the impatient traveller, forever baying

by bubblewrapstargirl

Summary

One: Robert Baratheon is eager to be back on the road to war. If only he could get Robb Stark to comply, they'd be busy slaughtering lions together by now.

Two: Robert deals with the stresses of inheritance, trying to work out a way for his family line to keep hold of their ancestral lands.

Three: Robert considers marriage alliances for his family while on a trip to inspect a new project.
Chapter 1

Robert watches his namesake settle into his chair, the youth broader than when last he saw him. Yet still far slender than he had been at his age. No true warrior, by the look of him, though whispers of his ability on the battlefield would say otherwise. The steel blue of his gaze seems darker in the candlelight. There’s no look of his father about him, not in his colouring, at least. But the cut of his jaw as it clenches, yes, perhaps there is a little of Ned there. It’s only for his sake that Robert doesn’t reach over the table between them and cut this meeting short with a tap to the boy’s cheek; one that would surely break his jaw.

Stannis warned him to keep his temper in check. Renly, too. They need the boy’s army. Apparently well-trained, for supposed Northern barbarians. His numbers even include the man-eating Skaggs and savage crannogmen. The Northmen are better fed from their Essosi supplies, versus Robert’s hungry army. His supply lines from the Reach are still being hounded by the Mountain.

The Northmen have only taken part in skirmishes in the Riverlands, driving Tywin Lannister to flee South again. After the bloodshed, instead of taking his men to join his King, this boy had pulled them back, North of the Neck. Leaving only a token force to sure up his kin in the Riverlands. It was not to be borne. If Tywin gained the backing of the Iron Bank, they’d be up to their arses in foreign sellswords before long. The Lannisters need cutting down before that could happen.

Robb Stark regards him coolly, before pouring himself a goblet a wine. The balls on this one! Robert reluctantly admired the boy’s ability to stare him down without giving ground. Eventually, the silence is too oppressive to hold off. It doesn’t seem like making the boy wait is cowing him at all, so Robert growls:

“We’ll be needing your men a little further South, boy. Don’t you want to avenge your Father?”

“Aye, of course,” says Robb, “But Jaime Lannister’s head on a spike won’t bring him back. There’s other things I desire, aside from revenge.”

“What’d that be?” Robert ponders facetiously, well aware of what the boy had written in his answering letter, after Robert demanded he attend him. “Power and glory, and to name yourself King.”

“I am a King,” Robb Stark said simply. “The King my people want and need. I’ve more right to a throne than you at any rate; my ancestors were Kings for thousands of years. Your Grandmother was a Targaryen, and you think it gives you leave to hold dominion over us all? Handing the reins of power to the Lannisters, so you can drink and whore? While Jon Arryn does his best to counteract your frivolous spending? No. No longer.”

“You carry on this road, you’ll be in open rebellion against the Iron Throne.” Robert warns, feeling his blood rise. “When I’m done skinning lion pelts, I’ll turn North, and gain me some fine wolf fur.”

Robb’s eyes twinkled with ill-hidden mirth. Was the little fuck going to laugh at him? Stannis be damned, if he dared, Robert would break his arms and leave him for a cripple.

“Will you?” Robb purrs. He did not raise his voice, but something about the gentle lilting tone was edged with steel. “How well do you think your men would navigate the Neck? If they manage to avoid the swamp, lizard-lions and crannogmen, and make it back to the Kingsroad, do you know what they must pass?”
He doesn’t give Robert the chance to respond, the arrogant shit.

“Moat Cailin.” Robb crows with triumph. “The seat of my brother, Jon Snow. Do you think he’d suffer your men to pass? He could live for years under siege, with supplies from the North side of the keep. You’d never get around it.”

“Maybe so,” Robert grunts, “Or maybe he’d let me through for a chance at being Jon Stark, Lord of Winterfell.”

The boy did laugh then, hard and cruel. “You don’t know my brother. He’d rather slit his own throat.”

Robert clenched his fists, and resisted the powerful urge to upend the table with a roar. Instead, he refilled his own goblet and didn’t speak again until the cup was drained.

“And what if I bypassed the Neck entirely? Took my ships, set a course for the North and razed your barren ground, leaving not a scrap of wood fit for kindling?”

