to herself, horrified, before shaking her head emphatically. Will frowned and looked to the ribbons in his hands, confused by her response.

Ella hopped down from her perch, sighing. “Hopeless, the lot of you.”

“Oi!” Gendry exclaimed.

“Oh, hush. Unless you're actually claiming to know a thing about fashion?”

Gendry said nothing.

“I thought so. Now come along, you might learn something,” Ella grabbed Gendry by the hand and pulled him along in the direction of Will and the ribbon vendor. Gendry was too stunned to do anything but follow along.

“Put those down,” Ella commanded.

“What’s wrong with these?” Will asked, honestly befuddled.

“Let me guess, you intended the red one for Mary?” She asked. Will nodded. “Mary has red hair, Will. Redheads don’t wear red, because it clashes. It’s the same reason why I don’t wear yellow.”

“What about this one, then?” Will pointed out a bright yellow lace ribbon.

“I don’t know your sisters all that well, Will, but even still I know that Mary doesn’t like yellow.”

“She doesn’t?”

Ella shook her head.
“Would you mind—?”

“Certainly.” Ella answered, not waiting for Will to finish asking. “Mary, Mel, and one of these two for Holly.” She pointed out a pale blue silk ribbon edged with lace, a shiny silver ribbon, and two ribbons in varying shades of pink. Will picked one and then purchased the ribbons as directed.

“And now you can say you picked them out by yourself without being a complete liar,” Ella joked.

Will thanked her and then bid them both farewell, excited to see how his sisters would react to their gifts.

“And if I were to ask?” Gendry wondered.

Ella smiled and pointed out a series of ribbons without so much as a pause, leading Gendry to believe she must have anticipated the question. She pointed out a sea green ribbon for Bess, a cream lace one for Serra, a mauve one for Evie, and a sparkly pink one for Lya. Addie was too young to really appreciate such a gift, and a hair ribbon would be too juvenile for Brynn, but, “I imagine she would very much like that hairnet,” Ella concluded, pointing out a loosely woven silver hairnet studded with seed pearls. Gendry trusted her judgement.

“What about you?” Gendry asked.

“What about me?” Ella responded in kind.

“Which one would you like?” Gendry asked.

“Don’t be silly,” Ella said.

“I’m not. I mean it.”

“Gendry—”

“Consider it a thank you for all your help.”

“Fine,” Ella said after a pause, giving in. She looked over the ribbons for a moment and then stopped, turning to Gendry once more.

“You pick,” Ella said.

“What?”

“I told you you might learn something, let’s see if you did.”

Gendry opened his mouth to protest, but then changed his mind. “Fine,” he said, echoing her words back to her.

Gendry made a show of looking through the ribbons before finally picking up a white ribbon embroidered with flowers. He paid the vendor for it before turning to Ella, who stared back at him, wide-eyed.

“Did I guess right?” Gendry asked, handing her the ribbon.

“How did you know?” Ella asked, shocked. She took the ribbon, running her fingers along the design in admiration.

“I don’t know a thing about hair ribbons, or fashion, but I can be quite observant at times. At least,
I like to think so.”

Ella smiled.

“So, is there hope for me yet?” Gendry asked.

“What? Oh,” Ella said, remembering her earlier remark and blushing. “Why, yes. I suppose an exception could be made in your case.”

“An exception, huh?” Gendry teased.

“Yes, I—wait,” Ella paused, noticing a large number of people rushing off, and all in the same direction. She stopped a woman hurrying by to ask her where she was headed. Ella had a good idea of what her answer would be, but she wanted to be certain.

“The Lady Margaery’s traveling party has been spotted from the gate,” the woman replied, excitedly.

“Thank you, Heda!” Ella called after the woman, who glanced back to give Ella a fond smile and wave but kept moving along with the crowd. “There goes my moment of peace. It was wonderful while it lasted.”

“You know that woman?” Gendry asked.

“Heda? Oh yes. Quite well. Her husband Daryl is a brewer. He’s our primary supplier of ale,” Ella explained. “Living and working at an inn means you know just about everybody.”

“Useful.”

“An awful lot of names to remember.”

A pause.

“Do you want to see what all the fuss is about?” Gendry asked.

“Absolutely.”

Margaery peered curiously through the small part of the window cleared of frost and found a crowd of people looking right back. My people, soon, Margaery thought.

Across from her, Merry and Megga were engrossed in a card game—Margaery had dropped out a few rounds ago, finding herself too distracted by everything else to properly feign interest in the game. Next to her, Alysanne shivered under a thick cloak and two blankets. Margaery worried for her youngest attendant. Instead of adjusting to the cold, Alysanne seemed to be growing more sensitive to it. Margaery knew she would need to do something, but she wouldn’t be able to make arrangements of such a nature until she was at least somewhat established in her new home, so she pushed the thought aside for the time being—she would figure it out later.

Margaery used the sleeve of her dress to clear the rest of the window to see them better. My people, soon, Margaery thought. They could see her better too, so she waved kindly to the crowds gathered at the roadside. First impressions were of the utmost importance, and it distracted her from the fact that she would be at Winterfell in less than an hour.
Arya tried very hard not to fidget. She was eleven. She was perfectly capable of standing still—unlike Rickon, who was twitching and hopping from foot to foot as if there were bugs crawling all over his skin. Robb was equally antsy, his jumbled emotions blazoned across his face. Lady Margaery’s carriage had been spotted, and now they were all lined up in the courtyard, waiting to greet her.

If she could just please her lady mother with good behavior for the next hour, Arya knew it would buy her some desperately needed leeway for the next few days—maybe even a week, if she was lucky.

“I see them!” Rickon whisper-shouted, drawing Arya from her thoughts. Catelyn and Sansa quickly shushed him.

At the sight of the wheelhouse Robb looked about ready to keel over. Arya watched him closely. If he fainted she would never ever let him live it down—and she knew Jon and Theon would be keeping her company. A quick glance over her shoulder to where Jon and Theon were waiting off to the side with Vayon Poole and Maester Luwin confirmed that both boys were also keenly eyeing the heir to Winterfell.

“Breathe, Robb,” Sansa instructed, just as observant as the others but not nearly as cruel.

Robb sucked in a breath that he hadn’t realized he had been holding. Embarrassed, he turned to see if Jon and Theon had noticed. Both boys had already redirected their eyes elsewhere, but Robb’s eyes narrowed suspiciously nonetheless. Sansa subtly touched Robb’s shoulder in an attempt to get his attention and then not-so-subtly shoved him to his side when that didn’t work. Irritated, Robb turned to Sansa, who pointedly kept her gaze straight ahead, towards the fast-approaching traveling party. It took a moment, but Robb eventually got the message, re-adjusted his stance, squared his shoulders, and put his serious “Heir to Winterfell” face back on.

The wheelhouses were two of the most stupidly gaudy things Arya had the misfortune of seeing in her short life, and the guards accompanying them were no better, with their fancy horses and intricate saddles and shiny armor. Arya was certain that if this was any indication of what Highgarden was like, then Sansa would love it there.

The wheelhouses stopped. A guard opened the door and started helping passengers out. Arya figured they were all attendants from their dress, though one of them looked more like a great big shivering lump of fur. Arya would have laughed if it weren’t so pathetically tragic.

Then, finally, it was Margaery’s turn, but Arya found herself watching Robb instead.

Upon seeing Margaery, Robb’s panic dissipated entirely. There was a moment of relief, and then an overwhelming knowledge of his own foolishness. His eyes met hers, and his face broke into a wide smile. She was a stranger (a very pretty one, too), but she was also a friend. This was what had him so worried? He knew her, she knew him. A smile spread across her face to match his own.

Margaery approached him without waiting for a proper announcement. They had waited long enough.

“My lord,” she greeted, dropping into a perfect curtsy. Her voice had an almost teasing quality to it, and Robb couldn’t help but think it suited her.

“My lady,” Robb responded in kind, taking her hand in his and kissing it.
Yay, Robbaery! Pretty sure not everyone's entirely thrilled with all the developments in this chapter, but worry not! This is primarily a Gendrya story, but Arya's still 11 at this point, and Gendry's not a creep. I have a plan, I promise! I'm not George R. R. Martin, so you can trust me.

