

# THE MYSTERY KNIGHT

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A Tale of the Seven Kingdoms

*George R. R. Martin*

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A light summer rain was falling as Dunk and Egg took their leave of Stoney Sept. Dunk rode his old war horse Thunder, with Egg beside him on the spirited young palfrey he'd named Rain, leading their mule Maester. On Maester's back were bundled Dunk's armor and Egg's books, their bedrolls, tent, and clothing, several slabs of hard salt beef, half a flagon of mead, and two skins of water. Egg's old straw hat, wide-brimmed and floppy, kept the rain off the mule's head. The boy had cut holes for Maester's ears. Egg's new straw hat was on his own head. Except for the ear holes, the two hats looked much the same to Dunk. As they neared the town gates, Egg reined up sharply. Up above the gateway a traitor's head had been impaled upon an iron spike. It was fresh from the look of it, the flesh more pink than green, but the carrion crows had already gone to work on it. The dead man's lips and cheeks were torn and ragged; his eyes were two brown holes weeping slow red tears as raindrops mingled with the crusted blood. The dead man's mouth sagged open, as if to harangue travelers passing through the gate below.

Dunk had seen such sights before. "Back in King's Landing when I was a boy, I stole a head right off its spike once," he told Egg. Actually it had been Ferret who scampered up the wall to snatch the head, after Rafe and Pudding said he'd never dare, but when the guards came running he'd tossed it down, and Dunk was the one who'd caught it. "Some rebel lord or robber knight, it was. Or maybe just a common murderer. A head's a head. They all look the same after a few days on a spike." Him and his three friends had used the head to terrorize the girls of Flea Bottom. They'd chase them through the alleys and make them give the head a kiss before they'd let them go. That head got kissed a lot, as he recalled. There wasn't a girl in King's Landing who could run as fast as Rafe. Egg was better off not hearing that part, though. *Ferret, Rafe, and Pudding. Little monsters, those three, and me the worst of all.* His friends and he had kept the head until the flesh turned black and began to slough away. That took the fun out of chasing girls, so one night they burst into a pot shop and tossed what was left into the kettle.

"The crows always go for the eyes," he told Egg. "Then the cheeks cave in, the flesh turns green..." He squinted. "Wait. I know that face."

"You do, ser," said Egg. "Three days ago. The hunchbacked septon we heard preaching against Lord Bloodraven."

He remembered then. *He was a holy man sworn to the Seven, even if he did preach treason.*

"His hands are scarlet with a brother's blood, and the blood of his young nephews too," the hunchback had declared to the crowd that had gathered in the market square. "A shadow came at his command to strangle brave Prince Valarr's sons in their mother's womb. Where is our Young Prince now? Where is his brother, sweet Matarys? Where has Good King Daeron gone, and fearless Baelor Breakspear? The grave has claimed them, every one, yet he endures, this pale bird with bloody beak who perches on King Aerys's shoulder and caws into his ear. The mark of hell is on his face and in his empty eye, and he has brought us drought and pestilence and murder. Rise up, I say, and remember our true king across the water. Seven gods there are, and seven kingdoms, and the Black Dragon sired seven sons! Rise up, my lords and ladies. Rise up, you brave knights and sturdy yeomen, and cast down Bloodraven, that foul sorcerer, lest your children and your children's children be cursed forever more." *Every word was treason.* Even so, it was a shock to see him here, with holes where his eyes had

been. “That’s him, aye,” Dunk said, “and another good reason to put this town behind us.” He gave Thunder a touch of the spur, and he and Egg rode through the gates of Stoney Sept, listening to the sound of the rain. *How many eyes does Lord Bloodraven have?* the riddle ran. *A thousand eyes, and one.* Some claimed the King’s Hand was a student of the dark arts who could change his face, put on the likeness of a one-eyed dog, even turn into a mist. Packs of gaunt gray wolves hunted down his foes, men said, and carrion crows spied for him and whispered secrets in his ear. Most of the tales were only tales, Dunk did not doubt, but no one could doubt that Bloodraven had informers everywhere.

He had seen the man once with his own two eyes, back in King’s Landing. White as bone were the skin and hair of Brynden Rivers, and his eye—he had only the one, the other having been lost to his half brother Bittersteel on the Redgrass Field—was red as blood. On cheek and neck he bore the winestain birthmark that had given him his name.

When the town was well behind them, Dunk cleared his throat and said, “Bad business, cutting off the heads of septon. All he did was talk. Words are wind.”

“Some words are wind, ser. Some are treason.” Egg was skinny as a stick, all ribs and elbows, but he did have a mouth.

“Now you sound a proper princeling.”

Egg took that for an insult, which it was. “He might have been a septon, but he was preaching lies, ser. The drought wasn’t Lord Bloodraven’s fault, nor the Great Spring Sickness either.”

“Might be that’s so, but if we start cutting off the heads of all the fools and liars, half the towns in the Seven Kingdoms will be empty.”

Six days later, the rain was just a memory.

Dunk had stripped off his tunic to enjoy the warmth of sunlight on his skin. When a little breeze came up, cool and fresh and fragrant as a maiden’s breath, he sighed. “Water,” he announced.

“Smell it? The lake can’t be far now.”

“All I can smell is Maester, ser. He stinks.” Egg gave the mule’s lead a savage tug. Maester had stopped to crop at the grass beside the road, as he did from time to time.

“There’s an old inn by the lakeshore.” Dunk had stopped there once when he was squiring for the old man. “Ser Arlan said they brewed a fine brown ale. Might be we could have a taste while we waited for the ferry.” Egg gave him a hopeful look. “To wash the food down, ser?”

“What food would that be?”

“A slice off the roast?” the boy said. “A bit of duck, a bowl of stew? Whatever they have, ser.” Their last hot meal had been three days ago. Since then, they had been living on windfalls and strips of old salt beef as hard as wood. *It would be good to put some real food in our bellies before we started north. That Wall’s a long way off.*

“We could spend the night as well,” suggested Egg.

“Does m’lord want a feather bed?”

“Straw will serve me well enough, ser,” said Egg, offended.

“We have no coin for beds.”

“We have twenty-two pennies, three stars, one stag, and that old chipped garnet, ser.” Dunk scratched at his ear. “I thought we had two silvers.”

“We did, until you bought the tent. Now we have the one.”

“We won’t have any if we start sleeping at inns. You want to share a bed with some peddler and wake up with his fleas?” Dunk snorted. “Not me. I have my own fleas, and they are not fond of strangers. We’ll sleep beneath the stars.”

“The stars are good,” Egg allowed, “but the ground is hard, ser, and sometimes it’s nice to have a pillow for your head.”

“Pillows are for princes.” Egg was as good a squire as a knight could want, but every so often he would get to feeling princely. *The lad has dragon blood, never forget.* Dunk had beggar’s blood himself... or so they used to tell him back in Flea Bottom, when they weren’t telling him that he was sure to hang. “Might be we can afford some ale and a hot supper, but I’m not wasting good coin on a bed. We need to save our pennies for the ferryman.” The last time he had crossed the lake, the ferry cost only a few coppers, but that had been six years ago, or maybe seven. Everything had grown more costly since then.

“Well,” said Egg, “we could use my boot to get across.”

“We could,” said Dunk, “but we won’t.” Using the boot was dangerous. *Word would spread. Word always spreads.* His squire was not bald by chance. Egg had the purple eyes of old Valyria, and hair that shone like beaten gold and strands of silver woven together. He might as well wear a three-headed dragon as a brooch as let that hair grow out. These were perilous times in Westeros, and... well, it was best to take no chances. “Another word about your bloody boot, and I’ll clout you in the ear so hard you’ll *fly* across the lake.”

“I’d sooner swim, ser.” Egg swam well, and Dunk did not. The boy turned in the saddle. “Ser? Someone’s coming up the road behind us. Hear the horses?”

“I’m not deaf.” Dunk could see their dust as well. “A large party. And in haste.”

“Do you think they might be outlaws, ser?” Egg raised up in the stirrups, more eager than afraid. The boy was like that.

“Outlaws would be quieter. Only lords make so much noise.” Dunk rattled his sword hilt to loose the blade in its scabbard. “Still, we’ll get off the road and let them pass. There are lords and lords.” It never hurt to be a little wary. The roads were not so safe as when Good King Daeron sat the Iron Throne.