Robb Stark raised a single eyebrow at him, taking a delicate sip from his own wine.

“Your ships have already met the Lannister fleet in open combat, repeatedly. Do you really think what remains of the combined Baratheon-Redwyne fleet could stand up against mine?”

Robert chuckled. “Yours? Every fool knows the North has no ships, boy.”

“Had.” The would-be King corrects him, “The North had no ships. I’ve built a few since my Father left me in charge of the North. Bought a few more. But you’re right, the bulk wouldn’t truly be mine. Or had you forgotten my sister is married to Theon Greyjoy?”

He hadn’t, but he’d never anticipated it would one day matter this much. Damn the boy, and damn the squids, too.

“Your ships have already been decimated by wildfire and combat. Do you think they will stand up against the might of the Greyjoy fleet?” Robb asks softly, tilting his head to one side.

Defeated, Robert sags back into his chair, no small amount of awe on his face when he considers the boy in front of him. Younger than he was, when he defeated the Dragon Prince, and overthrew the Mad King. For a time, no one would have dared stand against him, or incur his wrath. Now Robb Stark is going to gain a kingdom from him, without even shedding blood. It was a feat to be commended, if Robert could see past his fury.

“Your Father will be rolling in his grave. Would that he could see the traitorous whelp he seeded.”

Robb shrugs. “I see no betrayal here. I never swore fealty to you. My ancestors knelt to the dragons, but the dragons are gone. My Father was a good man, an honourable one. By all accounts, you are a drunkard lecher, who repeatedly forswore his marriage bed. One of your numerous bastards is a member of my household, did you know that?”

Robert did know, but he’ll not give the boy the satisfaction of acknowledging it.

“My Father was always loyal. But you did little to earn that loyalty from him, and nothing to gain it from me.”

Robb Stark states flatly. “I’ll subject my people to your careless folly no longer.”
“Have a care how you speak to me,” Robert hisses, half-rising from his chair, his pride battered enough. “Think your men could make it in here, before I crack your skull like an egg between my fists?”

A growl cuts through the air between them then. Robb Stark doesn’t even look round as his massive wolf invades the tent, padding to his side with loping, predatory steps. Spittle is drooling from the beast’s slavering jaws, sharp teeth glinting through the gloom.

“I don’t know about my men,” Robb shrugs, “But I know Grey Wind could rip out your throat before you lay a hand on me.”

Robert eyes the ferocious wolf, and supposes it is probably true. He doesn’t feel apt to test it. He’s not as quick on his feet as he once was. Too much fine food and wine.

“What is it you want?” He sighs, settling back into his seat. Stannis would be proud, he thinks, of how well he’s kept his fury in check.

Robb Stark lays a hand on the direwolf’s neck, smoothing down his fur until his hackles drop.

“You’ll sign an official decree, stating the North is a free and independent Kingdom, governed by our own laws and practices. Our territory will extend from the Wall to the Southern end of Riverlands—”

“The Riverlands?” Robert bellows, “Think I’ll let you steal another Kingdom from under me, do you?”

Robb Stark barely blinks, his face still serenely placid. Robert wants nothing more than to ruffle his feathers, thump him and be done with it. The direwolf snarls at him, as though it knows his thoughts.

“Edmure Tully is dead,” Robb informs him, as if he did not already know. “His only child betrothed to my brother. Bran is squire to Ser Brynden Tully, and eligible for the seat of Riverrun, through our mother’s blood. I’ll not leave him undefended, nor have his fealty torn between Kings.”

Robert pales, taking another generous swill of wine. This boy would squeeze blood from a stone, alright.

“Anything else?” He snarls.

“The Iron Islands.” Robb says, “That’s all the territory I want; nothing you’d miss terribly. We can renegotiate the borders of the Riverlands. You could extend the Crownlands, to where the Westerlands meet the Reach just above the Goldroad, if you wish.”

Robert grunts, but it’s not a bad bargain really. Better than a dissenting Lord Paramount, brother to a rival King, that he could never trust.

“What’ll I get in return?” He snaps, irritated that the negotiation is thus far one-sided.

“If my fighting men and fleet aren’t enough, I’ve a proposition that’ll give you something you’ve always wanted.” Robb offers.