In other news, for any Star Wars fans out there, I have officially joined the Reylo trash heap! No matter what happens in Episode VIII, there will still be creepier ships sailing the Game of Thrones sea, and I take considerable comfort in that. And on that note, I am also working on a Reylo fic, "The Chosen Ones" (I fought it, but the plot bunnies were just too strong), heavily inspired by G. K. Chesterton's "Heretics". Apparently when I read philosophy I write fanfiction. Not sure exactly what that says about me as a person, but if you have any theories, please let me know. Regardless, the first part will be posted soon (the first two chapters are also already posted on FF.net). So if you enjoy my writing, please check it out!

Chapter title comes from "Mistaken for Strangers". If you can't figure out the band then you haven't been paying attention!

Next time: Wedding planning! Also, Margaery gets a new attendant.
Margaery had been in Winterfell a fortnight, and her concern had only grown. Not about Robb—no, that was going as well as she had hoped it would, only even better because it was real—but about Alysanne. Her youngest companion was not adapting to the Northern clime the way she and all the others were. Still, the cold seemed to bother the girl more and more by the day. Then a cough settled in, and worsened. Alysanne wasn’t truly ill, not yet, but it now seemed all but inevitable. Alysanne didn’t complain, but it was impossible to suffer silently while hacking up a lung. Margaery knew she would look at returning south as a failure, but Margaery cared too much about the girl to be concerned about offending her pride when her health was at stake. So Margaery wrote her good-sister Leonette to see if she might have a place for Alysanne.

Luckily, one of Leonette’s attendants was to be married to the heir of a Stormlands house and would need a replacement. Alysanne was clearly upset when Margaery informed her of her plans, but far too well-mannered to argue.

So, just two weeks after arriving in Winterfell, Margaery found herself an attendant short. Of course, she was more than capable of surviving with two attendants. But Margaery was Olenna Tyrell’s granddaughter—her favorite grandchild—so while she would truly miss Alysanne, she soon came to see the situation as an opportunity.

Margaery did not just want to be a lady of the North in title. She wanted to belong, not a summer flower but a blue winter rose. Unfortunately, she still did not know half as much about the North as she would have liked. Robb tried his best, but he wasn’t the most perceptive person and a man besides; Lady Catelyn was far too busy to dedicate much time to such tutoring; Sansa had spent her entire life trying to emulate a “true” (Southron) lady, and could not really comprehend a Southron lady wanting to change her ways; and Arya knew about as much about being a Northern lady as Bran or Rickon.

“I should like to find a replacement for Alysanne,” Margaery announced at dinner two days after Alysanne, accompanied by a few guards, departed for Brightwater Keep.

“Write your grandmother, dear,” Alerie said. “She’ll find someone and send her up with Willas and the others.”

“Actually, mother, I was hoping to find a replacement here. If I am to be married to the Warden of
the North, I should know the North, understand it. I do not wish to surround myself with the familiarity of Highgarden any longer. I cannot be a suitable lady of the North if I surround myself with the Reach."

“I am afraid attendants are quite unusual north of the Neck, Lady Margaery,” Ned said, apologetic. “Maids and the like are all hired smallfolk.”

“That is fine,” Margaery said without hesitation. “You wouldn’t happen to know anyone, would you, Lord Stark?”

Ned looked ready to say “no,” but stopped at the last moment. He thought for a moment, and finally said, “actually, Lady Margaery, I think I might.”

Margaery smiled brightly.

“Thank you, Lord Stark.”

Burton did not recognize the young Winterfell guard who rode up, carrying a message from his liege lord, so he figured the boy must be new.

“Will this need an immediate reply?” Burton asked.

“Er, I couldn’t say.” Definitely new.

“Why don’t you wait here a moment then, eh?”

The messenger nodded. Not used to being in such a position, he quickly grew fidgety while Burton skimmed through the letter.

“You can go, lad,” Burton informed the young guard after about a minute. At some point the boy’s attention had been caught by something behind him in the parlor. Burton did not need to turn around to know it was Bess. The guard quickly looked away, knowing he had been caught. He flushed a little and mumbled a goodbye before scurrying off.

“What is it?” Brynn asked, sitting at the kitchen table.

They had been looking over their ledgers before the messenger had arrived. It was evening, but the sky had not darkened quite yet, so the younger children were outside playing, resulting in an uncommon but very welcome quiet. Jory and Cory had gone with Ben and Laurel for drinks in Stonecross, their absence just as responsible for the unusual quiet as that of their much younger siblings. Gendry, still mildly terrified of the incredibly forward woman who served drinks at the Stonecross tavern and not much of a drinker besides, had opted to stay home, as had Rory. They, Serra, Bess, and Silas, who often preferred to spend his evenings in their chaotic parlor instead of his own far more peaceful but lonely cottage, all sat on the rug before the fire, playing cards.

“The younger Lady Tyrell is looking for a new attendant,” Burton said, reclaiming his seat. “She wants a Northern girl. Ned thinks Bess is suited to the job.” Burton handed his wife the letter so she could read it for herself.

“What? I heard my name,” Bess said, putting down her cards. Rory rolled his eyes and sighed loudly at his twin. It was her turn, couldn’t she have at least taken her turn before interrogating
Brynn looked to their daughter for a moment before turning back to Burton. “What do you think?”
“I think it is her decision to make,” Burton said, though not without some regret.
“Thank you, father,” Bess said, “but what is this decision?”
“Lady Margaery seeks a new attendant,” said Burton. “Would you like the position?”
“Me?” Bess asked, stunned.
“You needn’t, sweetling, if you don’t want to,” said Brynn.
“I want to!” Bess immediately clarified, drawing the attention of the rest of the room.
“Wait, what?” Gendry asked.
“Bess is going to work in the castle?” Serra asked not a moment later.
“Isn’t that a job for a lady?” Rory added, ever helpful. Serra smacked him upside the head in a show of sisterly solidarity.
Bess just nodded giddily, choosing to ignore her twin entirely. “When do I start?”
“On the morrow, I suppose,” said Burton. “You can ride with Gendry, for now. We’ll have to see about getting you a horse, I suppose.” Because of all the riding that Gendry had to do to and from Wintertown, he had gotten a horse of his own—a dappled grey stallion upon whom he bestowed the incredibly creative name of Steel.
“She can get her own horse,” Brynn corrected, “she’s a working girl now, after all.”
“I suppose so,” Burton said.
“Can I see the letter?” Bess asked. Brynn nodded and handed it over.
“Let me see, let me see!” Serra insisted. Bess beckoned her over, and their brothers followed too, their card game completely forgotten.

Bess had to force herself to sleep that night so she wouldn’t look like the walking dead when meeting Lady Margaery. She still woke well before dawn, scrubbed herself raw, changed into her best dress, brushed and braided her hair and secured it with the green ribbon Gendry had gifted her.

By the time Gendry stumbled down to the kitchen, Bess was seated at the table with a half-eaten bowl of porridge.
“You look nice,” Gendry told her between yawns.
“Don’t sound so surprised,” said Bess.
“No, ’s not what I meant,” said Gendry, “the ribbon Ella picked really suits you, is all.”

“Ella picked it?” Bess asked, a teasing lilt in her voice.

“It’s too early for this,” Gendry insisted. Grabbing a spoon from a cabinet, Gendry went to steal Bess’s porridge—she clearly wasn’t eating it, after all.

“No, don’t!” Bess warned, trying to pull the bowl away, but it was too late. Gendry smiled smugly until he actually tasted the porridge. He nearly gagged, but then forced himself to swallow.

“Seven hells, Bess,” Gendry complained, “how much sugar is in that?!?”

“A lot?”

Gendry scoffed. “You’re going to rot your teeth.”

“So mother always tells me,” said Bess. “There’s more in the pot.”

Gendry scooped out a bowl for himself and added a much more modest amount of sugar.

“Why are you nervous?” Gendry asked. He and Bess were not terribly close, not the way he and Serra were, but he cared about her nonetheless and he could see her hands shaking with nerves even in the dim light of the fire.

“Have you met her? Lady Margaery?”

“I’ve seen her, but no, I haven’t met her. The only person who ever steps foot in the forge who could arguably be called a lady is Arya Stark. Jon quite likes her, and Jon isn’t easily impressed. I have met her brother, though, Ser Loras. Seemed a nice enough fellow, though he gave me the strangest look…”

“I’ve heard rumors about him.”

“I don’t think they’re just ru—wait, how have you heard them? They hadn’t even arrived last time you were in Wintertown, had they?”

“Will told his sisters, his sisters told me. Well, Holly told me. I shouldn’t drag in Mary and Mel. Holly’s a terrible busybody, you know.”

