"Dickon and I will be lord and lady of the manor, and you'll be the old maid," Mary says, tucking a stray lock of Colin's hair behind his ear. "You'll keep our house, won't you?"

The first time, it's innocent enough. Dickon takes Mary out to the garden to court and kiss—lightly, carefully, this thing between them still tentative and new—and Colin's already there. Mary catches sight of him a few minutes in, his blond head half-shaded by a briar, and leans in to press her lips to Dickon's ear. "Colin is here," she says. "He's watching us."

"So?" Dickon says. "Let him."

Mary looks up at Dickon's serious face so she doesn't give herself away. She feels queerly emboldened by the tacit permission of Colin's gaze, his role as omega chaperone comically inverted. Dickon wraps his arm around Mary's waist and she lets him draw her close, reaches up a hand to cup his jaw and kiss him deeply.

—

It's normal enough that she and Dickon should want each other. They're betas, of age—soon enough, Mary will come into her inheritance and be ready to marry up and out. Colin's the one with the manor entailed in the family line, who'll bring in an alpha to carry on the family name. The thought of losing Colin to someone else makes Mary's gut churn.

Their closeness seemed natural enough when they were children. Mary was curious, proud, and
spoiled, and Colin was alternately deprived and indulged. They fought and reconciled with equal
erGENCY, Dickon always mediating between them. There's nothing he can do now to soothe the
jealous push and pull of desire that keeps Mary up at night.

---

One night, Mary's sitting up in bed, reading by candlelight, when a familiar rap comes at her door.
"It's me," Colin says, pushing the door ajar. "I just—"

Mary scoots over to make room for him. "Can't sleep?"

"You aren't sleeping either," Colin says as he climbs in beside her. "You look awful in the
morning. Tell me."

"It's nothing," she says. "You can't—I don't know how to fix it."

Colin sighs. "Will you close your eyes? I want to try something."

With a huff, Mary lays her book aside. "Fine, but I don't—"

"Close your eyes," Colin says again.

The room feels very still with one of her senses diminished. Mary's suddenly conscious of the
draft from the window, air ghosting over her cheeks, and the warm bulk of Colin beside her. He's
gotten tall these last few years, his shoulders broad and strong. There's nothing frail about him.
Mary trembles when he takes her hand in his, caressing the inside of her wrist with his thumb.

Colin brings her hand up to place a heavy kiss in her palm. "How's this?" he says. "Is this
helping?"

"I don't know," Mary says. She leans in and fists her hand in his nightshirt anyway.

---

Mary can hardly wait to tell Dickon on their walk the next day, but when the time comes, she's
nervous, fussing with her hair and neatening her dress. "Come, tell me what's troubling you,"
Dickon says, tucking his arm in hers when they're out of sight of the manor. "It isn't like you to
worry so."

After a moment, she says, "Colin came to my bed last night."

"Did he." Dickon slows his pace, but he doesn't come to a halt or turn to Mary to confront her.

"You don't think it's wrong?" she says. "That we would—"

Dickon shakes his head. "I'm only envious that he got to touch you first."

"Of all of us, I wouldn't expect you to have trouble sharing," she teases.

Inside their garden, once the key's turned in the lock, Dickon presses Mary up against the door. "I
want to taste you," he says, low. "Has he done that yet?"

"No," Mary says as she draws up her skirts.

---

Colin's bred for bearing children, not for making them, so he's the one who spreads Mary out
before Dickon in the garden, works her open with his fingers until she's ready for him to enter her. "God," she says, clenching around Colin's cock. "There's—you—move."

Dickon slides his hand between them, teases at Mary's breasts and dips lower.

When Mary closes her eyes this time, all she can see is the roses overhead, red buds silhouetted against the blue sky.

—

They sneak in to help Colin through his heat when the next one arrives. He's pitiful, mewling with desire and nearly insatiable. Mary and Dickon take turns with him, Mary with her fingers and Dickon with with his cock, until Colin's fever finally breaks.

As they cuddle Colin between them afterward, Mary tells the boys her plan. "Dickon and I will be lord and lady of the manor, and you'll be the old maid," she says, tucking a stray lock of Colin's hair behind his ear. "You'll keep our house, won't you?"

"I won't do anything of the sort," Colin says, squirming when Dickon places a possessive hand over his belly. "We have servants for that."

"We won't keep upstairs servants any longer," Mary continues undeterred. "See, I've thought of everything."

"Don't think the neighbors'll take kindly to you marrying a country lad," Dickon says over Colin's shoulder.

Mary sighs, shifts closer so she can press a kiss to Dickon's lips and another to Colin's brow. "Uncle loves you," she says. "You know how he is when he wants something, especially when he thinks it's his idea."

—

"I'm not a fool, my boy," Uncle says when Dickon asks for Mary's hand that winter. The three of them are in his study, the fire crackling behind Uncle's chair. "I know what you children have been doing."

Mary's spine stiffens and her chin goes up. "You—" she says, twining her fingers behind her back. "You make my son happy," Uncle says. He gives Mary a moment to meet his eyes. "You've given him back his life. I can't begrudge you for sustaining it."

"That's kind of you, sir," Dickon says softly. "We've—I appreciate your consideration."

Uncle narrows his eyes at Dickon. "Is the wedding to be rushed?"

"No." Mary flushes, ducks her head to examine the exotic weave of the carpet. "We're wiser than that, Uncle."

Uncle huffs. "That may be," he says. "But I remember what it's like to be in love."

—

The wedding is in spring, when the whole world feels fresh and new. Dickon wears a stiff new suit of brown wool, Colin stands up beside him, and Mary carries a bouquet of roses.
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