Robert barks out a laugh. Unless the boy can raise his Lyanna from the dead, he doubts that very much.

“Tying House Baratheon to House Stark.”
That is something he’s long desired. But the Lannister bitch has ensured it will likely never happen. Robb Stark sounds assured of himself, however. Robert is willing to hear more, if it will turn the conversation away from land he is going to lose.

“My second sister is in love with your true son, though he’s not trueborn. Legitimise him so they can marry, and you’ll gain your wish.” Suggests Robb.

Robert blinks at that, thrown. He winces to think what Jon Arryn and the Queen of Thorns would say, if he suggested his blacksmith bastard be named a Prince.

“He’ll not be in line for the throne,” he starts, but Robb waves his concerns away.

“Make him last in succession, behind any children you and your Tyrell Queen might have, your brothers, and their children. He’d expect nothing less. I only ask you gift him a token keep in the Stormlands, somewhere currently empty, with no heirs to claim it. They’ll likely not want to leave the North, regardless.”

Robert considers it. An heir to fall back on, should he have no actual trueborns with the Tyrell girl, and his brothers produce no sons. He could do worse than the lad. The realm had certainly dealt with worse. Gendry was a strong enough to wield a hammer at least, and free from madness.

Robert nods, and Robb Stark bestows him a smile.

"One last thing. The Five Kingdoms—" Robert almost grinds his teeth like Stannis, hearing that, but the boy plows on, unheeding, "Will start taking their responsibilities to the Night's Watch seriously. Sending adequate men, supplies and weapons."

"Seems to me, the Wall will be in your territory now, why should I bother with it?" Robert asks, furiously.

"Because if you don't, I won't tie our Houses." Robb smirks, "Robert Arryn is in Riverrun. I'll have my sister marry him instead of your bastard son. Then I'll take the Vale for mine own, as well."

*Bugger me, Ned,* Robert thinks. *What kind of fiend did you raise?* The dead have no answers for him.

"Fine," he grinds out, impatient to be done with it.

“Should we call in the others, to discuss our assault on Casterly Rock?” Robb asks innocently, “I don’t know about you, but all this talk makes me hungry for action.”

Robert can understand that. “Aye lad,” he agrees. “We’ll gather the rest, and see if we can’t rout out that withered Old Lion before the year is through.”

The direwolf sits then, settling its massive head upon its forelegs, as though understanding the need for animosity is done. Robb Stark never stops petting it, supremely at ease with the brutal beast.

Robert is eager to taste blood again. Ned is gone, the world a darker place for it. But he’ll have a Stark by his side, a wolf with teeth it seems. Perhaps it will be enough.
Chapter 2

Robert Baratheon sighed heavily, massaging his aching forehead with bulbous fingertips. He felt the kind of fatigue usually associated with days spent awake, marching to war, when there was no time to be lost. But instead of enjoying battle and reaping the rich rewards of war, he had been confined to the Red Keep for days. Jon Arryn harassing him from dawn till dusk to find a solution to his heir problem. Oh, his own line was secure, of that he’d made sure.

Margaery had done her duty admirably, and with far less insufferable pride than that abominable whore, Cersei. Robert had seen to it that there was no chance of being fooled into accepting another rotten egg into his nest. He’d kept her confined to her rooms in Maegor’s Holdfast, until a pregnancy was apparent. Even after, she was only allowed between the courtyard and her chambers under the constant supervision and protection of her sworn shield, Lady Brienne.

The girl had never quite forgiven him for that, but then Robert hadn’t really expected her to. A gilded cage is still a prison, and she was under no illusions, that one. For all her pretty smiles and empty words made her seem harmless. Men had thought it a source of great amusement, that Robert had cleared the Maegor’s holdfast of all men. But Jon had convinced him of the need for absolute certainty this time.

Instead of male guards, a contingent of armed women were placed there to protect Margaery. Mostly Northern women, since precious few in the other Kingdoms were castle-trained fighters. But there’d been some from Dorne also, and Brienne of course. The women trained together, trading styles and weaponry. Before long, it became somewhat of a daily spectacle for the members of the court to watch.