Gendry looked at her skeptically, as if to say, just Holly?

“I’m not!” Bess insisted.

“Yes, I’m sure Holly told you all of this completely unprompted.”

“Well, no… I enjoy hearing talk, but I don’t spread it, so it doesn’t count.”

“If you say so,” Gendry said in a way that made it clear he wasn’t buying her logic at all. “It doesn’t matter, really. It wasn’t like that.”

“What wasn’t?”

“The look he gave me. It was like I was some sort of riddle, an impossibility. Eventually he said I reminded him of someone. Figure I must have really been the image of whoever it was, to unsettle him like that.”
“Did you ask who it was?”

“No. Wasn’t as if I would know him.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“Done with this?” Gendry asked, pointing to the now cold remnants of her sugar-porridge. Bess nodded, so Gendry scraped what was left into the slop bin and then put both of their empty bowls into the washing tub to soak.

“We should go,” Gendry told Bess. Bess only nodded, and followed him out the door.

The sun was still rising when Gendry and Bess arrived in Wintertown. Their first stop was The Smoking Log, where Gendry always stabled Steel for the day. Ella, already up and working under the watchful eye of her mother, smiled widely at the sight of them and waved hello. Gendry and Bess responded in kind.

In the stables Will was also already at work, mucking out the stalls.

“Do you ever go home, Will?” Gendry asked his friend, leading Steel into his usual stall.

“Good morning to you too, Gen. And if what you actually mean is ‘do I ever rest?’, then no. As my father so often likes to remind me, rest is for the wicked and the dead.” Only then did Will look up and notice Gendry’s companion. “Bess! Oh, um… hello. What brings you here?”

Bess told him about her new job.

“I suppose that means we’ll be seeing a lot more of you,” said Will.

“If all goes well, yes, I suppose it does,” said Bess. “Actually, Will, I was hoping to speak with your father about possibly getting a horse.”

“What, you mean you don’t want to ride home with your sooty brother every day? My sisters would feel the same, I’m sure, only they’d be far less polite about it.”

“Oi!” protested said brother. Bess winced, looking down at her pristine dress. She hadn’t even thought of that.

“We have a filly that I think would be a good fit for you, actually. Great temperament, proper size. Nearly trained, too. I’ll make sure father doesn’t sell her before you get a chance to visit.”

Bess thanked Will with a bright smile, and Will blushed to the tips of his very prominent ears. It was obvious enough that even Gendry noticed. But Will blushed easily, so it meant nothing. At least, that was how Gendry was choosing to look at it.

After making sure Steel was settled in, Gendry walked Bess all the way to the Great Keep.

“Get a guard to walk you to The Smoking Log, all right? Don’t walk to Wintertown on your own,” he warned her as they walked across the bridge that connected the Great Keep to the Armory.

“I won’t,” Bess promised. Satisfied, Gendry saw her to the doors of the Great Keep and then
headed off to the forge.

Bess got the attention of the next servant who passed her by. “Where might I find Lady Margaery? I’m her new maid.”

The servant looked a little skeptical but ultimately gave Bess the directions to Margaery’s quarters. Bess thanked her and headed in the indicated direction. Please let this be the right way, Bess thought, navigating her way through the halls.

When Lord Stark had said that he might know somebody to replace Alysanne, Margaery had not expected a girl to knock nervously on her door the following morning. Margaery was a relatively early riser, but Megga and Merry were still helping her dress when they heard the knock on the door. The three shared a look of confusion before Merry finally went to see who it was.

“Can I help you?”

“Hello, my name is Bess, I’m Lady Margaery’s new maid?”

Margaery could not see the girl, but she sounded nervous—and young.

“Let her in, Merry,” Margaery instructed.

The girl who entered the room was young, as Margaery had expected, though not as young as Alysanne—of an age with Sansa, if she had to guess—and incredibly pretty. Margaery felt a twinge of jealousy in the moment before rational thought set in. Of course, the moment it did set in, Margaery felt quite silly.

“I’m wasn’t expecting you yet, Bess, I must say. When Lord Stark told me he might know someone for the job last night, I didn’t think it would work out so soon,” Margaery said. Standing behind Margaery, Megga tapped her shoulder to let her know she was finished with her laces.

“I am sorry, my lady, I can return at some other time—”

“No, don’t be silly. Really, I’m quite impressed,” Margaery told the girl, smiling kindly. “And you’re to be my companion, not my maid.”

“Companion, my lady?” Bess asked, confused.

“My friend. Yes, you shall be an attendant, and help Megga and Merry with various chores that they can tell you all about later, but I want you to think of me as a friend, first and foremost. And please, call me Margaery.”

“Yes, Lady Margaery.”

“Just Margaery is fine.” Margaery noticed a subtle but distinct panic in Bess’s eyes. “Unless you’re not comfortable, that is.”

“Beg pardon, Lady Margaery, but my mother would flay me like a Bolton if I forgot my courtesies.”

“All right. But you are more than welcome to change your mind,” Margaery said, before deciding it was time to change the subject. “How does your family know Lord Stark?”
“My father served as a guard for Lord Stark.”

“Served?”

“Oh no, Lady Magaery, my father is alive and well,” Bess quickly assured, hearing the concern in Margaery’s question. “He fought for Lord Stark in the Rebellion and injured his shoulder. It healed, not perfectly, but well enough for most things. Lord Stark gifted him land east of Winterfell, he farms now.”

Margaery nodded. She vaguely remembered mention of a guard who had taken a crossbow bolt for Lord Stark during the Rebellion, and quickly grew convinced he and Bess’s father must be one and the same.

“So you have lived here your entire life?” Margaery asked.

“Yes. Farthest I’ve ever travelled is White Harbor, and only a few times. It’s also the furthest south I’ve been.”

“And how old are you, Bess?”

“Fourteen.”

Margaery could see Bess had a question, but was far too nervous to ask—unprompted, at least.

“I can see you want to ask me something,” Margaery said, hoping to make it easier. “Please, ask.”

“I don’t know anything about being a lady, or working for one. How can I possibly be of help to you?” Bess hesitantly asked.

“I happen to know quite a lot about being a lady. As do Megga and Merry, and experience serving one too. But something none of us know anything about is being Northern. Your library has many fine books, and I have indeed taken advantage of that resource, but they all speak of the past, not the present. You see, Bess, you have knowledge that is actually quite invaluable to me.”

Bess still looked skeptical. “You wish me to teach you… how to be Northern?”

“In a word, yes.”

“Where should I start?” Bess asked. She had little sense of what was uniquely Northern when the North was all she knew.

“Your shawl, did you make it?”

“Yes. I knitted it.”

“Could you teach me? Knitting is not common in the Reach, it rarely gets cold enough to merit heavy wool.”

“Yes, Lady Margaery.” Bess felt herself relaxing a little. That was definitely something she could do; she had helped her mother teach Evie, and had started showing Lya the basics. “I am afraid I do not have my things with me. I can bring them tomorrow.”

“Excellent! That gives us plenty of time today to get to know one another. Tell me, Bess, what is the weather like this morn?”

“Clear and fair, not near cold enough for snow—though I daresay you’ll not find it warm.”
“Ah, but that’s what cloaks are for. We have not yet had a chance to explore the town, and today sounds like a fine day for it. Will you be our guide?”

“Of course, Lady Margaery.”

“Megga, would you please rouse my dear brother’s lazy hide? He shall accompany us,” Margaery said with a smile.

“Of course,” Megga replied with a smirk of her own.

“And Merry, I should like to wear the cloak Robb gave me today.”

Merry nodded and retrieved the cloak.

“Stark grey,” Bess commented, noting the familiar shade of what she would guess, based on the length and sheen, was fox fur.

“I might as well start adopting it now,” Margaery said. “It might not be as vibrant as the colors I’m used to, but I think I could grow quite fond of it nonetheless.”

“I think it suits you,” said Bess.

“Thank you. He had it lined with Tyrell green, too,” said Margaery, showing Bess the pale green silk lining. “Wasn’t that very thoughtful?”

Bess had heard that Robb Stark and his intended got along very well, but she was still somewhat surprised by the amount of affection in Margaery’s voice.

“It was,” Bess agreed. She loved her brothers dearly, but she doubted any of them would think of something like that. Gendry, maybe. Barry was young still, and had potential. Definitely not the three idiots, her twin least of all.

“We’ll leave as soon as Megga returns with Loras. Have you eaten already?” Margaery asked, offering Bess an apple from what was left of her own breakfast.