He and Egg concealed themselves behind a thornbush. Dunk limiting his shield and slipped it on his arm. It was an old thing, tall and heavy, kite-shaped, made of pine and rimmed with iron. He had bought it in Stoney Sept to replace the shield the Longinch had hacked to splinters when they fought. Dunk had not had time to have it painted with his elm and shooting star, so it still bore the arms of its last owner: a hanged man swinging grim and gray beneath a gallows tree. It was not a sigil that he would have chosen for himself, but the shield had come cheap. The first riders galloped past within moments; two young lordlings mounted on a pair of coursers. The one on the bay wore an open-faced helm of gilded steel with three tall feathered plumes: one white, one red, one gold. Matching plumes

adorned his horse's crinet. The black stallion beside him was barded in blue and gold. His trappings rippled with the wind of his passage as he thundered past. Side by side the riders streaked on by, whooping and laughing, their long cloaks streaming behind.

A third lord followed more sedately, at the head of a long column. There were two dozen in the party, grooms and cooks and serving men, all to attend three knights, plus men-at-arms and mounted crossbowmen, and a dozen drays heavy-laden with their armor, tents, and provisions. Slung from the lord's saddle was his shield, dark orange and charged with three black castles. Dunk knew those arms but from where? The lord who bore them was an older man, sour-mouthed and saturnine, with a close-cropped salt-and-pepper beard. *He might have been at Ashford Meadow*, Dunk thought. *Or maybe we served at his castle when I was squiring for Ser Arlan.* The old hedge knight had done service at so many different keeps and castles through the years that Dunk could not recall the half of them.

The lord reined up abruptly, scowling at the thornbush. "You. In the bush. Show yourself." Behind him, two crossbowmen slipped quarrels into the notch. The rest continued on their way.

Dunk stepped through the tall grass, his shield upon his arm, his right hand resting on the pommel of his longsword. His face was a red-brown mask from the dust the horses had kicked up, and he was naked from the waist up. He looked a scruffy sight, he knew, though it was like to be the size of him that gave the other pause. "We want no quarrel, m'lord. There's only the two of us, me and my squire." He beckoned Egg forward.

"Squire? Do you claim to be a knight?"

Dunk did not like the way the man was looking at him. *Those eyes could flay a man.* It seemed prudent to remove his hand from his sword. "I am a hedge knight, seeking service."

"Every robber knight I've ever hanged has said the same. Your device may be prophetic, *ser...if ser you are.* A gallows and a hanged man. These are your arms?"

"No, m'lord. I need to have the shield repainted."

"Why? Did you rob it off a corpse?"

"I bought it, for good coin." *Three castles, black on orange... where have I seen those before?*

"I am no robber."

The lord's eyes were chips of flint. "How did you come by that scar upon your cheek? A cut from a whip?"

"A dagger. Though my face is none of your concern, m'lord."

"I'll be the judge of what is my concern."

By then, the two younger knights had come trotting back to see what had delayed their party.

"There you are, Gormy," called the rider on the black, a young man lean and lithe, with a comely clean-shaven face and fine features. Black hair fell shining to his collar. His doublet was made of dark blue silk edged in gold satin. Across his chest an engrailed cross had been embroidered in gold thread with a golden fiddle in the first and third quarters, a golden sword in the second and the fourth. His eyes caught the deep blue of his doublet and sparkled with amusement. "Alyn feared you'd fallen from your horse. A palpable excuse, it seems to me; I was about to leave him in my dust."

"Who are these two brigands?" asked the rider on the bay.

Egg bristled at the insult: "You have no call to name us brigands, my lord. When we saw your

dust, we thought *you* might be outlaws—that’s the only reason that we hid. This is Ser Duncan the Tall, and I’m his squire.”

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The lordlings paid no more heed to that than they would have paid the croaking of a frog. “I believe that is the largest lout that I have ever seen,” declared the knight of three feathers. He had a pudgy face beneath a head of curly hair the color of dark honey. “Seven feet if he’s an inch, I’d wager. What a mighty crash he’ll make when he comes tumbling down.” Dunk felt color rising to his face. *You’d lose your wager*, he thought. The last time he had been measured, Egg’s brother Aemon pronounced him an inch shy of seven feet.

“Is that your war horse, Ser Giant?” said the feathered lordling. “I suppose we could butcher it for the meat.”

“Lord Alyn oft forgets his courtesies,” the black-haired knight said. “Please forgive his churlish words, ser. Alyn, you will ask Ser Duncan for his pardon.”

“If I must. Will you forgive me, ser?” He did not wait for reply, but turned his bay about and trotted down the road.

The other lingered. “Are you bound for the wedding, ser?”

Something in his tone made Dunk want to tug his forelock. He resisted the impulse and said, “We’re for the ferry, m’lord.”

“As are we... but the only lords hereabouts are Gormy and that wastrel who just left us, Alyn Cockshaw. I am a vagabond hedge knight like yourself. Ser John the Fiddler, I am called.” That was the sort of name a hedge knight might choose, but Dunk had never seen any hedge knight garbed or armed or mounted in such splendor. *The knight of the golden hedge*, he thought. “You know my name. My squire is called Egg.”

“Well met, ser. Come, ride with us to Whitewalls and break a few lances to help Lord Butterwell celebrate his new marriage. I’ll wager you could give a good account of yourself.”

Dunk had not done any jousting since Ashford Meadow. *If I could win a few ransoms, we’d eat well on the ride north*, he thought, but the lord with the three castles on his shield said, “Ser Duncan needs to be about his journey, as do we.”

John the Fiddler paid the older man no mind. “I would love to cross swords with you, ser. I’ve tried men of many lands and races, but never one your size. Was your father large as well?”

“I never knew my father, ser.”

“I am sad to hear it. Mine own sire was taken from me too soon.” The Fiddler turned to the lord of the three castles. “We should ask Ser Duncan to join our jolly company.”

“We do not need his sort.”

Dunk was at a loss for words. Penniless hedge knights were not oft asked to ride with highborn lords. *I would have more in common with their servants*. Judging from the length of their column, Lord Cockshaw and the Fiddler had brought grooms to tend their horses, cooks to feed them, squires to clean their armor, guards to defend them. Dunk had Egg.

“His sort?” The Fiddler laughed. “What sort is that? The big sort? Look at the *size* of him. We want strong men. Young swords are worth more than old names, I’ve oft heard it said.”

“By fools. You know little and less about this man. He might be a brig-and, or one of Lord

Bloodraven's spies."

"I'm no man's spy," said Dunk. "And m'lord has no call to speak of me as if I were deaf or dead or down in Dome."

Those flinty eyes considered him. "Down in Dome would be a good place for you, ser. You have my leave to go there."

"Pay him no mind," the Fiddler said. "He's a sour old soul—he suspects everyone. Gormy, I have a good feeling about this fellow. Ser Duncan, will you come with us to Whitewalls?"

"M'lord, I..." How could he share a camp with such as these? Their serving men would raise the pavilions, their grooms would curry their horses, their cooks would serve them each a capon or a joint of beef, whilst Dunk and Egg gnawed on strips of hard salt beef. "I couldn't."

"You see," said the lord of the three castles. "He knows his place, and it is not with us." He turned his horseback toward the road. "By now Lord Cockshaw is half a league ahead."

"I suppose I must chase him clown again." The Fiddler gave Dunk an apologetic smile.

"Perchance we'll meet again someday. I hope so. I should love to try my lance on you." Dunk did not know what to say to that. "Good fortune in the lists, ser," he finally managed, but by then Ser John had wheeled about to chase the column. The older lord rode after him. Dunk was glad to see his back. He had not liked his flinty eyes, nor Lord Alyn's arrogance. The Fiddler had been pleasant enough, but there was something odd about him as well. "Two fiddles and two swords, a cross engrailed," he said to Egg as they watched the dust of their departure.

"What house is that?"

"None, ser. I never saw that shield in any roll of arms."

*Perhaps he is a hedge knight after all.* Dunk had devised his own arms at Ashford Meadow, when a puppeteer called Tanselle Too-Tall asked him what he wanted painted on his shield.

"Was the older lord some kin to House Frey?" The Freys bore castles on their shields, and their holdings were not far from here.