Robert had planned to have the women replaced with Unsullied soldiers, though his Small Council had grumbled at the idea of purchasing slave-fighters. But the women became so proficient, so commonplace in court, that it was rather a shock when the small band of Unsullied men turned up. Some of the women had been pleased to be released from their service, eager to go home. A few had petitioned to stay; one of the Mormont girls, a little group of Dornish women, and of course Brienne. Three of them had brokered marriages for themselves, with men who weren’t afraid of a tough woman.

A blue-eyed, black-haired son had been born to Robert, and for a while all had been smooth sailing. The realm had congratulated him profusely. Even if Jon would not let him spend the same grand amount on the tourney and celebrations of the new Prince’s birth, as Cersei had insisted on when Joffrey was born. It was for the best, he insisted, that they didn’t fall into the same kind of debt to the Tyrells, as they had with the Lannisters. Thankfully, occupying Casterly Rock during the war had allowed him to gather up the remaining gold to pay off the Iron Bank. The crown’s debt to the Lannisters was written off, as a term in the decree allowing Tyrion Lannister to retain his ancestral lands and the title of Lord of Casterly Rock, though the Westerlands had been carved up between the three Kings after the war.

When Robert’s new son was born, Renly had come to court to congratulate him personally, despite the little Prince meaning he lost his title as heir to the throne. Renly had been in the Stormlands since almost the end of the war, re-introducing his new wife to the lords there.

Robert hadn’t known quite what to think, when Renly had petitioned him to be allowed to marry Mrycella. Tyron Lannister had begged for her to be placed into his care. Jon had wanted the girl to go to the Silent Sisters or become a Septa, but Robert himself had suggested her married into some low masterly House. He’d always been fond of the younger children. Which is why he had allowed
Jon to persuade him to send Tommen to Oldtown, when he’d been bound for the Watch with his horrid, bratty brother. Women didn’t have as many choices outside of marriage. The Sisters had seemed like the only real one, until Renly had pleaded with Robert.

It was no secret his younger brother was a sword-swallower. So he didn’t want the young girl for lecherous purposes, of that Robert could be sure. It seemed to be genuine affection, to spare his former niece a life of drudgery. Renly had been sad and hurt to learn the little ones weren’t his blood kin, almost as much as Robert. It hurt to look at the girl, who had become quiet and sullen after learning the truth. She never mistakenly called him father afterward, as Tommen frequently did until he was sent to the Reach.

Robert and Jon had both agreed it would be a match of convenience. Allowing two people without many options, the chance for legitimacy. The benefits included Mrycella removed from court, so that the smallfolk and highborns alike had a chance to forget about her as their princess, and for Renly, no more pestering from Stormlords who wanted their daughter as the wife of their Lord Paramount.

It wasn’t the only marriage Robert had been forced to broker after the war. Stannis had done him the great disservice of getting himself killed. Leaving only a disfigured girl, too young to be the Lady of Dragonstone. Jon had warned him that if he didn’t take advantage of the turmoil after war, she would be difficult to find a husband for. The meek girl was too good for court, having none of her father’s brittleness. Until Robert had an heir, Renly filled that role. As his only other legitimate relative, Shireen was the next in line for the throne.

After the last battle, that was a fact that could be exploited. Her Florent relatives had wanted her married back into their House, vying with men from the Reach and Stormlands. It was Shireen herself that had come to him with the answer, quiet as a field mouse. She wanted to marry into the North, despite its new status as a separate kingdom.

“They are a plainer, hardier people. They value strength more than beauty. I was not born for silk-dresses and the South, your grace.” The little girl had told him plainly.

For once, Robert listened to the pleas of a girl. She had inherited Stannis’ matter of fact manner. No doubt she felt wildly out of place at court in her drab, dark dresses, among the women with elaborate hairstyles and clothing, with their perfumes and painted faces. Southern knights wanted a woman of beauty, not a girl with a half her face hidden by hair. Shireen had survived Dragonstone; she would flourish in the North.

Loathe to get into another battle of wills with King Robb, Robert sent for Randyll Tarly. A most fearsome commander, and more pertinently, a man who had a son married into the North. Brokering a deal with the Manderlys through him, had been much less of a headache than dealing with the Young Wolf. Shireen had been fostered in New Castle ever since, in anticipation of her marriage to Wyrik Tarly. Or Manderly- there had been some confusion about that. In any case, Randyll Tarly had secured himself a future great-grandson with royal blood, and Robert had seen his niece betrothed to the wealthiest house in the North, which would have pleased Stannis. Jon was happy, having negotiated a more acceptable dowry than if a Reach lord had gotten his thorns into Shireen.

