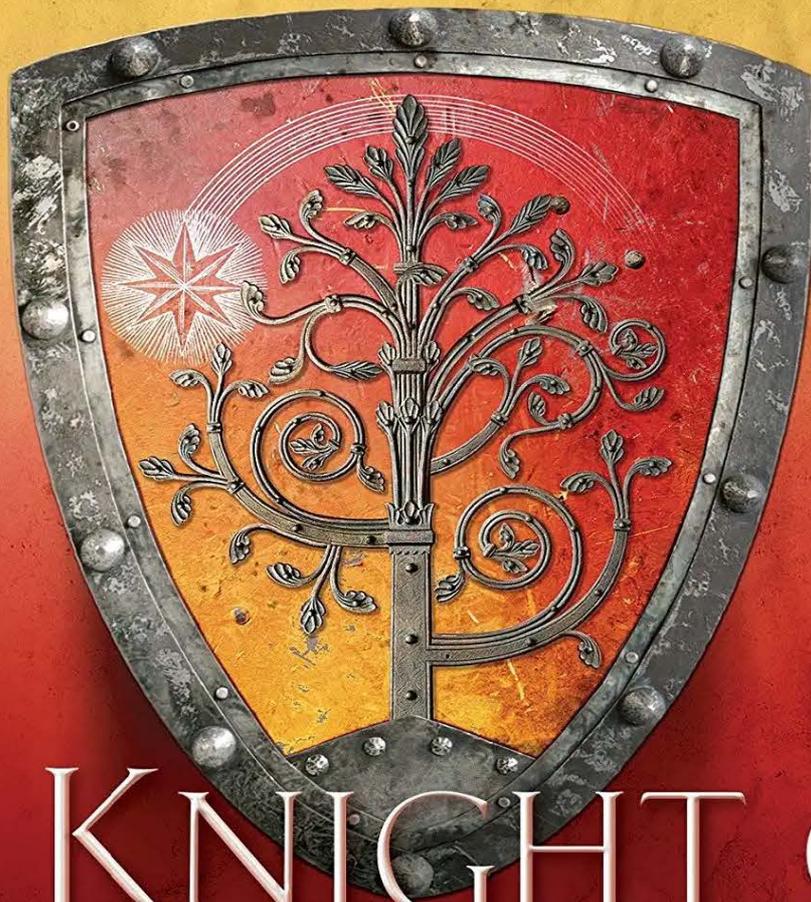


A century before *A Game of Thrones*,  
two unlikely heroes wandered Westeros.

# GEORGE R. R. MARTIN



## A KNIGHT OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GARY GIANNI



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George R. R. Martin

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Illustrations by Gary Gianni



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*To Raya Golden,  
for the cheerful smiles and pretty pictures*

—GRRM



*For the noble cause and the Ser Dunk in all of us.*

—GG

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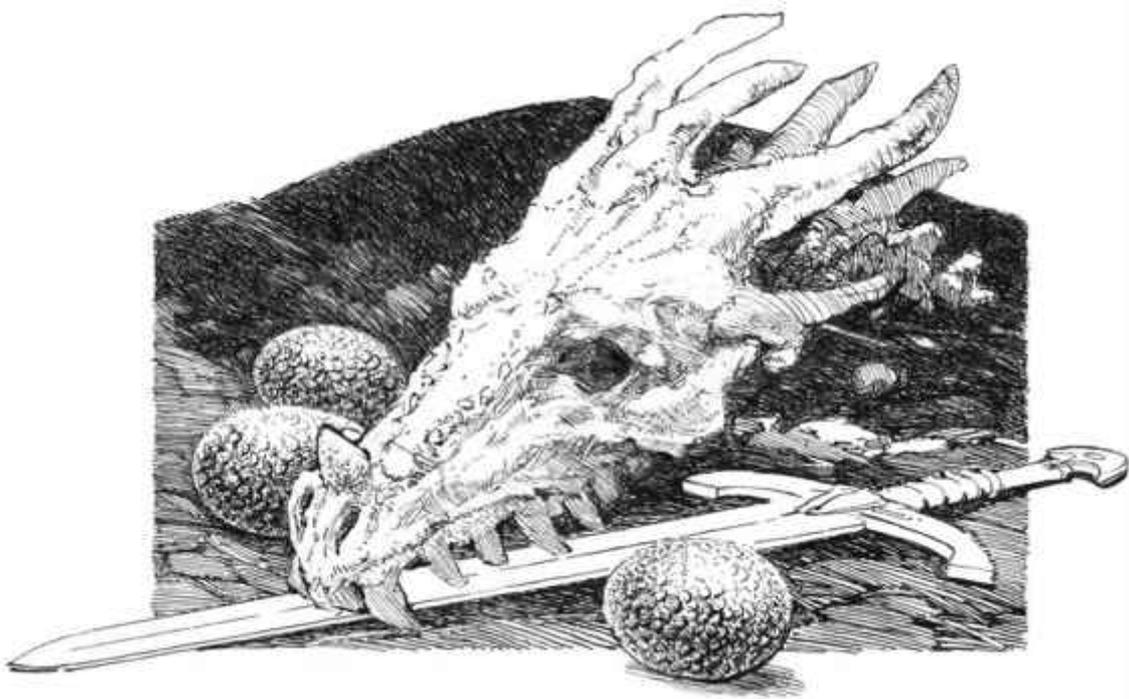
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# A KNIGHT OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS





# THE HEDGE KNIGHT





*The story offered here takes place about a hundred years prior to the events described in A Game of Thrones.*

The spring rains had softened the ground, so Dunk had no trouble digging the grave. He chose a spot on the western slope of a low hill, for the old man had always loved to watch the sunset. “Another day done”—he would sigh—“and who knows what the morrow will bring us, eh, Dunk?”