Egg rolled his eyes. "The Frey arms are two blue towers connected by a bridge, on a gray field. Those were three castles, black on orange, ser. Did you see a bridge?"

"No." *He just does that to annoy me.* "And next time you roll your eyes at me, I'll clout you on the ear so hard they'll roll back into your head for good."

Egg looked chastened. "I never meant—"

"Never mind what you meant. Just tell me who he was."

"Gormon Peake, the Lord of Starpike."

"That's down in the Reach, isn't it? Does he really have three castles?"

"Only on his shield, ser. House Peake did hold three castles once, but two of them were lost."

"How do you lose two castles?"

"You fight for the Black Dragon, ser."

"Oh." Dunk felt stupid. *That again.*

For two hundred years, the realm had been ruled by the descendants of Aegon the Conquerer and his sisters, who had made the Seven Kingdoms one and forged the Iron Throne. Their royal banners



bore the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen, red on black. Sixteen years ago, a bastard son of King Aegon IV named Daemon Blackfyre had risen in revolt against his trueborn brother. Daemon had used the three-headed dragon on his banners too, but he reversed the colors, as many bastards did. His revolt had ended on the Redgrass Field, where Daemon and his twin sons died beneath a rain of Lord Bloodraven's arrows. Those rebels who survived and bent the knee were pardoned, but some lost lands, some titles, some gold. All gave hostages to ensure their future loyalty.

*Three castles, black on orange.* "I remember now. Ser Arlan never liked to talk about the Redgrass Field, but once in his cups he told me how his sister's son had died." He could almost hear the old man's voice again, smell the wine upon his breath. "Roger of Pennytree, that was his name. His head was smashed in by a mace wielded by a lord with three castles on his shield." *Lord Gormon Peake. The old man never knew his name. Or never wanted to.* By that time Lord Peake and John the Fiddler and their party were no more than a plume of red dust in the distance. *It was sixteen years ago. The Pretender died, and those who followed him were exiled or forgiven. Anyway, it has nought to do with me.*

For a while they rode along without talking, listening to the plaintive cries of birds. Half a league on, Dunk cleared his throat and said, "Butter-well, he said. His lands are near?"

"On the far side of the lake, ser. Lord Butterwell was the master of coin when King Aegon sat the Iron Throne. King Daeron made him Hand, but not for long. His arms are undy green and white and yellow, ser." Egg loved showing off his heraldry.

"Is he a friend of your father?"

Egg made a face. "My father never liked him. In the Rebellion, Lord Butterwell's second son fought for the pretender and his eldest for the king. That way he was certain to be on the winning side. Lord Butterwell didn't fight for anyone."

"Some might call that prudent."

"My father calls it craven."

*Aye, he would.* Prince Maekar was a hard man, proud and full of scorn. "We have to go by Whitewalls to reach the kingsroad. Why not fill our bellies?" Just the thought was enough to cause his guts to rumble. "Might be that one of the wedding guests will need an escort back to his own seat."

"You said that we were going north."

"The Wall has stood eight thousand years, it will last awhile longer. It's a thousand leagues from here to there, and we could do with some more silver in our purse." Dunk was picturing himself atop Thunder, riding down that sour-faced old lord with the three castles on his shield. That would be sweet. *"It was old Ser Arlan's squire who defeated you," I could tell him when he came to ransom back his arms and tumor. "The boy who replaced the boy you killed." The old man would like that.*

"You're not thinking of entering the lists, are you, ser?"

"Might be it's time."

"It's not, ser."

"Maybe it's time I gave you a good clout in the ear." *I'd only need to win two tilts. If I could collect two ransoms and pay out only one, we'd eat like kings for a year.* "If there was a melee, I might enter that." Dunk's size and strength would serve him better in a melee than in the lists.

“It’s not customary to have a melee at a marriage, ser.”

“It’s customary to have a feast, though. We have a long way to go. Why not set out with our bellies full for once?”

The sun was low in the west by the time they saw the lake, its waters glimmering red and gold, bright as a sheet of beaten copper. When they glimpsed the turrets of the inn above some willows, Dunk donned his sweaty tunic once again and stopped to splash some water on his face. He washed off the dust of the road as best he could, and ran wet fingers through his thick mop of sun-streaked hair. There was nothing to be done for his size, or the scar that marked his cheek, but he wanted to make himself appear somewhat less the wild robber knight. The inn was bigger than he’d expected, a great gray sprawl of a place, timbered and turreted, half of it built on pilings out over the water. A road of rough-cut planks had been laid down over the muddy lakeshore to the ferry landing, but neither the ferry nor the ferrymen were in evidence. Across the road stood a stable with a thatched roof. A dry stone wall enclosed the yard, but the gate was open. Within, they found a well and a watering trough. “See to the animals,” Dunk told Egg, “but see that they don’t drink too much. I’ll ask about some food.” He found the innkeep sweeping off the steps. “Are you come for the ferry?” the woman asked him. “You’re too late. The sun’s going down, and Ned don’t like to cross by night unless the moon is full. He’ll be back first thing in the morning.”

“Do you know how much he asks?”

“Three pennies for each of you, and ten for your horses.”

“We have two horses and a mule.”

“It’s ten for mules as well.”

Dunk did the sums in his head, and came up with six-and-thirty, more than he had hoped to spend. “Last time I came this way, it was only two pennies, and six for horses.”

“Take that up with Ned, it’s nought to me. If you’re looking for a bed, I’ve none to offer. Lord Shawney and Lord Costayne brought their retinues. I’m full to bursting.”

“Is Lord Peake here as well?” He killed Ser. Arlan’s squire. “He was with Lord Cockshaw and John the Fiddler.”

“Ned took them across on his last run.” She looked Dunk up and down. “Were you part of their company?”

“We net them on the road, is all.” A good smell was drifting out the windows of the inn, one that made Dunk’s mouth water. “We might like some of what you’re roasting, if it’s not too costly.”

“It’s wild boar,” the woman said, “well peppered, and served with onions, mushrooms, and mashed neeps.”

“We could do without the neeps. Some slices off the boar and a tankard of your good brown ale would do for us. How much would you ask for that? And maybe we could have a place on your stable floor to bed down for the night?”

That was a mistake. “The stables are for horses. That’s why we call them stables. You’re big as a horse, I’ll grant you, but I see only two legs.” She swept her broom at him, to shoo him off. “I can’t be expected to feed all the Seven Kingdoms. The boar is for my guests. So is my ale. I won’t have lords

saying that I run short of food or drink before they were surfeit. The lake is full of fish, and you'll find some other rogues camped down by the stumps. Hedge knights, if you believe them." Her tone made quite clear that she did not. "Might be they'd have food to share. It's nought to me. Away with you now, I've work to do." The door closed with a solid thump behind her, before Dunk could even think to ask where he might find these stumps. He found Egg sitting on the horse trough, soaking his feet in the water and fanning his face with his big floppy hat. "Are they roasting pig, ser? I smell pork."

"Wild boar," said Dunk in a glum tone, "but who wants boar when we have good salt beef?" Egg made a face. "Can I please eat my boots instead, ser? I'll make a new pair out of the salt beef. It's tougher."

"No," said Dunk, trying not to smile. "You can't eat your boots. One more word and you'll eat my fist, though. Get your feet out of that trough." He found his greathelm on the mule and slung it underhand at Egg. "Draw some water from the well and soak the beef." Unless you soaked it for a good long time, the salt beef was like to break your teeth. It tasted best when soaked in ale, but water would serve. "Don't use the trough either, I don't care to taste your feet."

"My feet could only improve the taste, ser," Egg said, wriggling his toes. But he did as he was bid.

The hedge knights did not prove hard to find. Egg spied their fire flickering in the woods along the lakeshore, so they made for it, leading the animals behind them. The boy carried Dunk's helm beneath one arm, sloshing with each step he took. By then the sun was a red memory in the west. Before long the trees opened up, and they found themselves in what must once have been a weirwood grove. Only a ring of white stumps and a tangle of bone-pale roots remained to show where the trees had stood, when the children of the forest ruled in Westeros. Amongst the weirwood stumps, they found two men squatting near a cook fire, passing a skin of wine from hand to hand. Their horses were cropping at the grass beyond the grove, and they had stacked their arms and armor in neat piles. A much younger man sat apart from the other two, his back against a chestnut tree. "Well met, sers," Dunk called out in a cheerful voice. It was never wise to take armed men unawares. "I am called Ser Duncan the Tall. The lad is Egg. May we share your fire?"