If only things had gone as smoothly with Renly. If only his younger brother had shared Stannis’ obsession with duty! Being a Lord Paramount from childhood had made him flippant and whimsical. Years had passed, and still there were titters at court that Mrycella was still a maid. Loras Tyrell had taken up residence in Storm’s End, despite the public strife between him and Renly, after he had refused to attend Renly’s wedding. Now, Robert was plagued with distant cousins, on both his father and mother’s side. All vying for his favour in the hopes of their House being named the heirs to Storm’s End, when Renly inevitably failed to produce one. Robert knew it was only fair, after all the
He might have legitimised Edric Storm. But the fool had fallen in love with the wrong highborn girl, and had run away to join the Second Sons in heartsickness when he couldn’t have her. Robert couldn’t really fault the boy for that. Many a time when listening to Cersei be insufferable or the Small Council droning on, he had fantasised about running away to Essos and joining a sellsword company too. At least the boy had proven his hot-headed, furious Baratheon blood. Mayhaps Robert would legitimise him anyway, just to see the look on the Stormlord’s faces.

But it would bring him no closer to clearing his court of his pestilent relatives, constantly buzzing about Robert whenever he had a free moment. Like an infestation of lice that could not be cleared. The Estermonts made their claim through his mother, whilst the slightly more distant little Lord Bryce Caron was advised to press his claim through his grandmother’s line. Olenna Caron had been the sister of Robert’s grandfather Ormund Baratheon, and therefore the reasoning was sound. The young Lord of Nightsong was indeed closest to the Baratheon line after Renly and Shireen. But that would leave Nightsong with no one save Bryce’s bastard brother Rolland Storm to claim it. Since all his other legitimate siblings had died from an outbreak of the chill, along with both his parents. Legitimising Rolland would push out all the other lords with a claim to the keep.

In frustration, Robert had sent for his only grown son to bare his name. Gendry was a good lad. He fought alongside the Starks during the war, with a hammer of his own. Something Robert enjoyed to boast about. His boy, a mirror image on the battlefield! It was the stuff of songs; a son taking up the mantel of his father. Gendry looked the part too, with great strapping muscles from years hammering at the forge. He’d wed into an ancient House, giving himself greater legitimacy, though Robert now cursed his own lack of foresight.

Robert should have known that Renly couldn’t bring himself to produce heirs – or at least Jon should have. If Renly was capable of lying with a woman, he would have married young to stymie the rumours about himself and the Rose of Highgarden. If Robert had considered this during the war, he would never have allowed Gendry to be married off to the Stark girl. It would be a pig’s ear to convince his ornery Stormlords to accept the boy now, but it would have been a damn sight easier if he’d been free to marry Shireen. A marriage between the cousins would have made Gendry’s claim incontestable. Any naysayers that wouldn’t have a bastard for a lord, not even a king’s bastard, would have accepted Shireen as their lady.

But alas, Robert had been too focused on his own lack of heirs and hunting down Cersei to kill her because of it, to worry about anyone else’s. And now he found himself in the arduous position of persuading his lords to love his boy.

His expectant grandchild made things easier. Robert had been very moved to learn of it, from the boy’s letter. He was glad of Stannis’ foresight, to have Ned Stark teach the boy his letters, as it was wonderful to read about the boy’s joyful anticipation in his own scratchy hand. Having the child born at court would emphasise Robert’s regard for Gendry. And perhaps his bloody relatives would start pestering the boy instead, for an alliance through a marriage to the new babe when it came of age.

As Robert penned his reply missive, ordering his son to attend upon him and bring his newly pregnant wife along for an extended visit, he prayed the tactic would work. Otherwise he was going to have to force Renly to copulate with his once-daughter, under pain of death, just to get some peace and quiet.
They cantered out together at a steady pace, the horses eager for it, with confident riders who knew how to mind a beast’s moods. His granddaughter was a pretty, wee thing, but not so frail that she couldn’t bring a stallion to heel if needed. They raced across the grassy plain to the tip of a hill, Jeyne’s sweet laughter ringing out loud and clear on a day with no breeze to snatch it.