Well, one morrow had brought rains that soaked them to the bones, and the one after had brought wet, gusty winds, and the next a chill. By the fourth day the old man was too weak to ride. And now he was gone. Only a few days past, he had been singing as they rode, the old song about going to Gulltown to see a fair maid, but instead of Gulltown he’d sung of Ashford. *Off to Ashford to see the fair maid, heigh-ho, heigh-ho*, Dunk thought miserably as he dug.

When the hole was deep enough, he lifted the old man’s body in his arms and carried him there. He had been a small man, and slim; stripped of hauberk, helm, and sword belt, he seemed to weigh no more than a

bag of leaves. Dunk was hugely tall for his age, a shambling, shaggy, big-boned boy of sixteen or seventeen years (no one was quite certain which) who stood closer to seven feet than to six, and had only just begun to fill out his frame. The old man had often praised his strength. He had always been generous in his praise. It was all he had to give.

He laid him out in the bottom of the grave and stood over him for a time. The smell of rain was in the air again, and he knew he ought to fill the hole before it broke, but it was hard to throw dirt down on that tired old face. *There ought to be a septon here, to say some prayers over him, but he only has me.* The old man had taught Dunk all he knew of swords and shields and lances, but had never been much good at teaching him words.

“I’d leave your sword, but it would rust in the ground,” he said at last, apologetic. “The gods will give you a new one, I guess. I wish you didn’t die, ser.” He paused, uncertain what else needed to be said. He didn’t know any prayers, not all the way through; the old man had never been much for praying. “You were a true knight, and you never beat me when I didn’t deserve it,” he finally managed, “except that one time in Maidenpool. It was the inn boy who ate the widow woman’s pie, not me, I told you. It don’t matter now. The gods keep you, ser.” He kicked dirt in the hole, then began to fill it methodically, never looking at the thing at the bottom. *He had a long life, Dunk thought. He must have been closer to sixty than to fifty, and how many men can say that?* At least he had lived to see another spring.

The sun was westering as he fed the horses. There were three; his swaybacked stot, the old man’s palfrey, and Thunder, his warhorse, who was ridden only in tourney and battle. The big brown stallion was not as swift or strong as he had once been, but he still had his bright eye and fierce spirit, and he was more valuable than everything else Dunk owned. *If I sold Thunder and old Chestnut, and the saddles and bridles too, I’d come away with enough silver to...* Dunk frowned. The only life he knew was the life of a hedge knight, riding from keep to keep, taking service with this lord and that lord, fighting in their battles and eating in their halls until the war was done, then moving on. There were tourneys from time to time as well, though less often, and he knew that some hedge knights turned robber during lean winters, though the old man never had.

*I could find another hedge knight in need of a squire to tend his animals and clean his mail, he thought, or might be I could go to some city, to Lannisport or King's Landing, and join the City Watch. Or else...*

He had piled the old man's things under an oak. The cloth purse contained three silver stags, nineteen copper pennies, and a chipped garnet; like most hedge knights, the greatest part of his worldly wealth had been tied up in his horses and weapons. Dunk now owned a chain-mail hauberk that he had scoured the rust off a thousand times. An iron halfhelm with a broad nasal and a dent on the left temple. A sword belt of cracked brown leather, and a longsword in a wood-and-leather scabbard. A dagger, a razor, a whetstone. Greaves and gorget, an eight-foot war lance of turned ash topped by a cruel iron point, and an oaken shield with a scarred metal rim, bearing the sigil of Ser Arlan of Pennytree: a winged chalice, silver on brown.

Dunk looked at the shield, scooped up the sword belt, and looked at the shield again. The belt was made for the old man's skinny hips, it would never do for him, no more than the hauberk would. He tied the scabbard to a length of hempen rope, knotted it around his waist, and drew the longsword.

The blade was straight and heavy, good castle-forged steel, the grip soft leather wrapped over wood, the pommel a smooth, polished, black stone. Plain as it was, the sword felt good in his hand, and Dunk knew how sharp it was, having worked it with whetstone and oil-cloth many a night before they went to sleep. *It fits my grip as well as it ever fit his*, he thought to himself, *and there is a tourney at Ashford Meadow.*

Sweetfoot had an easier gait than old Chestnut, but Dunk was still sore and tired when he spied the inn ahead, a tall, daub-and-timber building beside a stream. The warm yellow light spilling from its windows looked so inviting that he could not pass it by. *I have three silvers*, he told himself, *enough for a good meal and as much ale as I care to drink.*

As he dismounted, a naked boy emerged dripping from the stream and began to dry himself on a roughspun brown cloak. "Are you the stableboy?" Dunk asked him. The lad looked to be no more than eight or nine, a pasty-faced, skinny thing, his bare feet caked in mud up to the

ankle. His hair was the queerest thing about him. He had none. "I'll want my palfrey rubbed down. And oats for all three. Can you tend to them?"