“I have, thank you,” Bess said, declining the offer.

Margaery shrugged and took a bite of the apple herself instead. “Do you have siblings, Bess?”

“Yes. Nine, actually.”

When Ned had seen the falcon seal on the letter in Maester Luwin’s hands, he had been sorely tempted to ignore it, at least for a little while. But he could not find even the weakest of justifications for such a course of action, so rationality quickly won. Reading the letter, though, only served to justify his reluctance. Ned cared deeply for the mentor he looked at as a second father, and regretted that circumstances were such that he looked at missives from Jon Arryn with apprehension. He knew the man took just as little pleasure from writing the letters as he did reading them.

This letter was even more terse than usual, not even four lines long, but the implications of the information therein were concerning at best, catastrophic at worst. King Robert was going to attend Robb and Margaery’s wedding. Robert meant Cersei and the Kingsguard, and the Kingsguard
meant Jaime Lannister. And Lannisters meant trouble.

Ned had long thought that there was more to the situation than what Jon Arryn had told him, but he trusted his mentor’s judgement completely. If he needed to know, Arryn would tell him.

Robert’s attendance also meant Jon Arryn would have to stay behind—the King and his Hand could not both be absent from the capital for a day, let alone two moon’s turns. The only thing Jon Arryn had successfully managed to do was to minimize the length of Robert’s stay—a fortnight, arriving just before the tourney the Tyrells had insisted on (Robert was never one to miss a tourney), and leaving the day after the wedding itself.

Ned wondered what to do about the boy. Gendry was a good lad. Burton saw him as a son, he was Jon’s closest friend, and Arya cared about him deeply, too—far more deeply than Catelyn (and, in all honesty, he himself) would have liked. He was also very obviously Robert’s, not his father’s twin but dammingly close—a slightly narrower nose, more angular cheekbones but the same square jaw, not quite the same eye shape but the same shade of blue, same straight black hair. According to several different sources, Robert’s many vices had finally caught up with him, drastically altering his appearance. But even if Robert no longer bore half the resemblance to his bastard son that he did at his prime, there were plenty of people who remembered Robert as he was just as well as Ned did, including Cersei and Jaime Lannister.

Ned knew protecting someone was never easy, but how could you protect someone who didn’t know they even needed protecting? Who couldn’t know?

Ned supposed he would need to speak with Mikken, maybe Burton. There was no way of talking to the boy himself, no way of doing so without drawing suspicion, least of all from the boy himself.

*Jon.* The thought entered his head suddenly. There were plenty of times when the boy was not under the eye of Mikken or Burton, but usually during those times he was accompanied by Jon.

So Ned had three important conversations to plan and as many as three different stories to tell, none of which would be the truth.

Chapter End Notes

I am LOOKING FOR A BETA, if anyone is interested. I would be more than happy to swap beta-ing services!
Margaery bonds with the Starks and Ned makes a deal with Jon.
Or, here there be fluff (with a small pinch of angst).

Chapter Notes
Happy Father's Day and happy "BastardBowl" to everyone!

I also want to thank SlightlyOff7 and Gingerpie81 for their beta services—this chapter wouldn't be what it is without their editing and feedback.

On a sadder note, I would like to say RIP to Anton Yelchin, my preteen celebrity crush and still one of my favorite actors. As a 12-year-old grade-skipping science geek with an occasionally "strange" accent courtesy of an immigrant parent and very visible Russian ancestry (at Russian restaurants I've often had waitresses try to speak to me in Russian) I absolutely adored his portrayal of Pavel Chekov. He will be greatly missed.

Normally I would make some sort of apology for all the fluff in this chapter, but I won't this time. Honestly, the world could use a lot more fluff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Margaery did not know if she was adjusting more or the weather was just exceptionally nice, because this particular day was so warm that she found herself outside without even a light shawl, practicing archery with Arya in the courtyard. She had insisted her attendants join her. Bess already had some slight experience handling a bow; Megga did not but approached the activity with the same good humor she did just about everything; Merry was decidedly more skeptical but too well-mannered to say anything and too competitive to not give it her best effort once a bow was placed in her hands.

Margaery had made it her mission to bond with all the Starks. With the amount of time she spent with Robb, she had gotten to know Jon quite well. He was quiet and solemn, but Margaery found herself growing fond of him. She even made him laugh once, an accomplishment of which she was quite proud.

Sansa did not need to be won over, but Margaery wanted to get to know her future good sister nonetheless. Besides, she was curious about the girl who would one day marry her beloved oldest brother. Margaery loved all three of her brothers, but Willas held a special place in her heart. Growing up, he always had time for her, unlike Garlan or Loras. Willas deserved nothing but the best, as far as she was concerned. Margaery knew from the moment she met Sansa that she was a sweet girl, but it wasn’t until she had unexpectedly run into Sansa in the glass gardens after she had already been in Winterfell nearly a moon’s turn that Margaery was fully convinced Sansa was a truly ideal match for her brother.
While Margaery grew more fond of her new home by the day, she still missed Highgarden. The warmth and diverse greenery in the glass gardens were easily the closest thing to her childhood home that she would find in Winterfell, so she often found herself there when the longing for home got particularly bad. It was usually empty or nearly empty, with only a servant or two or, occasionally, Catelyn Stark present.

This particular time, Margaery was surprised to see Sansa, without her usual gaggle of friends, her attention split between the roses and the book in her hand. At her greeting Sansa jumped, startled, looking almost embarrassed. When she asked Sansa what she was doing, she blushed and responded that she was teaching herself about roses so she would be able to hold an intelligent conversation on the subject with Willas.

“He’s so clever. I don’t want him to think me dull, or a silly little girl,” Sansa admitted. “I just want to impress him.”

And it was in that moment that Margaery was fully convinced that Sansa was an excellent match for her brother, and vice versa. Which was a good thing, because she was also convinced that Sansa, too, deserved nothing but the best.

Winning Bran over was as simple as agreeing to watch him climb trees and towers and any other tall thing so that Catelyn would allow it. Rickon was just a matter of giving Shaggydog a pat on the head, which sounded simple but ranked among the most terrifying things Margaery had ever done, considering how close the top of Shaggy’s head was to his very large, very sharp teeth.

Arya was easily the most difficult to win over. It was hard to find a bonding activity when Arya detested all activities deemed suitable for a lady on principle. It took some brainstorming, but eventually Margaery had thought of archery: unladylike enough to appease Arya, but not entirely unheard of, especially in the North.

Which brought her here, to Winterfell’s courtyard on the warmest day she had experienced thus far in her new home, hoping she didn’t look quite as clumsy as she felt with a bow. Robb had helped them set up the targets, and then helped Arya teach them the basics. However, considering the exceptionally fine weather, they were far from alone in enjoying the outdoors. It seemed as if normal work had all but come to a halt in order to allow everyone to enjoy the day. What had begun as practice sparring between Jon, Theon, and Cley Cerwyn—who had ridden in the night before with the intention of staying a few days, as he quite often did—quickly turned into a full-blown melee as a number of guards and others joined, no doubt looking for practice before the tourney just three moon’s turns away.

Margaery saw her intended eyeing the practice yard longingly.

“Go,” she said.

“What? No, I—” Robb began to argue, but Margaery cut him off.

“I might not understand why you want to smack your friends with blunt swords, but I can tell that you definitely do want to, so go. Thank you very much for showing us the basics, but we can handle it from here. Besides, we have Arya.”

Arya was also eyeing the melee longingly, but Margaery was not about to give her permission to leave.

“Are you sure?” Robb asked.
“Yes,” Margaery insisted, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek for good measure. “Go.”

Robb smiled widely before hurrying off to join his friends. Margaery watched him go fondly. She looked to the practice yard, curious to see if Loras was there. It did not take her long to identify a familiar head of brown curls among the crowd. But then another figure drew her attention.

“Renly?” Margaery wondered aloud, catching sight of an extremely familiar tall, broad-shouldered silhouette. The person in question happened to turn just then, giving Margaery a glimpse of his face. Not Renly, then, she thought, but the resemblance is uncanny.

“Is something the matter, Lady Margaery?” Bess asked, concerned.

“See the tall, black-haired man in the blue tunic?”

“Yes,” Bess confirmed, giving Margaery an odd look.

“You would not happen to know him, would you?” Margaery asked.

“He’s my brother,” Bess said, still concerned and more than a little confused.