“Victory is mine, Papa!” she announced, turning to face him, her cheeks rosy from the exertion.

Robert had grown weary of ‘your grace’ and ‘my King’ after less than a month, and soon ‘Grandfather’ had become too unwieldy for every day use.

This is the kind of girl my Lyanna would have given me, he thought, as he joined her beside a flowering gorse on the crest of the hill, the finishing point for their wager. Spirited, quick to laugh and grown free with the sharp edge of her tongue, since she had become secure at court. Who could have known that a combination of Baratheon and Frey blood could produce such a beauty, a fine example of a young lady? Robert was half inclined to betrothe his younger son to one of old Walder’s get, to see if the effect could be replicated.

Margaery would never speak to me again, he chuckled to himself.

“Good view from here,” Jeyne said, running her eyes over the partially restored castle.

Robert nodded, pleased with the work. They’d spent the last three days in Harrenhal, exploring the changes in person. If Robb Stark could garner such respect from his people for his building efforts, Robert didn’t see why the same couldn’t be said of him. Jon Arryn had greatly admired Ned’s boy, naming him shrewd for keeping his serfs and villagers busy. Working together forced the smallfolk to communicate with each other, building trust as well as castles. Men were more willing to share resources and methods for quicker hunting, fishing or better crops with those they knew. It all contributed to good relationships between bannermen and the smallfolk, which could only be good for a realm.

Harrenhal had long been too large for a base landed knight, but too ugly and damaged for anyone of consequence. The rumoured curse upon the settlement made it a sour prospect for most. But Robert wasn’t going to surrender the largest castle in Westeros to Robb fucking Stark, along with everything else, and let him claim it for his family. No, Robert wanted Harrenhal to barter with, Robb’s Whent blood be damned. Robb Stark had fought and gained access to the God’s eye, the lake not being far ahead of them now, as they approached the border to the Riverlands.

If Jeyne were older, perhaps Robert would have settled it on her, to entice a good husband, not afraid of the challenge of such a complex keep. Once it was complete, the builders will have removed the most damaged, dragon-melted stones, to salvage the best rock to repair the lower levels completely. The covered walkway between the keep and the Sept was already fully restored, as were the stables, kennels and the paths and borders in the gardens. The lovely large garden would be just right for Jeyne: Robert liked to picture her walking there when the plants had been tended and flowers were in bloom.

“Ser Bronn will be happy here, I think,” said his sweet girl.
Robert watched her carefully, when he replied, “Should you like to be happy here, also?”

Jeyne’s unblemished forehead wrinkled as she parsed out his meaning, letting out a quiet, shocked, “Oh!” when she did.

“I am not sure I am ready to be parted from court yet, Papa,” she said diplomatically, avoiding his eyes.

Robert waved his head until their gazes met again. “Worry not, my girl. I know you’ll not be wanting an old knight like Bronn. Little too much distance between your birth years, hmm?”

Jeyne blushed, but said not a thing. When she was embarrassed, she became a little dormouse, curled in on herself. They both knew a prestigious knight, about to become the lord of a giant keep in fertile lands, was more than most bastard girls had any right to hope for. Had she festered away among her ratty Frey cousins, Jeyne would have snapped at the chance to be wedded to such a man, and they both knew it.

It had been his Lord Hand, Randyll Tarly, who suggested that the Kingsguard be decreased from a service for life to twenty years. Too much pressure was created by absolutes, Tarly claimed; men who could be tempted by the pleasures of wealth and women if they never expected to obtain them. Baelish had revelled in yoking men with their forbidden desires. Some kind of reform was needed, to avoid any repetition of such a scheming sycophant gaining such power ever again. And if Robb Stark was not afraid to expose the dirty secrets of his bannermen, denouncing Harald Karstark as a lecher before sending him to the Wall, Robert could admit that expecting a highborn former lord to uphold a lifetime of servitude with no reward was a tough expectation.