The boy looked at him brazenly. "I could. If I wanted."

Dunk frowned. "I'll have none of that. I am a knight, I'll have you know."

"You don't look to be a knight."

"Do all knights look the same?"

"No, but they don't look like you, either. Your sword belt's made of rope."

"So long as it holds my scabbard, it serves. Now see to my horses. You'll get a copper if you do well, and a clout in the ear if you don't." He did not wait to see how the stableboy took that but turned away and shouldered through the door.

At this hour, he would have expected the inn to be crowded, but the common room was almost empty. A young lordling in a fine damask

mantle was passed out at one table, snoring softly into a pool of spilled wine. Otherwise there was no one. Dunk looked around uncertainly until a stout, short, whey-faced woman emerged from the kitchens and said, "Sit where you like. Is it ale you want, or food?"

"Both." Dunk took a chair by the window, well away from the sleeping man.

"There's good lamb, roasted with a crust of herbs, and some ducks my son shot down. Which will you have?"

He had not eaten at an inn in half a year or more. "Both."

The woman laughed. "Well, you're big enough for it." She drew a tankard of ale and brought it to his table. "Will you be wanting a room for the night as well?"

"No." Dunk would have liked nothing better than a soft straw mattress and a roof above his head, but he needed to be careful with his coin. The ground would serve. "Some food, some ale, and it's on to Ashford for me. How much farther is it?"

"A day's ride. Bear north when the road forks at the burned mill. Is my boy seeing to your horses, or has he run off again?"

"No, he's there," said Dunk. "You seem to have no custom."

"Half the town's gone to see the tourney. My own would as well, if I allowed it. They'll have this inn when I go, but the boy would sooner swagger about with soldiers, and the girl turns to sighs and giggles every time a knight rides by. I swear I couldn't tell you why. Knights are built the same as other men, and I never knew a joust to change the price of eggs." She eyed Dunk curiously; his sword and shield told her one thing, his rope belt and roughspun tunic quite another. "You're bound for the tourney yourself?"

He took a sip of the ale before he answered. A nut-brown color it was, and thick on the tongue, the way he liked it. "Aye," he said. "I mean to be a champion."

"Do you, now?" the innkeep answered, polite enough.

Across the room, the lordling raised his head from the wine puddle. His face had a sallow, unhealthy cast to it beneath a rat's nest of sandy brown hair, and blond stubble crusted his chin. He rubbed his mouth, blinked at Dunk, and said, "I dreamed of you." His hand trembled as he

pointed a finger. “You stay away from me, do you hear? You stay *well* away.”

Dunk stared at him uncertainly. “My lord?”

The innkeep leaned close. “Never you mind that one, ser. All he does is drink and talk about his dreams. I’ll see about that food.” She bustled off.

“Food?” The lordling made the word an obscenity. He staggered to his feet, one hand on the table to keep himself from falling. “I’m going to be sick,” he announced. The front of his tunic was crusty red with old wine stains. “I wanted a whore, but there’s none to be found here. All gone to Ashford Meadow. Gods be good, I need some wine.” He lurched unsteadily from the common room, and Dunk heard him climbing steps, singing under his breath.

*A sad creature*, thought Dunk. *But why did he think he knew me?* He pondered that a moment over his ale.

The lamb was as good as any he had ever eaten, and the duck was even better, cooked with cherries and lemons and not near as greasy as most. The innkeep brought buttered pease as well, and oaten bread still hot from her oven. *This is what it means to be a knight*, he told himself as he sucked the last bit of meat off the bone. *Good food, and ale whenever I want it, and no one to clout me in the head.* He had a second tankard of ale with the meal, a third to wash it down, and a fourth because there was no one to tell him he couldn’t, and when he was done he paid the woman with a silver stag and still got back a fistful of coppers.

It was full dark by the time Dunk emerged. His stomach was full and his purse was a little lighter, but he felt good as he walked to the stables. Ahead, he heard a horse whicker. “Easy, lad,” a boy’s voice said. Dunk quickened his step, frowning.

He found the stableboy mounted on Thunder and wearing the old man’s armor. The hauberk was longer than he was, and he’d had to tilt the helm back on his bald head or else it would have covered his eyes. He looked utterly intent, and utterly absurd. Dunk stopped in the stable door and laughed.

The boy looked up, flushed, vaulted to the ground. “My lord, I did not mean—”

“Thief,” Dunk said, trying to sound stern. “Take off that armor, and be glad that Thunder didn’t kick you in that fool head. He’s a warhorse, not a boy’s pony.”

The boy took off the helm and flung it to the straw. “I could ride him as well as you,” he said, bold as you please.

“Close your mouth, I want none of your insolence. The hauberk too, take it off. What did you think you were doing?”

“How can I tell you, with my mouth closed?” The boy squirmed out of the chain mail and let it fall.