A stout man of middling years rose to greet them, garbed in tattered finery. Flamboyant ginger whiskers framed his face. "Well met, Ser Duncan. You are a large one... and most welcome, certainly, as is your lad. *Egg*, was it? What sort of name is that, pray?"

"A short one, ser." Egg knew better than to admit that Egg was short for Aegon. Not to men he did not know.

"Indeed. What happened to your hair?"

*Rootworms*, Dunk thought. *Tell him it was rootworms, boy.* That was the safest story, the tale they told most often... though sometimes Egg took it in his head to play some childish game. "I shaved it off, ser. I mean to stay shaven until I earn my spurs."

"A noble vow. I am Ser Kyle, the Cat of Misty Moor. Under yonder chestnut sits Ser Glendon, alias Ball. And here you have the good Ser Maynard Plumm."

Egg's ears pricked up at that name. "Plumm... are you kin to Lord Viserys Plumm, ser?"

"Distantly," confessed Ser Maynard, a tall, thin, stoop-shouldered man with long straight flaxen hair, "though I doubt that His Lordship would admit to it. One might say that he is of the sweet

Plumms, whilst I am of the sour.” Plumm’s cloak was as purple as name, though frayed about the edges and badly dyed. A moonstone brooch big as a hen’s egg fastened it at the shoulder. Elsewise he wore dun-colored roughspun and stained brown leather.

“We have salt beef,” said Dunk.

“Ser Maynard has a bag of apples,” said Kyle the Cat. “And I have pickled eggs and onions. Why together we have the makings of a feast! Be seated, ser. We have a fine choice of stumps for your comfort. We will be here until midmorning, unless I miss my guess. There is only the one ferry, and is not big enough to take us all. The lords and their tails must cross first.”

“Help me with the horses,” Dunk told Egg. Together the two of them unsaddled Thunder, Rain, and Maester.

Only when the animals had been fed and watered and hobbled for the night did Dunk accept the wineskin that Ser Maynard offered him. “Even sour wine is better than none,” said Kyle the Cat. “We’ll drink finer vintages at Whitewalls. Lord Butterwell is said to have the best wines north of the Arbor. He was once the King’s Hand, as his father’s father was before him, and he is said to be a pious man besides, and very rich.”

“His wealth is all from cows,” said Maynard Plumm. “He ought to take a swollen udder for his arms. These Butterwells have milk running in their veins, and the Freys are no better. This will be a marriage of cattle thieves and toll collectors, one lot of coin clinkers joining with another. When the Black Dragon rose, this lord of cows sent one son to Daemon and one to Daeron, to make certain there was a Butterwell on the winning side. Both perished on the Redgrass Field, and his youngest died in the spring. That’s why he’s making this new marriage. Unless this new wife gives him a son, Butterwell’s name will die with him.”

“As it should.” Ser Glendon Ball gave his sword another stroke with the whetstone. “The Warrior hates cravens.”

The scorn in his voice made Dunk give the youth a closer look. Ser Glendon’s clothes were of good cloth, but well-worn and ill-matched, with the look of hand-me-downs. Tufts of dark brown hair stuck out from beneath his iron halfhelm. The lad himself was short and chunky, with small close-set eyes, thick shoulders, and muscular arms. His eyebrows were shaggy as two caterpillars after a wet spring, his nose bulbous, his chin pugnacious. And he was young. *Sixteen, might be. No more than eighteen.* Dunk might have taken him for a squire if Ser Kyle had not named him with a ser. The lad had pimples on his cheeks in place of whiskers.

“How long have you been a knight?” Dunk asked him.

“Long enough. Half a year when the moon turns. I was knighted by Ser Morgan Dunstable of Tumbler’s Falls, two dozen people saw it, but I have been training for knighthood since I was born. I rode before I walked, and knocked a grown man’s tooth out of his head before I lost any of my own. I mean to make my name at Whitewalls, and claim the dragon’s egg.”

“The dragon’s egg? Is that the champion’s prize? Truly?” The last dragon had perished half a century ago. Ser Arlan had once seen a clutch of her eggs, though. *They were hard as stone, he said, but beautiful to look upon,* the old man had told Dunk. “How could Lord Butterwell come by a dragon’s egg?”

“King Aegon presented the egg to his father’s father after guesting for a night at his old castle,”

said Ser Maynard Plumm.

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“Was it a reward for some act of valor?” asked Dunk.

Ser Kyle chuckled. “Some might call it that. Supposedly old Lord Butterwell had three young maiden daughters when His Grace came calling. By morning, all three had royal bastards in their little bellies. A hot night’s work, that was.”

Dunk had heard such talk before. Aegon the Unworthy had bedded half the maidens in the realm and fathered bastards on the lot of them, supposedly. Worse, the old king had legitimized them all upon his deathbed; the baseborn ones born of tavern wenches, whores, and shepherd girls, and the Great Bastards whose mothers had been highborn. “We’d all be bastard sons of old King Aegon if ha these tales were true.”

“And who’s to say we’re not?” Ser Maynard quipped.

“You ought to come with us to Whitewalls, Ser Duncan,” urged Ser Kyle. “Your size is sure to catch some lordling’s eye. You might find good service there. I know I shall. Joffrey Caswell will be at this wedding, the Lord of Bitterbridge. When he was three, I made him his first sword. I carved it out of pine, to fit his hand. In my greener days my sword was sworn to his father.”

“Was that one carved from pine as well?” Ser Maynard asked.

Kyle the Cat had the grace to laugh. “That sword was good steel, I assure you. I should be glad to ply it once again in the service of the centaur. Ser Duncan, even if you do not choose to tilt, do join us for the wedding feast. There will be singers and musicians, jugglers and tumblers, and a troupe of comic dwarfs.”

Dunk frowned. “Egg and I have a long journey before us. We’re headed north to Winterfell. Lord Beron Stark is gathering swords to drive the krakens from his shores for good.”

“Too cold up there for me,” said Ser Maynard. “If you want to kill krakens, go west. The Lannisters are building ships to strike back at the iron-men on their home islands. That’s how you put an end to Dagon Greyjoy. Fighting him on land is fruitless, he just slips back to sea. You have to beat him on the water.”

That had the ring of truth, but the prospect of fighting ironmen at sea was not one that Dunk relished. He’d had a taste of that on the *White Lady*, sailing from Dorne to Oldtown, when he’d donned his armor to help the crew repel some raiders. The battle had been desperate and bloody, and once he’d almost fallen in the water. That would have been the end of him.

“The throne should take a lesson from Stark and Lannister,” declared Ser Kyle the Cat. “At least they fight. What do the Targaryens do? King Aerys hides amongst his books, Prince Rhaegel prances naked through the Red Keep’s halls, and Prince Maekar broods at Summerhall.” Egg was prodding at the fire with a stick, to send sparks floating up into the night. Dunk was pleased to see him ignoring the mention of his father’s name. *Perhaps he’s finally learned to hold that tongue of his.*

“Myself, I blame Bloodraven,” Ser Kyle went on. “He is the King’s Hand, yet he does nothing, whilst the krakens spread flame and terror up and down the sunset sea.” Ser Maynard gave a shrug. “His eye is fixed on Tyrosh, where Bittersteel sits in exile, plotting with the sons of Daemon Blackfyre. So he keeps the king’s ships close at hand, lest they attempt to cross.”

“Aye, that may well be,” Ser Kyle said, “but many would welcome the return of Bittersteel.

Bloodraven is the root of all our woes, the white worm gnawing at the heart of the realm.” Dunk frowned, remembering the hunchbacked septon at Stoney Sept. “Words like that can cost a man his head. Some might say you’re talking treason.”

“How can the truth be treason?” asked Kyle the Cat. “In King Daeron’s day, a man did not have to fear to speak his mind, but now?” He made a rude noise. “Bloodraven put King Aerys on the Iron Throne, but for how long? Aerys is weak, and when he dies, it will be bloody war between Lord River and Prince Maekar for the crown, the Hand against the heir.”

“You have forgotten Prince Rhaegel, my friend,” Ser Maynard objected, in a mild tone. “He comes next in line to Aerys, not Maekar, and his children after him.”