“Really?” Margaery blurted out, before quickly realizing how rude she sounded. “I’m sorry, you just look absolutely nothing alike.”

Bess could not help but smile at that.

“That’s Gendry,” Arya piped in before Bess could answer.

“Oh.” Bess had told Margaery a little bit about her adopted brother. She had also heard about the blacksmith’s apprentice from Arya and Jon and even Robb a few times.

“Why?” Arya asked, skeptical and more than a tad defensive. Bess clearly was wondering the same thing, though she would never have put it quite so bluntly.

“He just looks like someone I know from the Reach, is all,” Margaery answered, returning her attention to archery.

Though it certainly did not leave Margaery’s mind, she hoped the others would soon forget. And while it seemed to have slipped from Arya’s mind by the time they parted ways, Bess was another matter. That night, she happened to get a moment alone with Margaery, helping remove all the pins from her hair while Megga and Merry were attending to matters elsewhere.

“When you first saw Gendry you said a name, ‘Renly.’ Is that who Gendry reminded you of?” Bess asked quietly.

Margaery hesitated, so Bess continued. “I’m not usually one to pry, but Gendry told me that when your brother first visited the smithy, he looked at him as if he had seen a ghost. Do you think he was thinking of this Renly, too?”

“Yes,” Margaery said before she could convince herself otherwise. “Renly Baratheon.”

Bess’s eyes widened round as saucers. “Baratheon? As in the king’s brother?”

Margaery nodded. “I’ve only seen the king once or twice—I’ve never met him properly—but Lord Renly and my brother grew quite close during his visits to the capital, and he visited Highgarden on a few occasions.”
“Is the resemblance truly that great?”

“It’s… nearly frightening, actually,” Margaery said, deciding to be completely honest. “When I was little, my septa used to tell me that even gods grow tired sometimes, and give the same face to people of different blood. I must say, I never really believed her before.” She called them Stranger-twins, and said they were cursed. That only one could thrive. Gave Loras nightmares, Margaery remembered, though she decided to keep those reminiscences to herself.

“I suppose,” Bess said, frowning slightly. He’s probably forgotten all about it, so I won’t bother to mention it, she rationalized, though the truth of the matter was that, for some reason, she simply did not want to tell him.

Suddenly, she was worried. And she had no idea why.

As far as brothers went, Gendry really wasn’t bad at all, and Bess knew that. However, he was a blacksmith and therefore invariably covered in sweat and soot and grime by the end of the day, meaning that, as someone who rode home with him, she also ended up sooty and grimy, and somehow grime stains were even more stubborn than wine.

Margaery liked to give her attendants at least one full day a fortnight off, and once Bess’s first free day approached she knew exactly what she was going to do with it: buy a horse. Considering everyone else still had places to be and things to do, all the horses were in use, but Unwin’s was only about a two hour brisk walk, and it was a nice day, so Bess hardly minded.

Upon reaching Unwin’s land Bess first encountered the triplets, who sent her to the barn.

“Hello?” Bess called out, entering the barn.

Will, who had been hidden behind a stall partition near the back, suddenly stepped into view, and Bess squeaked in surprise. He wasn’t wearing a shirt.

“Holly, I swear—” he began, before realizing he was not addressing his sister. “Bess!”

Bess realized she had been staring and quickly averted her eyes. Will sounded just about as embarrassed as she felt. Bess heard the rustle of a shirt but waited for a few more seconds for good measure before looking up, and realized that a part of her was almost disappointed by the presence of the shirt. She saw shirtless men plenty—she lived on a farm with five brothers and a number of farmhands—but never had it caused her to so much as bat an eyelash. Despite the constant teasing he got, Will was definitely not scrawny, as she had just learned, but he was lean. Surprisingly muscled, but still, nothing like Gendry or Ben or Silas. So why were her cheeks growing mortifyingly hot?

“Bess?” Will asked. Bess shook her head slightly as if that might somehow clear such wonderings out of it, refocusing herself. I do hope he hasn’t been trying to get my attention for too long, she thought, I’ve already made enough of a fool of myself.

Bess cleared her throat before speaking. “I’m here about that horse you mentioned?”

“Oh yes, of course! She’s out in the pasture, follow me,” Will said brightly. The mention of horses had snapped him back to his usual cheery, charmingly awkward self, as if the previous five
minutes never even happened. Bess wished she could do the same.

Bess liked horses just fine, but she had never had much of an interest in them. She never really took much notice of things like coat color or body shape. Horses were horses. If they were reasonably friendly and trained and did what she needed them to do, Bess was content.

But when they neared the pasture and Will pointed out the horse in question, even Bess could recognize she was an uncommonly pretty horse, with a glossy gold coat and a thick mane the color of cream.

“She’s beautiful, Will,” Bess said, as Will offered his hand to help her as she climbed over the stile into the pasture. Bess quickly accepted and told herself it was just to help her keep her balance. Never mind the fact that she scrambled over such structures unaided on a daily basis.

Will whistled and the horse approached, somewhat cautious of the unfamiliar figure beside him. “A real lamb, too. A little shy, but we’ve worked on it a good deal,” Will said, giving the horse a fond pat on the neck as soon as she was in reach.

“Does she have a name?” Bess asked, holding out her hand for the horse to inspect.

“Apple. At least, that’s what I’ve been calling her. But she’s still quite young, it would be easy to change it, if you’d like.”

“No, it’s a fine name. Why Apple?”

“She likes apples—the sweet red kind. She’ll eat others, sure, but she doesn’t like them half so well. Especially if they’re tart. A real sweet tooth, this one,” Will explained.

Bess gave Will a cautious glance. Was he teasing her? How would he know? Unless…, Bess thought, the three idiots coming to mind. No, they wouldn’t dare. Well, Rory might, but they don’t really talk at all. Actually, that goes for all of them, Bess rationalized. The only one Will speaks with all that often is Gendry, and he certainly wouldn’t. I’m being ridiculous, she concluded before realizing that once again she had gotten entirely distracted by her thoughts, and Will was giving her an odd look.

“It’s more creative than Gendry naming his horse Steel,” she finally said, drawing a chuckle from Will.

“Here, give her a try,” Will said, saddling Apple. Bess rode her twice around the pasture before returning.

“She’s an exquisite creature, Will,” Bess complimented with the utmost honesty, gracefully dismounting. Will had been absolutely right, Apple was well suited to her size. “How much?”

Will named a price that even Bess knew was far too low; nearer the amount one would expect to pay for a mediocre horse aged past its prime.

“No really, Will,” said Bess.

“I’m serious,” Will replied.

“I know you are, though I can’t understand why,” Bess said. “That would be stealing, Will, and I’m no thief.”

“That’s the price,” Will insisted.
“No it isn’t,” Bess argued, instead naming her own.

“What? No!” Will spluttered, before adding, “that’s an oddly specific number.”

“I told Lady Tyrell I needed a horse, so she gave me two moons’ pay in advance.”

“Well I won’t take it. I won’t take a copper more than what I told you,” Will argued stubbornly. But Bess could be plenty stubborn too.

“You will, and I will be eternally grateful to you for it because it will still be far less than what she is worth.”

“So you’re an expert on horses?” Will challenged.

“I don’t even have to be to know this horse is worth more than I can rightly afford, even with Lady Tyrell’s generosity,” Bess retorted. “Besides, she gave me this gold early so that I could buy a horse, so I will use it to buy a horse.”

“Yes, you will use some of it to buy a horse—the amount I told you,” Will insisted.

“So if I ask your sisters about it would they tell me the same price? How about your father?”

Will hesitated and Bess knew she had him. She pulled a coin purse from the pocket of her skirt and placed it in his hand. “You are incredibly generous, Will, but take it, please.”

Will reluctantly did so. “Gendry never charges me as much as he should at the forge. But no more—you tell him that, all right?”

“Gendry will do as he pleases. You know, though, I might just ask him to not charge you at all next time you go to the forge.”

“Bess—”

“Will,” Bess retorted, realizing she was actually quite enjoying herself.

“This is the most ridiculous argument I have ever heard in all my life,” a third voice piped in. Bess and Will turned to see Holly peeking out from behind a copse of trees just beyond the pasture fence. Ben noticed when they turned, her shoulder nearly brushed against Will’s arm. When did he get so close?

“Holly!” Will scolded. Holly just rolled her eyes. “Mary! Amy! I know you’re there too!” The other two also came out from behind the trees. Mary was just as shameless as Holly, but Amy looked more fittingly abashed. She usually was the most reasonable one.