“You can open your mouth to answer,” said Dunk. “Now pick up that mail, shake off the dirt, and put it back where you found it. And the halfhelm too. Did you feed the horses, as I told you? And rub down Sweetfoot?”

“Yes,” the boy said, as he shook straw from the mail. “You’re going to Ashford, aren’t you? Take me with you, ser.”



The innkeep had warned him of this. “And what might your mother say to that?”

“My mother?” The boy wrinkled up his face. “My mother’s dead, she wouldn’t say anything.”

He was surprised. Wasn’t the innkeep his mother? Perhaps he was only ’prenticed to her. Dunk’s head was a little fuzzy from the ale. “Are you an orphan boy?” he asked uncertainly.

“Are you?” the boy threw back.

“I was once,” Dunk admitted. *Till the old man took me in.*

“If you took me, I could squire for you.”



“I have no need of a squire,” he said.

“Every knight needs a squire,” the boy said. “You look as though you need one more than most.”

Dunk raised a hand threateningly. “And you look as though you need a clout in the ear, it seems to me. Fill me a sack of oats. I’m off for Ashford...alone.”

If the boy was frightened, he hid it well. For a moment he stood there defiant, his arms crossed, but just as Dunk was about to give up on him the lad turned and went for the oats.

Dunk was relieved. *A pity I couldn't...but he has a good life here at the inn, a better one than he'd have squiring for a hedge knight. Taking him would be no kindness.*

He could still feel the lad's disappointment, though. As he mounted Sweetfoot and took up Thunder's lead, Dunk decided that a copper penny might cheer him. “Here, lad, for your help.” He flipped the coin down at him with a smile, but the stableboy made no attempt to catch it. It fell in the dirt between his bare feet, and there he let it lie.





*He'll scoop it up as soon as I am gone,* Dunk told himself. He turned the palfrey and rode from the inn, leading the other two horses. The trees were bright with moonlight, and the sky was cloudless and speckled with stars. Yet as he headed down the road he could feel the stableboy watching his back, sullen and silent.

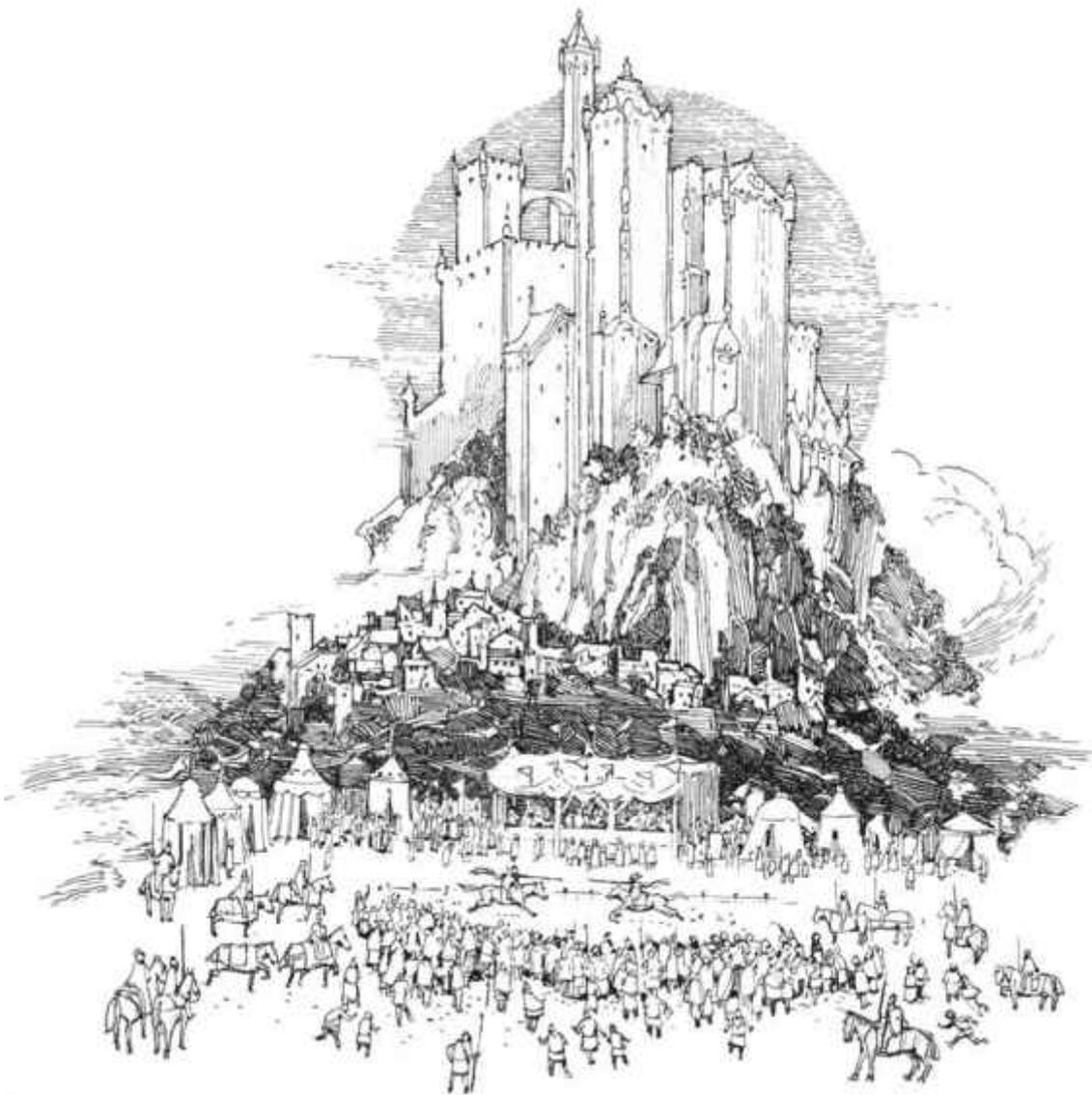
The shadows of the afternoon were growing long when Dunk reined up on the edge of broad Ashford Meadow. Threescore pavilions had already risen on the grassy field. Some were small, some large; some square,