“Rhaegel is feeble-minded. Why, I bear him no ill will, but the man is good as dead, and those twins of his as well, though whether they will die of Maekar’s mace or Bloodraven’s spells...” *Seven save us*, Dunk thought as Egg spoke up shrill and loud. “Prince Maekar is Prince Rhaegel’s *brother*. He loves him well. He’d never do harm to him or his.”

“Be quiet, boy,” Dunk growled at him. “These knights want none of your opinions.”

“I can talk if I want.”

“No,” said Dunk. “You can’t.” *That mouth of yours will get you killed someday. And me as well, most like.* “That salt beefs soaked long enough, I think. A strip for all our friends, and be quick about it.”

Egg flushed, and for half a heartbeat, Dunk feared the boy might talk back. Instead he settled for a sullen look, seething as only a boy of eleven years can seethe. “Aye, ser,” he said, fishing in the bottom of Dunk’s helm. His shaven head shone redly in the firelight as he passed out the salt beef.

Dunk took his piece and worried at it. The soak had turned the meat from wood to leather, but that was all. He sucked on one corner, tasting the salt and trying not to think about the roast boar at the inn crackling on its spit and dripping fat.

As dusk deepened, flies and stinging midges came swarming off the lake. The flies preferred to plague their horses, but the midges had a taste for man flesh. The only way to keep from being bitten was to sit close to the fire, breathing smoke. *Cook or be devoured*, Dunk thought glumly, *now there’s a beggar’s choice*. He scratched at his arms and edged closer to the fire. The wineskin soon came round again. The wine was sour and strong. Dunk drank deep, and passed along the skin, whilst the C of Misty Moor began to talk of how he had saved the life of the Lord of Bitterbridge during the Backfire Rebellion. “When Lord Armond’s banner-bearer fell, I leapt down from my horse with traitors all around us—”

“Ser,” said Glendon Ball. “Who were these *traitors*?”

“The Blackfyre men, I meant.”

Firelight glimmered off the steel in Ser Glendon’s hand. The pock-marks on his face flamed as red as open sores, and his every sinew was wound as tight as a crossbow. “My father fought for the Black Dragon.”

*This again.* Dunk snorted. *Red or Black?* was not a thing you asked a man. It always made for trouble. “I am sure Ser Kyle meant no insult to your father.”

“None,” Ser Kyle agreed. “It’s an old tale, the Red Dragon and the Black. No sense for us to fight

about it now, lad. We are all brothers of the hedges here.”

Ser Glendon seemed to weigh the Cat’s words, to see if he was being mocked. “Daemon Blackfyre was no traitor. The old king gave *him* the sword. He saw the worthiness in Daemon, even though he was born bastard. Why else would he put Blackfyre into his hand in place of Daeron’s? He meant for him to have the kingdom too. Daemon was the better man.” A hush fell. Dunk could hear the soft crackle of the fire. He could feel midges crawling on the back of his neck. He slapped at them, watching Egg, willing him to be still. “I was just a boy when they fought the Red-grass Field,” he said when it seemed that no one else would speak, “but I squired for a knight who fought with the Red Dragon, and later served another who fought for the Black. There were brave men on both sides.”

“Brave men,” echoed Kyle the Cat, a bit feebly.

“Heroes.” Glendon Ball turned his shield about, so all of them could see the sigil painted there, a fireball blazing red and yellow across a night-black field. “I come from hero’s blood.”

“You’re *Fireball*’s son,” Egg said.

That was the first time they saw Ser Glendon smile.

Ser Kyle the Cat studied the boy closely. “How can that be? How old are you? Quentyn Ball died —”

“—before I was born,” Ser Glendon finished, “but in me, he lives again.” He slammed his sword back into its scabbard. “I’ll show you all at Whitewalls, when I claim the dragon’s egg.”

The next day proved the truth of Ser Kyle’s prophecy. Ned’s ferry was nowise large enough to accomodate all those who wished to cross, so Lords Costayne and Shawney must go first, with their tails. That required several trips, each taking more than an hour. There were the mudflats to contend with, horses and wagons to be gotten down the planks, loaded on the boat, and unloaded again across the lake. The two lords slowed matters even further when they got into a shouting match over precedence. Shawney was the elder, but Costayne held himself to be better born.

There was nought that Dunk could do but wait and swelter. “We could go first if you let me use my boot,” Egg said.

“We could,” Dunk answered, “but we won’t. Lord Costayne and Lord Shawney were here before us. Besides, they’re lords.”

Egg made a face. “Rebel lords.”

Dunk frowned down at him. “What do you mean?”

“They were for the Black Dragon. Well, Lord Shawney was, and Lord Costayne’s father. Aemon and I used to fight the battle on Maester Melaquin’s green table with painted soldiers and little banners. Costayne’s arms quarter a silver chalice on black with a black rose on gold. That banner was on the left of Daemon’s host. Shawney was with Bittersteel on the right, and almost died of his wounds.”

“Old dead history. They’re here now, aren’t they? So they bent the knee, and King Daeron gave them pardon.”

“Yes, but—”

Dunk pinched the boy’s lips shut. “Hold your tongue.”

Egg held his tongue.

No sooner had the last boatload of Shawney men pushed off than Lord and Lady Smallwood turned up at the landing with their own tail, so they must needs wait again. The fellowship of the hedge had not survived the night, it was plain to see. Ser Glendon kept his own company, prickly and sullen. Kyle the Cat judged that it would be midday before they were allowed to board the ferry, so he detached himself from the others to try to ingratiate himself with Lord Smallwood, with whom he had some slight acquaintance. Ser Maynard spent his time gossiping with the innkeep.

“Stay well away from that one,” Dunk warned Egg. There was something about Plumm that troubled him. “He could be a robber knight, for all we know.” The warning only seemed to make Ser Maynard more interesting to Egg. “I never knew a robber knight. Do you think he means to rob the dragon’s egg?”

“Lord Butterwell will have the egg well guarded, I’m sure.” Dunk scratched the midge bites on his neck. “Do you think he might display it at the feast? I’d like to get a look at one.”

“I’d show you mine, ser, but it’s at Summerhall.”

“Yours? *Your dragon’s egg?*” Dunk frowned down at the boy, wondering if this was some jape.

“Where did it come from?”

“From a dragon, ser. They put it in my cradle.”

“Do you want a clout in the ear? There are no dragons.”

“No, but there are eggs. The last dragon left a clutch of five, and they have more on Dragonstone old ones from before the Dance. My brothers all have them too. Aerion’s looks as though it’s made of gold and silver, with veins of fire running through it. Mine is white and green, all swirly.”

“Your dragon’s egg.” *They put it in his cradle.* Dunk was so used to Egg that sometimes he forgot Aegon was a prince. *Of course they’d put a dragon egg inside his cradle.* “Well, see that you don’t go mentioning this egg where anyone is like to hear.”

“I’m not *stupid*, ser.” Egg lowered his voice. “Someday the dragons will return. My brother Daeron’s dreamed of it, and King Aerys read it in a prophecy. Maybe it will be my egg that hatches. That would be *splendid*.”

“Would it?” Dunk had his doubts.

Not Egg. “Aemon and I used to pretend that our eggs would be the ones to hatch. If they did, we could fly through the sky on dragonback, like the first Aegon and his sisters.”

“Aye, and if all the other knights in the realm should die, I’d be the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. If these eggs are so bloody precious, why is Lord Butterwell giving his away?”

“To show the realm how rich he is?”

“I suppose.” Dunk scratched his neck again and glanced over at Ser Glendon Ball, who was tightening the cinches on his saddle as he waited for the ferry. *That horse will never serve.* Ser Glendon’s mount was a sway-backed stot, undersized and old. “What do you know about his sire? Why did they call him Fireball?”

“For his hot head and red hair. Ser Quentyn Ball was the master-at-arms at the Red Keep. He taught my father and my uncles how to fight. The Great Bastards too. King Aegon promised to raise him to the Kingsguard, so Fireball made his wife join the silent sisters, only by the time a place came



open, King Aegon was dead and King Daeron named Ser Willam Wylde instead. My father says that was Fireball as much as Bittersteel who convinced Daemon Blackfyre to claim the crown, and rescue him when Daeron sent the Kingsguard to arrest him. Later on, Fireball killed Lord Lefford at the gate of Lannisport and sent the Grey Lion running back to hide inside the Rock. At the crossing of the Mandel, he cut down the sons of Lady Penrose one by one. They say he spared the life of the youngest one as a kindness to his mother.”