It was fixed that twenty years was enough of a sacrifice; if a man was young enough at the start, he would still be a fit lord for a new keep, and make a good match with a fertile woman, without the gap in their ages being too obscene. It was agreed that feats of magnitude could deservedly shave off a few years, and that nothing would increase it. There was a suggestion at the time, that the Kingsguard which remained could use their time served, as the chance to step down from their position soon. Of those, only Barristan Selmy had served long enough to be honourably released from his service right then, but of course the ornery, honourable old man wouldn’t hear of it. He insisted that his twenty year span begin from the implementation of the new rule.

And what fucking fool would ever willingly relinquish Barristan the Bold as their protector?

Bronn had accepted his elevation to the order with the knowledge that his conduct during the war had already halved the time he would have to serve. Ten years to gain a lordship, castle and a highborn wife, were a small price to pay for a street urchin sellword, trained in fighting pits. Bronn’s tenure was to end in less than half a year, and for the past seven moons, work had commenced on his future keep. Despite the grandeur of his new abode, Ser Bronn wasn’t good enough for the King’s beloved granddaughter, baseborn or no.

Margaery should have given me daughters, Robert grumbled to himself, not for the first time. Every man needed sons, but sons would not tend him in his dotage, or sit and read to him, nor did they squeal in delight when he returned home from a tour of his lands or a hunting trip.

It had been wonderful, to watch Jeyne transform into an eligible young lady. Robert spoilt her, with dresses and dolls, lessons in graceful dancing, household management and womenly duties from a Septa, and strategy on how to mind unruly lords from Tarly.

They’d discussed matches for Jeyne between them. Though Gendry would be displeased if he wasn’t given the chance for input, the boy did leave his daughter in Robert’s care, and it was a
King’s duty to ensure the welfare of his subjects. Tarly agreed that Jeyne’s hand might be a good way to finally bring Dorne into the fold. They had strange views about women and bastards there, being more inclined to look favourably on them.

“Young Dayne might be more your sort,” Robert mused, considering the chivalrous young man who was always dashing in his silver and purple armour, “Cuts a fine figure on the field, and I know how all the young ladies of the court moon over him.”

Jeyne turned red as a tomato as Robert guffawed. He’d seen her smiling in conversation with Ned Dayne; heard the ladies twittering whenever Dayne appeared in the lists. He was a popular contender with the crowds, considered well turned out young lord, and the head of his House. For Jeyne, he would be a brilliant choice.

“Lord Dayne is very kind,” Jeyne said demurely, “I am certain he shall make his future wife very happy.”

Robert was taken aback by her lukewarm response. Ned Dayne would be an excellent catch. He and Jeyne looked very fine dancing sets together, with his blonde hair a nice contrast to her glossy black locks.

“But he’s not the one for you, eh? Is that what you mean, little one?” Robert pressed. He’d have to halt Tarly’s overtures toward House Dayne if that were the case.

Jeyne avoided his gaze, her look suddenly melancholy.

“There’s someone else you’ve settled your eye on.” Robert declared, sure that nothing else would stay her hand over a man like Ned Dayne.

She did not deny the suggestion, at last turning to look at him again.

“I had rather hoped…” she paused to gather her courage, before revealing; “Ser Rolland is most attentive. Strong and brave, and always very polite.”

Robert absorbed the surprise like an unseen blow. They’d left Ser Rolland back at Harrenhal; though as another loyal member of the Kingsguard, he had protested Robert and Jeyne riding out alone. Perhaps it was not only Robert’s safety that motivated his protests.

“Ser Rolland has many years left on the Kingsguard,” Robert reminded her gently.

“Oh, I know it most likely won’t be possible. He won’t have noticed me in that way, I don’t think,” she shook her head in an attempt to pretend she was unaffected by it, “Ser Rolland has always treated me well, but he still sees me as a child.”

She offered him a brave smile, and Robert immediately saw how deeply her regard for the man ran, and in that moment resolved to do what he must to see her secured with the man that featured in her innocent daydreams.

Chapter End Notes

Harald Karstark (the guy who was hanging out with Ramsay in canon, when Ramsay killed Roose), is a paedophile who likes little boys, according to Smalljon Umber in Season 6. I've not seen anyone else address that in a fic but W O W am I not gonna
stand for that to go unpunished. Jsyk, he was torn apart by wights.

It's a gods-damned tragedy that Barristan Semly never passed on his genetics of badassery. I don't care that he's like 60+ I'd still marry him. What a dude.

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