some round; some of sailcloth, some of linen, some of silk; but all were brightly colored, with long banners streaming from their center poles, brighter than a field of wildflowers with rich reds and sunny yellows, countless shades of green and blue, deep blacks and greys and purples.



The old man had ridden with some of these knights; others Dunk knew from tales told in common rooms and round campfires. Though he had never learned the magic of reading or writing, the old man had been relentless when it came to teaching him heraldry, often drilling him as they rode. The nightingales belonged to Lord Caron of the Marches, as skilled with the high harp as he was with a lance. The crowned stag was for Ser Lyonel Baratheon, the Laughing Storm. Dunk picked out the Tarly huntsman, House Dondarrion's purple lightning, the red apple of the Fossoways. There roared the lion of Lannister gold on crimson, and there the dark green sea turtle of the Estermonts swam across a pale

green field. The brown tent beneath a red stallion could only belong to Ser Otho Bracken, who was called the Brute of Bracken since slaying Lord Quentyn Blackwood three years past during a tourney at King's Landing. Dunk heard that Ser Otho struck so hard with the blunted longaxe that he staved in the visor of Lord Blackwood's helm and the face beneath it. He saw some Blackwood banners as well, on the west edge of the meadow, as distant from Ser Otho as they could be. Marbrand, Mallister, Cargyll, Westerling, Swann, Mullendore, Hightower, Florent, Frey, Penrose, Stokeworth, Darry, Parren, Wylde; it seemed as though every lordly house of the west and south had sent a knight or three to Ashford to see the fair maid and brave the lists in her honor.



Yet however fine their pavilions were to look upon, he knew there was no place there for him. A threadbare wool cloak would be all the shelter he had tonight. While the lords and great knights dined on capons and suckling pigs, Dunk's supper would be a hard, stringy piece of salt beef. He knew full well that if he made his camp upon that gaudy field, he would need to suffer both silent scorn and open mockery. A few perhaps would treat him kindly, yet in a way that was almost worse.

A hedge knight must hold tight to his pride. Without it, he was no more than a sellsword. *I must earn my place in that company. If I fight well, some lord may take me into his household. I will ride in noble company then, and eat fresh meat every night in a castle hall, and raise my own pavilion at tourneys. But first I must do well.* Reluctantly, he turned his back on the tourney grounds and led his horses into the trees.

On the outskirts of the great meadow, a good half mile from town and castle, he found a place where a bend in a brook had formed a deep pool. Reeds grew thick along its edge, and a tall, leafy elm presided over all. The spring grass there was as green as any knight's banner and soft to the touch. It was a pretty spot, and no one had yet laid claim to it. *This will be my pavilion, Dunk told himself, a pavilion roofed with leaves, greener even than the banners of the Tyrells and the Estermunts.*

His horses came first. After they had been tended, he stripped and waded into the pool to wash away the dust of travel. "A true knight is cleanly as well as godly," the old man always said, insisting that they wash themselves head to heels every time the moon turned, whether they smelled sour or not. Now that he was a knight, Dunk vowed he would do the same.

He sat naked under the elm while he dried, enjoying the warmth of the spring air on his skin as he watched a dragonfly move lazily amongst the reeds. *Why would they name it a dragonfly?* he wondered. *It looks nothing like a dragon.* Not that Dunk had ever seen a dragon. The old man had, though. Dunk had heard the story half a hundred times, how Ser Arlan had been just a little boy when his grandfather had taken him to King's Landing, and how they'd seen the last dragon there the year before it died. She'd been a green female, small and stunted, her wings withered. None of her eggs had ever hatched. "Some say King Aegon poisoned her," the old man would tell. "The third Aegon that would be, not King Daeron's father, but the one they named Dragonbane, or Aegon the Unlucky. He was afraid of dragons, for he'd seen his uncle's beast

devour his own mother. The summers have been shorter since the last dragon died, and the winters longer and crueller.”

The air began to cool as the sun dipped below the tops of the trees. When Dunk felt gooseflesh prickling his arms, he beat his tunic and breeches against the trunk of the elm to knock off the worst of the dirt and donned them once again. On the morrow he could seek out the master of the games and enroll his name, but he had other matters he ought to look into tonight if he hoped to challenge.

He did not need to study his reflection in the water to know that he did not look much a knight, so he slung Ser Arlan’s shield across his back to display the sigil. Hobbling the horses, Dunk left them to crop the thick green grass beneath the elm as he set out on foot for the tourney grounds.