“That was chivalrous of him,” Dunk had to admit. “Did Ser Quentyn die upon the Redgrass Field?”

“Before, ser,” Egg replied. “An archer put an arrow through his throat as he dismounted by a stream to have a drink. Just some common man, no one knows who.”

“Those common men can be dangerous when they get it in their heads to start slaying lords and heroes.” Dunk saw the ferry creeping slowly across the lake. “Here it comes.”

“It’s slow. Are we going to go to Whitewalls, ser?”

“Why not? I want to see this dragon’s egg.” Dunk smiled. “If I win the tourney, we’d *both* have dragon’s eggs.”

Egg gave him a doubtful look.

“What? Why are you looking at me that way?”

“I could tell you, ser,” the boy said solemnly, “but I need to learn to hold my tongue.”

They seated the hedge knights well below the salt, closer to the doors than to the dais. Whitewalls was almost new as castles went, having been raised a mere forty years ago by the grandsire of its present lord. The smallfolk hereabouts called it the Milk house, for its walls and keeps and towers were made of finely dressed white stone, quarried in the Vale and brought over the mountains at great expense. Inside were floors and pillars of milky white marble veined with gold; the rafters overhead were carved from the bone-pale trunks of weirwoods. Dunk could not begin to imagine what all of that had cost.

The hall was not so large as some others he had known, though. *At least we were allowed beneath the roof*, Dunk thought as he took his place on the bench between Ser Maynard Plumm and Kyle the Cat. Though uninvited, the three of them had been welcomed to the feast quick enough; it was ill luck to refuse a knight hospitality on your wedding day. Young Ser Glendon had a harder time, however. “Fireball never had a son,” Dunk heard Lord Butterwell’s steward tell him, loudly. The stripling answered heatedly, and the name of Ser Morgan Dunstable was mentioned several times, but the steward had remained adamant. When Ser Glendon touched his sword hilt, a dozen men-at-arms appeared with spears in hand, but for a moment it looked as though there might be bloodshed. It was only the intervention of a big blond knight named Kirby Pimm that saved the situation. Dunk was too far away to hear, but he saw Pimm clasp an arm around the steward’s shoulders and murmur in his ear, laughing. The steward frowned, and said something to Ser Glendon that turned the boy’s face dark red. *He looks as if he’s about to cry*, Dunk thought, watching. *That, or kill someone*. After all of that, the young knight was finally admitted to the castle hall.

Poor Egg was not so fortunate. “The great hall is for the lords and knights,” an understeward had informed them haughtily when Dunk tried to bring the boy inside. “We have set up tables in the inner

yard for squires, grooms, and men-at-arms.”

*If you had an inkling who he was, you would seat him on the dais on a cushioned throne.* Dunk had not much liked the look of the other squires. A few were lads of Egg’s own age, but most were older, seasoned fighters who long ago had made the choice to serve a knight rather than become one. *Or did they have a choice?* Knighthood required more than chivalry and skill at arms; it required horse and sword and armor too, and all of that was costly. “Watch your tongue,” he told Egg before he left him in that company. “These are grown men; they won’t take kindly to your insolence. Sit and eat and listen, might be you’ll learn some things.” For his own part, Dunk was just glad to be out of the hot sun, with a wine cup before him and a chance to fill his belly. Even a hedge knight grows weary of chewing every bite of food for half an hour. Down here below the salt, the fare would be more plain than fancy, but there would be no lack of it. Below the salt was good enough for Dunk.

But peasant’s pride is lordling’s shame, the old man used to say. “This cannot be my proper place,” Ser Glendon Ball told the understeward hotly. He had donned a clean doublet for the feast, a handsome old garment with gold lace at the cuffs and collar and the red chevron and white plates of House Ball sewn across the chest. “Do you know who my father was?”

“A noble knight and mighty lord, I have no doubt,” said the understeward, “but the same is true of many here. Please take your seat or take your leave, ser. It is all the same to me.” In the end, the boy took his place below the salt with the rest of them, his mouth sullen. The long white hall was filling up as more knights crowded onto the benches. The crowd was larger than Dunk had anticipated, and from the looks of it, some of the guests had come a very long way. He and Egg had not been around so many lords and knights since Ashford Meadow, and there was no way to guess who else might turn up next. *We should have stayed out in the hedges, sleeping under trees. If I am recognized...*

When a serving man placed a loaf of black bread on the cloth in front of each of them, Dunk was grateful for the distraction. He sawed the loaf open lengthwise, hollowed out the bottom half for a trencher, and ate the top. It was stale, but compared with his salt beef, it was custard. At least it did not have to be soaked in ale or milk or water to make it soft enough to chew.

“Ser Duncan, you appear to be attracting a deal of attention,” Ser Maynard Plumm observed as Lord Vyrwel and his party went parading past them toward places of high honor at the top of the hall. “Those girls up on the dais cannot seem to take their eyes off you. I’ll wager they have never seen a man so big. Even seated, you are half a head taller than any man in the hall.” Dunk hunched his shoulders. He was used to being stared at, but that did not mean he liked it.

“Let them look.”

“That’s the Old Ox down there beneath the dais,” Ser Maynard said. “They call him a huge man, but seems to me his belly is the biggest thing about him. You’re a bloody giant next to him.”

“Indeed, ser,” said one of their companions on the bench, a sallow man, saturnine, clad in grey and green. His eyes were small and shrewd, set close together beneath thin arching brows. A neat black beard framed his mouth, to make up for his receding hair. “In such a field as this, your size alone should make you one of the most formidable competitors.”

“I had heard the Brute of Bracken might be coming,” said another man, farther down the bench.

“I think not,” said the man in green and grey. “This is only a bit of jousting to celebrate His Lordship’s nuptials. A tilt in the yard to mark the tilt between the sheets. Hardly worth the bother for

the likes of Otho Bracken.” Ser Kyle the Cat took a drink of wine. “I’ll wager my lord of Butterwell does not take the field either. He will cheer on his champions from his lord’s box in the shade.”

“Then he’ll see his champions fall,” boasted Ser Glendon Ball, “and in the end, he’ll hand his egg to me.”

“Ser Glendon is the son of Fireball,” Ser Kyle explained to the new man. “Might we have the honor of your name, ser?”

“Ser Uthor Underleaf. The son of no one of importance.” Underleafs garments were of good cloth, clean and well cared for, but simply cut. A silver clasp in the shape of a snail fastened his cloak. “If your lance is the equal of your tongue, Ser Glendon, you may even give this big fellow here a contest.”

Ser Glendon glanced at Dunk as the wine was being poured. “If we meet, he’ll fall. I don’t care how big he is.”

Dunk watched a server fill his wine cup. “I am better with a sword than with a lance,” he admitted, “and even better with a battleaxe. Will there be a melee here?” His size and strength would stand him in good stead in a melee, and he knew he could give as good as he got. Jousting was another matter.

“A melee? At a marriage?” Ser Kyle sounded shocked. “That would be unseemly.” Ser Maynard gave a chuckle. “A marriage is a melee, as any married man could tell you.” Ser Uthor chuckled. “There’s just the joust, I fear, but besides the dragon’s egg, Lord Butterwell has promised thirty golden dragons for the loser of the final tilt, and ten each for the knights defeated in the round before.”

*Ten dragons is not so bad. Ten dragons would buy a palfrey, so Dunk would not need to ride Thunder save in battle. Ten dragons would buy a suit of plate for Egg, and a proper knight’s pavilion sewn with Dunk’s tree and falling star. Ten dragons would mean roast goose and ham and pigeon pie.*

“There are ransoms to be had as well, for those who win their matches,” Ser Uthor said as he hollowed out his trencher, “and I have heard it rumored that some men place wagers on the tilts. Lord Butterwell himself is not fond of taking risks, but amongst his guests are some who wager heavily.”