“Bess, my father wanted to sell that horse for five hundred gold dragons,” Holly explained, before turning to her brother, “and Will, take the money, for pity’s sake.”

“I can’t possibly—” Bess began, but Holly cut her off.

“Take the horse, Bess,” she said, leaving no room for argument. Bess took the horse.
Ned never enjoyed lying, but lying to Mikken and Burton was just about as easy and palatable as lying got, because neither were the type to ask questions, meaning his lies were mostly by omission—the sorts of things many did not consider to be lies at all. Speaking with Jon, however, would be an entirely different matter, which was probably why Ned put it off for nearly a moon’s turn. Several times Ned nearly talked himself out of mentioning anything to Jon at all, but ultimately he knew Jon was possibly in a better position that even Burton or Mikken to keep an eye on the boy.

“You wanted to see me, father?” Jon asked.

Ned looked up. He had not even heard Jon enter the solar.

“Yes, Jon. Please sit, there is a matter I wish to discuss with you.”

Jon sat down. Ned opened his mouth to tell one of the many lies he had practiced, but suddenly they all seemed terrible. At once, he was seized by an idea that was either one of the best or worse had had ever had.

“The truth is a burden, Jon,” he finally said. “I know you’ve wanted to know the truth about your mother for a very long time. You haven’t asked me in years, but I know it’s not because you’ve lost interest. I know you have a lot of questions that I haven’t been willing to answer. To be honest, Jon, I worry that you really don’t understand the cost of knowing. That if you did, you might not actually want to know.”

“But I can’t know that if I don’t know,” argued Jon, “and you can’t either.”

“No, I cannot,” Ned admitted. “However, there is another matter, burdensome in a similar way. It has become of pressing importance, and now I find myself debating whether or not to share it with you. Likewise, this is, of course, a secret, must remain so. If you agree to this, you may not speak of it with anybody. Not Arya, not Gendry, not even Robb. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Jon replied, though he sounded confused.

“If, after I tell you this, after you carry this burden for a while and understand what that means, if, after all of this, you still wish to know the truth about your mother, I shall tell you all you wish to know about her before you leave for the Wall.” Ned explained. “Now, I shall only ask you once, and I want you to think about it carefully before you answer: do you still want to know?”

“Yes,” Jon answered without hesitation.

“The reason I am telling you this at all is because there is something very important you must do for me, related to the information I am about to share.”

“I understand, father. Tell me.”

Ned sighed. There was no turning back now. “Your friend Gendry is Robert Baratheon’s bastard son. He is no orphan of the Rebellion. His mother could not leave King’s Landing, so she sent him here for his safety with the help of Jon Arryn.”

“The Hand of the King?”

Ned nodded. “For his safety?” Jon repeated.

This was the complicated part. Ned figured it easiest to start from the beginning. “Robert has
always been a man of many vices. He left a trail of bastards behind him from a young age. A few years after he became king, they suddenly all started dying.”

Jon frowned. “They were being killed?”

“Yes. By Lannister men.”

“The king—”

“Knew nothing. Knows nothing. It is also, of course, something the Lannisters would never admit to.”

“But why?”

“If a bastard of Robert’s was legitimized, he could make a claim for the throne.”

“Not over a true-born son, surely?”

“No.”

“That makes no sense,” Jon said after a moment’s pause.

“Because I am being completely truthful with you about the matter, I shall tell you this: I do believe there is more to it, something Jon Arryn hasn’t told me. But it is not my place to speculate, and I am asking you not to, either. The truth is important, but so are other things. And sometimes we must know when the truth is not worth seeking out.”

Jon nodded, though he did not look entirely convinced. “And what is it you need me to do?”

“Just before the tourney, King Robert will arrive, and the Lannisters with him. You need to keep Gendry as far away from them as possible. And keep an eye and an ear out. If you hear or see anything, let me know at once.”

“You really think they would have him killed?”

“Unfortunately, yes I do.”

Robb was joking with some of the guards while they put away their mail and melee weapons after a day of beating each other black and blue when Margaery approached.

"Walk with me to the Godswood?" She said in that way of hers that Robb had grown quite accustomed to, which sounded like a question but somehow worked like a command. An almost frighteningly effective technique, Robb found. Grey Wind eagerly approached Margarey, who no longer hesitated to give him a pat on the head and a scratch behind the ears in spite of his enormous size and sharp teeth.

"Of course, my lady," Robb said, offering his, admittedly sweaty, arm, which Margaery linked through her own without any hesitation. She never seemed bothered by sweat. Robb idly wondered if that had anything to do with the heat of the Reach. Robb found it mildly amusing to think of the Southron court, for all its airs and graces, sweating like pigs. "What's got you in such a good mood, and where are the others?"
"I gave them the afternoon off. And am I not always in a good mood?"

"Of course, my lady," Robb said once more, earning a giggle from Margaery.

"I just got a raven from Willas. Apparently they're making better time than they expected. He thinks they might even be here before the new moon." That was just a fortnight away.

"You've told my mother?"

"Of course, my lord," Margaery said. It was Robb's turn to laugh.

"For a southerner, you seem awfully fond of the godswood, you know. Most find it unsettling. I think mother still doesn't like coming here, even after all these years." Once they entered the shade of the godswood, Grey Wind, who had stuck to Robb's side the whole way, bounded off deeper into the woods, no doubt hoping to brutalize some poor unsuspecting furry creatures.

"It was unsettling at first," Margaery admitted. "The first time you brought me here I couldn't see past the strangeness of it. But once I thought on it a little, I realized I felt that way because it truly is a special place. The strangeness has faded away completely now, and I've come to find it an incredibly peaceful place. Only, peaceful doesn't seem quite right. I can't describe it."

"You don't need to," said Robb. "You know, when I was little, father used to bring me and Jon here to try to get us to see just that. Took him far longer than I would care to admit—far longer than it's taken you, for certain. We'll make a Northerner of you yet, my lady."

They reached the heart tree and stopped for a moment as Margaery studied it with curious eyes. "I will admit, this still unsettles me a little. The expression... so much pain..."

"Sansa still can't stand it," Robb commented.

Margaery looked around. "Which path leads to the hot springs?" she asked. "I can never remember if it's this one here or that one." She pointed to the paths in question.

"The one on the left," Robb directed.

"Now I really like it here," Margaery announced as soon as they made it to the pools. Toeing off her slippers, she sat on the edge of the pool and dipped her feet in.

"If you don't join me I'll feel foolish," she told Robb, who still stood near the edge of the clearing.

"Will you now?" Robb asked, teasing.

"Oh yes. Terribly," Margaery responded in kind.

"Well, we can't have that, can we?" Robb pulled off his own boots and rolled up the legs of his trousers before joining his intended at the water's edge. "Is there nothing like this in Highgarden?"

"Nothing natural, no. We have the river Mander, but that's no place for swimming if you don't want to be swept away by the current. It's also much colder than this, funnily enough. We'd go to the seaside, sometimes. It's pretty, but I can't say I'm overly fond of it. I despise all the sand."

"I've seen the ocean a few times, when we visited White Harbor. Not the sort of water anyone swims in, even in summer. No proper beaches, either."

"Well, I've seen both, and I say this is much better."
"I'll have to trust your word, I suppose."

They talked for a while longer, before deciding they should probably head back.

As Margaery stood, she found herself a little off balance and grabbed Robb's arm for support. Unfortunately, Robb lost his footing on a mossy stone at the exact same moment, sending them both into the water.

The water where they fell happened to be particularly deep, despite being at the edge of the pool, such that Robb could almost, but not quite, reach the bottom with his toes and keep his head above water at the same time. Which meant that it was well over Margaery's head.

"Margaery?" Robb called out anxiously as soon as he surfaced. What if she couldn't swim? Robb was in a full blown panic by the time she surfaced, just moments after him. "Margaery! Are you all right?" he asked, rushing through the words in his hurry. Her face was fully obscured by the curtain of wet hair plastered to her face, but he could make out her shoulders shaking, as if she was crying.

"Margaery? Are you hurt?" He continued, desperately, hurrying to her side. Margaery let out some kind of sound that Robb couldn't identify. As soon as he got to her, he gently pushed the hair away from her face.

She was laughing at him.

The overwhelming relief he felt was swiftly replaced by irritation. Robb moved towards the shallowest edge of the pool, which was also the easiest to climb out of.