In normal times the meadow served as a commons for the folk of Ashford town across the river, but now it was transformed. A second town had sprung up overnight, a town of silk instead of stone, larger and fairer than its elder sister. Dozens of merchants had erected their stalls along the edge of the field, selling felts and fruits, belts and boots, hides and hawks, earthenware, gemstones, pewterwork, spices, feathers, and all manner of other goods. Jugglers, puppeteers, and magicians wandered amongst the crowds plying their trades...as did the whores and cutpurses. Dunk kept a wary hand on his coin.

When he caught the smell of sausages sizzling over a smoky fire, his mouth began to water. He bought one with a copper from his pouch and a horn of ale to wash it down. As he ate he watched a painted wooden knight battle a painted wooden dragon. The puppeteer who worked the dragon was good to watch too; a tall drink of water, with the olive skin and black hair of Dorne. She was slim as a lance with no breasts to speak of, but Dunk liked her face and the way her fingers made the dragon snap and slither at the end of its strings. He would have tossed the girl a copper if he’d had one to spare, but just now he needed every coin.

There were armorers amongst the merchants, as he had hoped. A Tyroshi with a forked blue beard was selling ornate helms, gorgeous fantastical things wrought in the shapes of birds and beasts and chased with gold and silver. Elsewhere he found a swordmaker hawking cheap

steel blades, and another whose work was much finer, but it was not a sword he lacked.

The man he needed was all the way down at the end of the row, a shirt of fine chain mail and a pair of lobstered steel gauntlets displayed on the table before him. Dunk inspected them closely. "You do good work," he said.

"None better." A stumpy man, the smith was no more than five feet tall, yet wide as Dunk about the chest and arms. He had a black beard, huge hands, and no trace of humility.

"I need armor for the tourney," Dunk told him. "A suit of good mail, with gorget, greaves, and greathelm." The old man's halfhelm would fit his head, but he wanted more protection for his face than a nasal bar alone could provide.

The armorer looked him up and down. "You're a big one, but I've armored bigger." He came out from behind the table. "Kneel, I want to measure those shoulders. Aye, and that thick neck o' yours." Dunk knelt. The armorer laid a length of knotted rawhide along his shoulders, grunted, slipped it about his throat, grunted again. "Lift your arm. No, the right." He grunted a third time. "Now you can stand." The inside of a leg, the thickness of his calf, and the size of his waist elicited further grunts. "I have some pieces in me wagon that might do for you," the man said when he was done. "Nothing prettied up with gold or silver, mind you, just good steel, strong and plain. I make helms that look like helms, not winged pigs and queer foreign fruits, but mine will serve you better if you take a lance in the face."

"That's all I want," said Dunk. "How much?"

"Eight hundred stags, for I'm feeling kindly."

"*Eight hundred?*" It was more than he had expected. "I...I could trade you some old armor, made for a smaller man...a halfhelm, a mail hauberk..."

"Steely Pate sells only his own work," the man declared, "but it might be I could make use of the metal. If it's not too rusted, I'll take it and armor you for six hundred."

Dunk could beseech Pate to give him the armor on trust, but he knew what sort of answer that request would likely get. He had traveled with the old man long enough to learn that merchants were notoriously mistrustful of hedge knights, some of whom were little better than

robbers. “I’ll give you two silvers now, and the armor and the rest of the coin on the morrow.”

The armorer studied him a moment. “Two silvers buys you a day. After that, I sell me work to the next man.”

Dunk scooped the stags out of his pouch and placed them in the armorer’s callused hand. “You’ll get it all. I mean to be a champion here.”

“Do you?” Pate bit one of the coins. “And these others, I suppose they all came just to cheer you on?”



The moon was well up by the time he turned his steps back toward his elm. Behind him, Ashford Meadow was ablaze with torchlight. The sounds of song and laughter drifted across the grass, but his own mood was somber. He could think of only one way to raise the coin for his armor. And if he should be defeated...“One victory is all I need,” he muttered aloud. “That’s not so much to hope for.”

Even so, the old man would never have hoped for it. Ser Arlan had not ridden a tilt since the day he had been unhorsed by the Prince of Dragonstone in a tourney at Storm’s End, many years before. “It is not every man who can boast that he broke seven lances against the finest knight in the Seven Kingdoms,” he would say. “I could never hope to do better, so why should I try?”

Dunk had suspected that Ser Arlan’s age had more to do with it than the Prince of Dragonstone did, but he never dared say as much. The old man had his pride, even at the last. *I am quick and strong, he always said so, what was true for him need not be true for me*, he told himself stubbornly.

He was moving through a patch of weed, chewing over his chances in his head, when he saw the flicker of firelight through the bushes. *What is this?* Dunk did not stop to think. Suddenly his sword was in his hand and he was crashing through the grass.

He burst out roaring and cursing, only to jerk to a sudden halt at the sight of the boy beside the campfire. “You!” He lowered the sword. “What are you doing here?”

“Cooking a fish,” said the bald boy. “Do you want some?”

“I meant, how did you *get* here? Did you steal a horse?”