No sooner had he spoken than Ambrose Butterwell made his entrance, to a fanfare of trumpets from the minstrel’s gallery. Dunk shoved to his feet with the rest as Butterwell escorted his new bride down a patterned Myrish carpet to the dais, arm in arm. The girl was fifteen and freshly flowered, her lord husband fifty and freshly widowed. She was pink and he was grey. Her bride’s cloak trailed behind her, done in candy green and white and yellow. It looked so hot and heavy that Dunk wondered how she could bear to wear it. Lord Butterwell looked hot and heavy too, with his heavy jowls and thinning flaxen hair.

The bride’s father followed close behind her, hand in hand with his young son. Lord Frey of the Crossing was a lean man elegant in blue and grey, his heir a chinless boy of four whose nose was dripping snot. Lords Costayne and Risley came next, with their lady wives, daughters of Lord Butterwell by his first wife. Frey’s daughters followed with their own husbands. Then came Lord Gormon Peake; Lords Smallwood, and Shawney; various lesser lords and landed knights. Amongst them Dunk glimpsed John the Fiddler and Alyn Cockshaw. Lord Alyn looked to be in his cups, though the feast had not yet properly begun.

By the time all of them had sauntered to the dais, the high table was as crowded as the benches. Lord Butterwell and his bride sat on plump downy cushions in a double throne of gilded oak. The rest

planted themselves in tall chairs with fancifully carved arms. On the wall behind them, two huge banners hung from the rafters: the twin towers of Frey, blue on grey, and the green and white and yellow undy of the Butterwells.

It fell to Lord Frey to lead the toasts. “*The king!*” he began simply. Ser Glendon held his wine cup out above the water basin. Dunk clanked his cup against it, and against Ser Uthor’s and the rest as well. They drank.

“*Lord Butterwell, our gracious host,*” Frey proclaimed next. “May the Father grant him long life and many sons.”

They drank again.

“*Lady Butterwell, the maiden brick, my darling daughter.* May the Mother make her fertile.” Frey gave the girl a smile. “I shall want a grandson before the year is out. Twins would suit me even better, so churn the butter well tonight, my sweet.”

Laughter rang against the rafters, and the guests drank still once more. The wine was rich and red and sweet.

Then Lord Frey said, “I give you the King’s Hand, Brynden Rivers. May the Crone’s lamp light his path to wisdom.” He lifted his goblet high and drank, together with Lord Butterwell and his bride and the others on the dais. Below the salt, Ser Glendon turned his cup over to spill its contents to the floor.

“A sad waste of good wine,” said Maynard Plumm.

“I do not drink to kinslayers,” said Ser Glendon. “Lord Bloodraven is a sorcerer and a bastard.”

“Born bastard,” Ser Uthor agreed mildly, “but his royal father made him legitimate as he lay dying.” He drank deep, as did Ser Maynard and many others in the hall. Near as many lowered their cups, or turned them upside down as Ball had done. Dunk’s own cup was heavy in his hand. *How many eyes does Lord Bloodraven have?* the riddle went. *A thousand eyes, and one.* Toast followed toast, some proposed by Lord Frey and some by others. They drank to young Lord Tully, Lord Butterwell’s liege lord, who had begged off from the wedding. They drank to the health of Leo Longthorn, Lord of Highgarden, who was rumored to be ailing. They drank to the memory of their gallant dead. *Aye,* thought Dunk, remembering. *I’ll gladly drink to them.* Ser John the Fiddler proposed the final toast. “*To my brave brothers!* I know that they are smiling tonight!”

Dunk had not intended to drink so much, with the jousting on the morrow, but the cups were filled anew after every toast, and he found he had a thirst. “Never refuse a cup of wine or a horn of ale,” Ser Arlan had once told him, “it may be a year before you see another.” *It would have been discourteous not to toast the bride and groom,* he told himself, *and dangerous not to drink to the king and his Hand with strangers all about.*

Mercifully, the Fiddler’s toast was the last. Lord Butterwell rose ponderously to thank them for coming and promise good jousting on the morrow. “Let the feast begin!” Suckling pig was served at the high table, a peacock roasted in its plumage, a great pike crusted with crushed almonds. Not a bit of that made it down below the salt. Instead of suckling pig, they got salt pork, soaked in almond milk and peppered pleasantly. In place of peacock, they had capons, crisped up nice and brown and stuffed with onions, herbs, mushrooms, and roasted chestnuts. In place of pike, they ate chunks of flaky white cod in a pastry coffyn, with some sort of tasty brown sauce that Dunk could not quite place. There wa

pease porridge besides, buttered turnips, carrots drizzled with honey, and a ripe white cheese that smelled as strong as Bennis of the Brown Shield. Dunk ate well, but all the while wondered what Egg was getting in the yard. Just in case, he slipped half a capon into the pocket of his cloak, with some hunks of bread and a little of the smelly cheese.

As they ate, pipes and fiddles filled the air with spritely tunes, and the talk turned to the morrow jousting. “Ser Franklyn Frey is well regarded along the Green Fork,” said Uthor Underleaf, who seemed to know these local heroes well. “That’s him upon the dais, the uncle of the bride. Lucas Nayland is down from Flag’s Mire, he should not be discounted. Nor should Ser Mortimer Boggs, of Crackclaw Point. Elsewise, this should be a tourney of household knights and village heroes. Kirby Pimm and Galtry the Green are the best of those, though neither is a match for Lord Butterwell’s good-son, Black Tom Heddle. A nasty bit of business, that one. He won the hand of His Lordship’s eldest daughter by killing three of her other suitors, it’s said, and once unhorsed the Lord of Casterly Rock.”

“What, young Lord Tybolt?” asked Ser Maynard.

“No, the old Grey Lion, the one who died in the spring.” That was how men spoke of those who had perished during the Great Spring Sickness. *He died in the spring*. Tens of thousands had died in the spring, among them a king and two young princes.

“Do not slight Ser Buford Bulwer,” said Kyle the Cat. “The Old Ox slew forty men upon the Redgrass Field.”

“And every year his count grows higher,” said Ser Maynard. “Bulwer’s day is done. Look at him. Past sixty, soft and fat, and his right eye is good as blind.”

“Do not trouble to search the hall for the champion,” a voice behind Dunk said. “Here I stand, sers. Feast your eyes.”

Dunk turned to find Ser John the Fiddler looming over him, a half smile on his lips. His white silk doublet had lagged sleeves lined with red satin, so long their points drooped down past his knees. A heavy silver chain looped across his chest, studded with huge dark amethysts whose color matched his eyes. *That chain is worth as much as everything I own*, Dunk thought. The wine had colored Ser Glendon’s cheeks and inflamed his pimples. “Who are you, to make such boasts?”

“They call me John the Fiddler.”

“Are you a musician or a warrior?”

“I can make sweet song with either lance or resined bow, as it happens. Every wedding needs a singer, and every tourney needs a mystery knight. May I join you? Butterwell was good enough to place me on the dais, but I prefer the company of my fellow hedge knights to fat pink ladies and old men.” The Fiddler clapped Dunk upon the shoulder. “Be a good fellow and shove over, Ser Duncan.”

Dunk shoved over. “You are too late for food, ser.”

“No matter. I know where Butterwell’s kitchens are. There is still some wine, I trust?” The Fiddler smelled of oranges and limes, with a hint of some strange eastern spice beneath. Nutmeg, perhaps. Dunk could not have said. What did he know of nutmeg?

“Your boasting is unseemly,” Ser Glendon told the Fiddler.

“Truly? Then I must beg for your forgiveness, ser. I would never wish to give offense to any son

of Fireball.”

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That took the youth aback. “You know who I am?”

“Your father’s son, I hope.”

“Look,” said Ser Kyle the Cat. “The wedding pie.”

Six kitchen boys were pushing it through the doors, upon a wide wheeled cart. The pie was brown and crusty and immense, and there were noises coming from inside it, squeaks and squawks and thumps. Lord and Lady Butterwell descended from the dais to meet it, sword in hand. When they cut open, half a hundred birds burst forth to fly around the hall. In other wedding feasts Dunk had attended, the pies had been filled with doves or songbirds, but inside this one were bluejays and skylarks, pigeons and doves, mockingbirds and nightingales, small brown sparrows and a great red parrot. “One-and-twenty sorts of birds,” said Ser Kyle.

“One-and-twenty sorts of bird droppings,” said Ser Maynard.

“You have no poetry in your heart, ser.”