"No, wait!" Margaery called. Seeing it wasn't going to work, she quickly swam after him. It only took her a few seconds to reach him, and once she did she threw her arms around his neck to get him to stop. He did, and she let go so she could swim around to face him. "Don't be mad," Margaery said.

“I’m not mad,” Robb insisted.

“You’re not a very good liar, Robb,” said Margaery. “You think I’m laughing at you. Is that it?”

“No.”

“That is it.” Margaery shook her head. “Silly man. I’m laughing at this,” she said, gesturing at their surroundings and then at their soaked clothes. “You must admit, it is a little funny.”

Robb couldn’t argue that.

“I’m surprised you’re not laughing, too,” Margaery admitted. “I must look a sight. Whenever we would go to the bathing pools in Oldtown, my brothers—Loras and Garlan, that is, Willas is far too kind to ever do such a thing—would always laugh at me. Said I looked like a drowned cat.”

“You’re beautiful,” Robb blurted out. Margaery was about to argue when she saw the earnest look in his eyes and forgot what she was about to say. And everything else. “I don’t think I’ve seen you speechless before.”

“It doesn’t happen very often,” Margaery said.

If Robb were asked, he would not be able to say who initiated the kiss. But he could honestly say he didn’t care one whit.
Robb and Margaery broke apart and swiveled around to see they had an audience: Arya, who had made the complaint and wore a look of mixed disgust and horror; Theon, who was leering in a way that made Robb want to punch him; Bran, who was gaping like a fish; Jon, who looked so utterly confused he had forgotten to be embarrassed; and Gendry, who was looking anywhere and everywhere that wasn’t the couple in the water. They all had quivers of arrows strung across their backs and bows in their hands, and Gendry and Jon carried practice targets, making their intentions perfectly clear. Grey Wind was there too, entirely unbothered, sharing the last of what might have been a hare at some point with Ghost. *My thanks for the warning, friend,* Robb thought wryly.

“Don’t mind your sister, please continue,” Theon insisted, waggling his eyebrows as if the implications of his statement were not already perfectly clear.

“In your dreams, Theon,” Margaery retorted. Robb could tell from her reddened cheeks that she was embarrassed, but she refused to be ashamed. In fact, Robb thought she looked about ready to laugh,

“Don’t you dare, Theon,” Robb warned before his father’s ward could say anything. “What are you doing here, anyway?” While target practice in the godswood was not expressly forbidden, his father generally frowned upon it.

“The courtyard’s too busy and wildling raiders were spotted in the Wolfswood yesterday,” Jon answered.

“I see,” Robb said, after an awkward pause. It was all too much for Margaery, who let out a shockingly piggish snort before dissolving into giggles. This time, Robb could not help but join in. Their audience looked at them with varying degrees of shock, horror, and confusion—with the exception of Arya, who rolled her eyes to the heavens and growled something that sounded like “I give up” before stomping off.

The couple in the water only laughed harder.

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone is still enjoying!

My predictions for tonight’s episode: Davos dies and Littlefinger saves the day.
My unlikely hope for tonight’s episode: Gendry finally shows up. (or, more accurately: my unlikely hope for every episode since season 3)

NEXT TIME: WILLAS! (finally!)

A NOTE: People have commented on the fact that Margaery does have a Northern-born attendant in the Game of Thrones TellTale Game, so I just wanted to address a few things. As I mentioned in the prologue, this story will simplify certain things—for example, I am mostly disregarding semi-canon sources, such as the TellTale game. Also, I know Margaery has a small army of attendants, but I doubted that most of them would travel all the way to Winterfell, either because they wouldn’t want to or because they wouldn’t be allowed to by their families due to the distance and/or potential damage to their marriage prospects. Furthermore, Margaery wants to be accepted by...
the North, and she knows the way to do that isn’t by having a small army of Southron attendants. I do try to give some regard to canon, so please feel free to let me know if things come up, but ultimately this is a very AU story and there will therefore be some discrepancies.
everyone is watching

Chapter Summary

A second Highgarden party arrives at Winterfell.

Chapter Notes


In other news: FINALE TONIGHT! Woo-hoo! Also, D: (let us all pray/beg/make deals with higher powers of ill repute for the return of Gendry).

Like last time, my thanks to SlightlyOff7 and Gingerpie81 for their beta services!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya remembered once Old Nan told her a legend from the Age of Heroes involving a mountain in Old Valyria which exploded, raining down fire for leagues around. Like all of the old woman’s stories, Arya knew it was supposed to have a message of some sort, but she could never figure out for the life of her what it was.

Regardless, Arya was beginning to feel like that mountain. She had kept her word to her father for several moons—she showed up at her lessons, did as her mother bid with minimal complaint, limited her time with Gendry and Jon to when she wasn’t required anywhere else, and only wore tunics and trousers when and where no one “important” would see her. Her father seemed pleased, which was one of the only reasons Arya had managed to keep it up for so long, but she noticed that her mother looked decidedly not pleased, and that concerned Arya. Her mother was planning something, she could tell. But she didn’t know what, and she didn’t know when—she just knew she was not going to like it.

Jon and Gendry got the worst of it when she managed to sneak off with Bran’s practice sword so she could join them in some sparring practice—snapping at Sansa only lead to grief, so Arya tried to control herself, but her favorite brother and his best friend took their bruised shins with exceptionally good humor. Channeling her frustrations into her sword practice helped, but only a little. Eventually, she even started talking to Jon about it. She was not sure he really understood everything she tried to convey, but he was a good listener, and it helped immensely. But he’ll be gone soon, the voice of her growing anxiety reminded her. He’ll be with the Night’s Watch. You might never see him again. Arya did her best to ignore that voice.

Sansa knew she was prone to exaggeration—Arya never failed to remind her, after all—but she didn’t think it would be even a slight exaggeration to say she had been anticipating this moment her entire life. A few wheelhouses had already stopped and unloaded, full of attendants and a few
minor lords who had decided to arrive early and Tyrell relatives that Margaery all knew and greeted warmly. Any other time, Sansa would be fascinated. But none of them were Willas Tyrell, her future husband, so Sansa could hardly manage to get through the necessary polite greetings without looking back anxiously to the road. She was too busy planning out the perfect thing to say, running through the thousand different versions of this first meeting she had rehearsed so diligently in her head (and, sometimes, alone in her room, aloud to the mirror, though she would never willingly admit to such a thing).

Her blood was pumping so loudly in her ears it was a wonder no one else could hear it. But Sansa knew that if it could be heard, Arya would have made some sort of comment by now. Her sister had surprisingly managed to keep up her best behavior since her blow-up several moons ago. Everything was relative, of course—Arya's best behavior was still quite abysmal by any other standard—but she had been showing up to events and all her lessons relatively on time, even if she rarely could muster an appropriate level of enthusiasm once she was there. Right now, for example, she had a scowl on her face that resembled Rickon's when he was banned from dessert because Shaggy bit someone.

A third wheelhouse pulled up, grander than the first two, and Sansa tried to stand up straighter, as if her posture was not already perfect. An attendant stepped out first, and then helped out an old, shrewd-looking woman draped in finery. The Queen of Thorns. She glanced to her right to see that Arya must have come to the same conclusion, because she actually looked intrigued for once. As Lady Olenna made her introductions, Sansa saw the carriage door open once more. When she saw the silver cane she knew. Her breath caught in her throat. A footman stepped up to offer an arm to help Willas down the stairs.

"Thank you, Leo, but it's quite all right. I can manage." Sansa still couldn't see his face, but his voice was deep and soothing and she could easily imagine hearing it every day for the rest of her life.

Then she finally did see his face, and the shock must have been written plainly on her face. Arya snickered, unable to help herself, earning warning glances from both Catelyn and Jon—Catelyn on Sansa's behalf, Jon on her own.

Willas was handsome. In retrospect, Sansa realized that some part of her had assumed that Willas would be somehow plain, because he was thirteen years her senior and had a crippled leg. As if somehow his leg would affect his face, which she was now realizing was incredibly foolish. In her defense, she had heard repeatedly how little Loras resembled his eldest brother, and Loras was a knight from a song made flesh. Still, she should have known better—his mother and sister were beautiful as well, so how could he be plain?

It was true, he looked nothing like Loras. He was not as tall as Loras or Robb, but still a few inches taller than her, and lean. His hair was the same shade of brown as Margaery's and had a slight curl to it. He was square-jawed and clean-shaven, with high, prominent cheekbones, and his eyes were possibly the most striking Sansa had ever seen—a bright pale blue that shone with an intimidating intelligence. The more she looked, the less Sansa thought handsome was the right word to describe her intended. She had met handsome men before, but none that looked anything like Willas. Elegant? Striking?