“I rode in the back of a cart, with a man who was bringing some lambs to the castle for my lord of Ashford’s table.”

“Well, you’d best see if he’s gone yet, or find another cart. I won’t have you here.”

“You can’t make me go,” the boy said, impertinent. “I’d had enough of that inn.”

“I’ll have no more insolence from you,” Dunk warned. “I should throw you over my horse right now and take you home.”

“You’d need to ride all the way to King’s Landing,” said the boy. “You’d miss the tourney.”

*King's Landing.* For a moment Dunk wondered if he was being mocked, but the boy had no way of knowing that he had been born in King's Landing as well. *Another wretch from Flea Bottom, like as not, and who can blame him for wanting out of that place?*

He felt foolish standing there with sword in hand over an eight-year-old orphan. He sheathed it, glowering so the boy would see that he would suffer no nonsense. *I ought to give him a good beating at the least,* he thought, but the child looked so pitiful he could not bring himself to hit him. He glanced around the camp. The fire was burning merrily within a neat circle of rocks. The horses had been brushed, and clothes were hanging from the elm, drying above the flames. "What are those doing there?"



“I washed them,” the boy said. “And I groomed the horses, made the fire, and caught this fish. I would have raised your pavilion, but I couldn’t find one.”

“There’s my pavilion.” Dunk swept a hand above his head, at the branches of the tall elm that loomed above them.

“That’s a tree,” the boy said, unimpressed.

“It’s all the pavilion a true knight needs. I would sooner sleep under the stars than in some smoky tent.”

“What if it rains?”

“The tree will shelter me.”

“Trees leak.”

Dunk laughed. “So they do. Well, if truth be told, I lack the coin for a pavilion. And you’d best turn that fish, or it will be burned on the bottom and raw on the top. You’d never make a kitchen boy.”

“I would if I wanted,” the boy said, but he turned the fish.

“What happened to your hair?” Dunk asked of him.

“The maesters shaved it off.” Suddenly self-conscious, the boy pulled up the hood of his dark brown cloak, covering his head.



Dunk had heard that they did that sometimes, to treat lice or rootworms or certain sicknesses. “Are you ill?”

“No,” said the boy. “What’s your name?”

“Dunk,” he said.

The wretched boy laughed aloud, as if that was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. “*Dunk?*” he said. “Ser Dunk? That’s no name for a knight. Is it short for Duncan?”

Was it? The old man had called him just *Dunk* for as long as he could recall, and he did not remember much of his life before. “Duncan, yes,” he said. “Ser Duncan of...” Dunk had no other name, nor any house; Ser Arlan had found him living wild in the stews and alleys of Flea Bottom. He had never known his father or mother. What was he to say? “Ser Duncan of Flea Bottom” did not sound very knightly. He could take Pennytree, but what if they asked him where it was? Dunk had never been to Pennytree, nor had the old man talked much about it. He frowned for a moment, then blurted out, “Ser Duncan the Tall.” He *was* tall, no one could dispute that, and it sounded puissant.

Though the little sneak did not seem to think so. “I have never heard of any Ser Duncan the Tall.”

“Do you know every knight in the Seven Kingdoms, then?”

The boy looked at him boldly. “The good ones.”

“I’m as good as any. After the tourney, they’ll all know that. Do *you* have a name, thief?”

The boy hesitated. “Egg,” he said.

Dunk did not laugh. *His head does look like an egg. Small boys can be cruel, and grown men as well.* “Egg,” he said, “I should beat you bloody and send you on your way, but the truth is, I have no pavilion and I have no squire either. If you’ll swear to do as you’re told, I’ll let you serve me for the tourney. After that, well, we’ll see. If I decide you’re worth your keep, you’ll have clothes on your back and food in your belly. The clothes might be roughspun and the food salt beef and salt fish, and maybe some venison from time to time where there are no foresters about, but you won’t go hungry. And I promise not to beat you except when you deserve it.”

Egg smiled. “Yes, my lord.”

“Ser,” Dunk corrected. “I am only a hedge knight.” He wondered if the old man was looking down on him. *I will teach him the arts of battle, the same as you taught me, ser. He seems a likely lad, might be one day he’ll make a knight.*

The fish was still a little raw on the inside when they ate it, and the boy had not removed all the bones, but it still tasted a world better than hard salt beef.

Egg soon fell asleep beside the dying fire. Dunk lay on his back nearby, his big hands behind his head, gazing up at the night sky. He

could hear distant music from the tourney grounds half a mile away. The stars were everywhere, thousands and thousands of them. One fell as he was watching, a bright green streak that flashed across the black, then was gone.

*A falling star brings luck to him who sees it, Dunk thought. But the rest of them are all in their pavilions by now, staring up at silk instead of sky. So the luck is mine alone.*

In the morning he woke to the sound of a cock crowing. Egg was still there, curled up beneath the old man's second-best cloak. *Well, the boy did not run off during the night, that's a start.* He prodded him awake with his foot. "Up. There's work to do." The boy rose quick enough, rubbing his eyes. "Help me saddle Sweetfoot," Dunk told him.

"What about breakfast?"

"There's salt beef. *After* we're done."

"I'd sooner eat the horse," Egg said. "Ser."