“You have shit upon your shoulder.”

“This is the proper way to fill a pie,” Ser Kyle sniffed, cleaning off his tunic. “The pie is meant to be the marriage, and a true marriage has in it many sorts of things—joy and grief, pain and pleasure, love and lust and loyalty. So it is fitting that there be birds of many sorts. No man ever truly knows what a new wife will bring him.”

“Her cunt,” said Plumm, “or what would be the point?” Dunk shoved back from the table. “I need a breath of air.” It was a piss he needed, truth be told, but in fine company like this, it was more courteous to talk of air. “Pray excuse me.”

“Flurry back, ser,” said the Fiddler. “There are jugglers yet to come, and you do not want to miss the bedding.”

Outside, the night wind lapped at Dunk like the tongue of some great beast. The hard-packed earth of the yard seemed to move beneath his feet... or it might be that he was swaying. The lists had been erected in the center of the outer yard. A three-tiered wooden viewing stand had been raised beneath the walls, so Lord Butterwell and his highborn guests would be well shaded on their cushioned seats. There were tents at both ends of the lists where the knights could don their armor, with racks of tourney lances standing ready. When the wind lifted the banners for an instant, Dunk could smell the whitewash on the tilting barrier. He set off in search of the inner ward. He had to hunt up Egg and send the boy to the master of the games to enter him in the lists. That was a squire’s duty.

Whitewalls was strange to him, however, and somehow Dunk got turned around. He found himself outside the kennels, where the hounds caught scent of him and began to bark and howl. *They want to tear my throat out*, he thought, *or else they want the capon in my cloak*. He doubled back the way he’d come, past the sept. A woman went running past, breathless with laughter, a bald knight in hard pursuit. The man kept falling, until finally the woman had to come back and help him up. *I should slip into the sept and ask the Seven to make that knight my first opponent*, Dunk thought, but that would have been impious. *What I really need is a privy, not a prayer*. There were some bushes near at hand, beneath a flight of pale stone steps. *Those will serve*. He groped his way behind them and unlaced his breeches. His bladder had been full to bursting. The piss went on and on.

Somewhere above, a door came open. Dunk heard footfalls on the steps, the scrape of boots on stone. “...beggar’s feast you’ve laid before us Without Bittersteel...”

“Bittersteel be bugged,” insisted a familiar voice. “No bastard can be trusted, not even him. A few victories will bring him over the water fast enough.”

*Lord Peake.* Dunk held his breath... and his piss.

“Easier to speak of victories than to win them.” This speaker had a deeper voice than Peake, a bass rumble with an angry edge to it. “Old Milkblood expected the boy to have it, and so will all the rest. Glib words and charm cannot make up for that.”

“A dragon would. The prince insists the egg will hatch. He dreamed it, just as he once dreamed his brothers dead. A living dragon will win us all the swords that we would want.”

“A dragon is one thing, a dream’s another. I promise you, Bloodraven is not off dreaming. We need a warrior, not a dreamer. Is the boy his father’s son?”

“Just do your part as promised, and let me concern myself with that. Once we have Butterwell’s gold and the swords of House Frey, Harrenhal will follow, then the Brackens. Otho knows he cannot hope to stand...”

The voices were fading as the speakers moved away. Dunk’s piss began to flow again. He gave his cock a shake, and laced himself back up. “His father’s son,” he muttered. *Who were they speaking of? Fireball’s son?*

By the time he emerged from under the steps, the two lords were well across the yard. He almost shouted after them, to make them show their faces, but thought better of it. He was alone and unarmed, and half-drunk besides. *Maybe more than half.* He stood there frowning for a moment, then marched back to the hall.

Inside, the last course had been served and the frolics had begun. One of Lord Frey’s daughters played “Two Hearts That Beat As One” on the high harp, very badly. Some jugglers flung flaming torches at each other for a while, and some tumblers did cartwheels in the air. Lord Frey’s nephew began to sing “The Bear and the Maiden Fair” while Ser Kirby Pimm beat out time upon the table with a wooden spoon. Others joined in, until the whole hall was bellowing, “*A bear! A bear! All black and brown, and covered with hair!*” Lord Caswell passed out at the table with his face in a puddle of wine, and Lady Vyrwel began to weep, though no one was quite certain as to the cause of her distress.

All the while the wine kept flowing. The rich Arbor reds gave way to local vintages, or so the Fiddler said; if truth be told, Dunk could not tell the difference. There was hippocras as well, he had to try a cup of that. *It might be a year before I have another.* The other hedge knights, fine fellows all, had begun to talk of women they had known. Dunk found himself wondering where Tanselle was tonight. He knew where Lady Rohanne was—abed at Coldmoat Castle, with old Ser Eustace beside her, snoring through his mustache—so he tried not to think of her. *Do they ever think of me?* he wondered.

His melancholy ponderings were rudely interrupted when a troupe of painted dwarfs came bursting from the belly of a wheeled wooden pig to chase Lord Butterwell’s fool about the tables, walloping him with inflated pig’s bladders that made rude noises every time a blow was struck. It was the funniest thing Dunk had seen in years, and he laughed with all the rest. Lord Frey’s son was so taken by their antics that he joined in, pummeling the wedding guests with a bladder borrowed from

dwarf. The child had the most irritating laugh Dunk had ever heard, a high shrill hiccup of a laugh that made him want to take the boy over a knee or throw him down a well. *If he hits me with that bladder, may do it.*

“There’s the lad who made this marriage,” Ser Maynard said as the chinless urchin went screaming past.

“How so?” The Fiddler held up an empty wine cup, and a passing server filled it. Ser Maynard glanced toward the dais, where the bride was feeding cherries to her husband.

“His Lordship will not be the first to butter that biscuit. His bride was deflowered by a scullion at the Twins, they say. She would creep down to the kitchens to meet him. Alas, one night that little brother of hers crept down after her. When he saw them making the two-backed beast, he let out a shriek, and cooks and guardsmen came running and found milady and her pot boy coupling on the slab of marble where the cook rolls out the dough, both naked as their name day and floured up from head to heel.”

*That cannot be true*, Dunk thought. Lord Butterwell had broad lands, and pots of yellow gold. Why would he wed a girl who’d been soiled by a kitchen scullion, and give away his dragon’s egg to mark the match? The Freys of the Crossing were no nobler than the Butterwells. They owned a bridge instead of cows, that was the only difference. *Lords. Who can ever understand them?* Dunk ate some nuts and pondered what he’d overheard whilst pissing. *Dunk the drunk, what is it that you think you heard?* He had another cup of hippocras, since the first had tasted good. Then he lay his head down atop his folded arms and closed his eyes just for a moment, to rest them from the smoke.

When he opened them again, half the wedding guests were on their feet and shouting, “Bed them! Bed them!” They were making such an uproar that they woke Dunk from a pleasant dream involving Tanselle Too-Tall and the Red Widow. “Bed them! Bed them!” the calls rang out. Dunk sat up and rubbed his eyes.

Ser Franklyn Frey had the bride in his arms and was carrying her down the aisle, with men and boys swarming all around him. The ladies at the high table had surrounded Lord Butterwell. Lady Vyrwel had recovered from her grief and was trying to pull His Lordship from his chair, while one of his daughters unlaced his boots and some Frey woman pulled up his tunic. Butterwell was flailing at them ineffectually, and laughing. He was drunk, Dunk saw, and Ser Franklyn was a deal drunker... so drunk, he almost dropped the bride. Before Dunk quite realized what was happening, John the Fiddler had dragged him to his feet. “Here!” he cried out. “Let the giant carry her!”

The next thing he knew, he was climbing a tower stair with the bride squirming in his arms. How he kept his feet was beyond him. The girl would not be still, and the men were all around them, making ribald japes about flouing her up and kneading her well whilst they pulled off her clothes. The dwarfs joined in as well. They swarmed around Dunk’s legs, shouting and laughing and smacking at his calves with their bladders. It was all he could do not to trip over them.

Dunk had no notion where Lord Butterwell’s bedchamber was to be found, but the other men pushed and prodded him until he got there, by which time the bride was red-faced, giggling, and nearly naked, save for the stocking on her left leg, which had somehow survived the climb. Dunk was crimson too, and not from exertion. His arousal would have been obvious if anyone had been looking



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