Before he got to the Starks, Willas was greeted by his own family. He started with Loras, who said something which made him laugh. His laugh was rich and kind, and his wide smile lit up his whole face. Sansa could not decide if this made him seem more or less intimidating. He kissed his mother and sister on both cheeks, and said something which made Margaery blush. Alerie inspected him
and patted him on the cheek in a fond and motherly way Sansa often saw with her own mother and Rickon. Willas looked slightly embarrassed at the gesture, and Sansa found herself relaxing slightly.

He then made his way over to Ned. His limp was only slightly noticeable with the cane, and if Sansa didn’t know about his leg she wondered if she would even be able to tell he required the cane for anything more than the stately air it gave him.

“Lord Stark, I thank you for your hospitality,” Willas greeted, inclining his head respectfully. “Do forgive me for not kneeling, it’s quite difficult for me to get back up once I do.”

“No apology is required, Lord Willas. We are honored to have you as our guest.”

He moved on to Catelyn, kissing the back of her hand and thanking her once more for her hospitality. Next was Robb. The two clasped forearms.

“And I with her, Lord Willas,” Robb answered honestly with surprising grace that everyone in earshot quickly attributed to Margaery’s influence.

And then it was her turn. She curtsied. “Then you must be Lady Sansa.”

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Lord Willas.” Really? That’s the best you could do? Sansa wanted to smack herself. It could have been worse. You could have stuttered, or tripped and fallen flat on your face. Though there’s still time for the last one.

Sansa held out her hand and hoped he would not be able to notice how it was shaking. She had had many a lord kiss her hand before, but never had it felt like this. Warmth radiated from his hands through the leather of his gloves, and his lips were similarly warm and surprisingly soft, though slightly chapped. Sansa felt a little faint.

“The pleasure is mine, my lady.” Then he moved on to Arya, who said nothing at all in response to his greeting, which was rude, though likely not as rude as anything Arya would have said.

After they greeted the last of their guests and were all free to go, Margaery quickly claimed her eldest brother, meaning Sansa would see him next at dinner. With nothing else to do, Sansa retreated to her quarters to sulk over her own ineptitude and complain to Lady, which she knew was pretty much talking to herself but somehow felt less pathetic.

Her mother distracted with their new guests, Arya snuck off to practice archery with Jon in the Wolfswood. Maybe she could even convince Jon to take a detour into Wintertown to see if they could wheedle Gendry into joining them. Bran and Rickon gathered up all the other children for games of come-into-my-castle and monsters-and-maidens. Abandoned by his intended, Robb joined Theon and Loras and most of the other young visiting lords for a game of cards.

Margaery dragged Willas off for a walk around the courtyard. While she loved her mother and Loras, she missed her eldest brother’s thoughtful rationality and dry humor.

“Careful, sweet sister, your intended might feel abandoned,” Willas teased.
“Robb knows how much I’ve missed you. He’ll be all right,” Margery replied, leading her brother into the courtyard.

“The North seems to agree with you.”

“I find it very agreeable,” Margaery said with a mischievous smirk.

“Agreeable, hmm?”

“I would have you know, dearest brother, that we have not done anything of which grandmother would disapprove.”

“Now, why does that not comfort me in the slightest?”

“Because you’re smart and it probably shouldn’t,” Margaery admitted. “There’s the library tower. I’m sure you’ll want to explore it later,” she informed him, pointing out the structure in question.

Willas was intrigued, though he eyed the stairs with some apprehension. “I’ll want to give myself a good deal of time, I suppose.”

After showing him around the courtyard and pointing out a few more structures, Margaery lead him back to the Great Keep and showed him to his quarters, which she had helped prepare. The servants had already brought in all his trunks. “There was a larger room Lady Catelyn wanted to put you in on the second level, but I convinced her that you would prefer the lack of stairs.”

“Indeed I do,” Willas agreed. Margaery sat in the arm chair by the fireplace and patted the arm of the lounge seat next to her.

Willas sat down, happy to be off his feet, and propped up his bad leg with pillows.

“So?” Margaery asked, the moment he had finally settled. “What do you think?”

“Of what?” Willas asked warily.

“Of Sansa, you goose,” Margaery said with a fond roll of her eyes.

Willas sighed. “Have you no mercy for a weary, crippled traveller?”

“Absolutely none,” Margaery admitted without shame. She reached over and poked him in the ribs like she knew he hated. Willas swatted her hand away.

“She seems a sweet girl.”

“You don’t sound terribly thrilled.”

“You saw her, Marg. She was terrified of me! She could barely speak to me and she was shaking like a leaf!”

Margaery actually laughed at that. “That’s because she thought you were handsome, you fool.”

Willas looked to his sister as if she had grown a second head. “What?” he asked, and then a moment later, “how do you know?”

“Because I was Sansa’s age a few short years ago. More importantly, I’ve gotten to know her quite well.”
“Then maybe it is I who should be questioning you?”

“I’m not quite done with you yet, brother dear. Did you find her pretty?”

“Margaery!” Willas scolded, “she is a child.”

“Hardly,” Margaery scoffed. “She’s only two years younger than me, and already taller. Answer the question, Willas.”

“She is very pretty,” Willas admitted. “There. Are you satisfied?”

“Immensely. Oh Willas, you could be so happy with her, I can imagine it so clearly. You’ll be sickeningly sweet together, just you wait. And then you’ll give mother beautiful blue-eyed grandchildren to spoil.”

Willas buried his face in his hands. “Margaery.”

“Oh, don’t act like some blushing green boy, Willas. Besides, I’m sure it’s nothing mother hasn’t already said.”

“Somehow it’s worse, coming from you.”

Dinner was a lively affair. Between the two Highgarden parties they now had around thirty guests—a small fraction of the total 300 or so anticipated for the tourney and the wedding, but still more than any of the Starks were accustomed to. Olenna and Willas joined the high table, so Jon was relegated to one of the lower tables along with Theon, much to Arya’s displeasure. Willas was seated next to Sansa. Arya, on her other side as usual, had first worried that this would be a truly terrible thing, but quickly realized that Sansa’s preoccupation with her intended meant that she would not be paying any attention to Arya, meaning that, for once, Arya could eat in peace. No critiques over her posture or complaints about her chewing with her mouth open or *no Arya, don’t hold your knife like that, you’re not a wildling.* While Arya knew wildlings carried knives, she doubted they used them for pork chops. She also doubted that a wildling would put up with her sister’s constant nitpicking.

Ned started the meal by asking their guests whether they would prefer wine or ale, but Lady Olenna simply shook her head and waved over one of her attendants.

“I brought enough barrels from the Arbor to hold over a family of drunks for a year,” she announced, before turning to the girl she had called over. “Bring us a few bottles of the good gold. You know the ones I like.”

The girl curtsied and scurried off in search of the wine.

“I was born a Redwyne, Lord Stark. I have very strong opinions about wine.”

“And everything else,” Willas muttered dryly under his breath, too quiet for anyone but Sansa and Margaery, sitting on either side of him, to hear.

Ned was taken aback by Lady Olenna, but took her prickly disposition with good humor, and once the wine was sorted conversation flowed well.
“Have you had a chance to see much of Winterfell yet, Lord Willas?” Ned asked.

“Margaery gave me a brief tour, but I am sure there is plenty more to see.”

“Have you seen the glass gardens yet? Your mother tells me you are quite the expert on roses; I would be curious to know your thoughts,” Catelyn added.

“It’s just a hobby of mine,” Willas said modestly, “but no, I have not.”

“Sansa could show you,” Margaery chimed in, “she spends a good deal of time in the gardens.”

“She does?” Robb wondered cluelessly, earning him an elbow to the ribs from his intended. “I mean, what would I know? It’s not as if I spend any time in the glass gardens.”

“If Lady Sansa is willing,” Willas agreed, turning to the girl in question.

“Of course, my lord,” Sansa replied graciously, though her insides raged with a mix of excitement and trepidation.

Margaery just smiled, and inwardly congratulated herself on a job well done.

Chapter End Notes

Yay, Willas! In case anyone is curious, I imagine Willas as the gorgeous Cillian Murphy. For those of you not familiar:
I mean, how could you imagine Willas as anyone else?

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