"You'll eat my fist if you don't do as you're told. Get the brushes. They're in the saddle sack. Yes, that one."

Together they brushed out the palfrey's sorrel coat, hefted Ser Arlan's best saddle over her back, and cinched it tight. Egg was a good worker once he put his mind to it, Dunk saw.

"I expect I'll be gone most of the day," he told the boy as he mounted. "You're to stay here and put the camp in order. Make sure no *other* thieves come nosing about."

"Can I have a sword to run them off with?" Egg asked. He had blue eyes, Dunk saw, very dark, almost purple. His bald head made them seem huge, somehow.

"No," said Dunk. "A knife's enough. And you had best be here when I come back, do you hear me? Rob me and run off, and I'll hunt you down, I swear I will. With dogs."

"You don't have any dogs," Egg pointed out.

"I'll get some," said Dunk. "Just for you." He turned Sweetfoot's head toward the meadow and moved off at a brisk trot, hoping the threat would be enough to keep the boy honest. Save for the clothes on his back, the armor in his sack, and the horse beneath him, everything Dunk

owned in the world was back at that camp. *I am a great fool to trust the boy so far, but it is no more than the old man did for me, he reflected. The Mother must have sent him to me so that I could pay my debt.*



As he crossed the field, he heard the ring of hammers from the riverside, where carpenters were nailing together jousting barriers and raising a lofty viewing stand. A few new pavilions were going up as well, while the knights who had come earlier slept off last night's revels or sat to break their fasts. Dunk could smell woodsmoke, and bacon as well.

To the north of the meadow flowed the river Cockleswent, a vassal stream to the mighty Mander. Beyond the shallow ford lay town and castle. Dunk had seen many a market town during his journeys with the old man. This was prettier than most; the whitewashed houses with their thatched roofs had an inviting aspect to them. When he was smaller, he used to wonder what it would be like to live in such a place; to sleep every night with a roof over your head and wake every morning with the same walls wrapped around you. *It may be that soon I'll know. Aye, and Egg too.* It could happen. Stranger things happened every day.

Ashford Castle was a stone structure built in the shape of a triangle, with round towers rising thirty feet tall at each point and thick, crenellated walls running between. Orange banners flew from its battlements, displaying the white sun-and-chevron sigil of its lord. Men-at-arms in orange-and-white livery stood outside the gates with halberds, watching people come and go, seemingly more intent on joking with a pretty milkmaid than in keeping anyone out. Dunk reined up in front of the short, bearded man he took for their captain and asked for the master of the games.

“It’s Plummer you want, he’s steward here. I’ll show you.”

Inside the yard, a stableboy took Sweetfoot for him. Dunk slung Ser Arlan’s battered shield over a shoulder and followed the guards captain back of the stables to a turret built into an angle of the curtain wall. Steep stone steps led up to the wallwalk. “Come to enter your master’s name for the lists?” the captain asked, as they climbed.

“It’s my own name I’ll be putting in.”

“Is it now?” Was the man smirking? Dunk was not certain. “That door there. I’ll leave you to it and get back to my post.”

When Dunk pushed open the door, the steward was sitting at a trestle table, scratching on a piece of parchment with a quill. He had thinning grey hair and a narrow, pinched face. “Yes?” he said, looking up. “What do you want, man?”

Dunk pulled shut the door. “Are you Plummer the steward? I came for the tourney. To enter the lists.”

Plummer pursed his lips. “My lord’s tourney is a contest for knights. Are you a knight?”

He nodded, wondering if his ears were red.

“A knight with a name, mayhaps?”

“Dunk.” Why had he said *that*? “Ser Duncan. The Tall.”

“And where might you be from, Ser Duncan the Tall?”

“Everyplace. I was squire to Ser Arlan of Pennytree since I was five or six. This is his shield.” He showed it to the steward. “He was coming to the tourney, but he caught a chill and died, so I came in his stead. He knighted me before he passed, with his own sword.” Dunk drew the longsword and laid it on the scarred wooden table between them.

The master of the lists gave the blade no more than a glance. “A sword it is, for a certainty. I have never heard of this Arlan of Pennytree, however. You were his squire, you say?”

“He always said he meant for me to be a knight, as he was. When he was dying he called for his longsword and bade me kneel. He touched me once on my right shoulder and once on my left, and said some words, and when I got up he said I was a knight.”

“Hmpf.” The man Plummer rubbed his nose. “Any knight can make a knight, it is true, though it is more customary to stand a vigil and be anointed by a septon before taking your vows. Were there any witnesses to your dubbing?”

“Only a robin, up in a thorn tree. I heard it as the old man was saying the words. He charged me to be a good knight and true, to obey the seven gods, defend the weak and innocent, serve my lord faithfully, and defend the realm with all my might, and I swore that I would.”

“No doubt.” Plummer did not deign to call him *ser*; Dunk could not help but notice. “I shall need to consult with Lord Ashford. Will you or your late master be known to any of the good knights here assembled?”

Dunk thought a moment. “There was a pavilion flying the banner of House Dondarrion? The black, with purple lightning?”

“That would be Ser Manfred, of that house.”

“Ser Arlan served his lord father in Dorne, three years past. Ser Manfred might remember me.”

“I would advise you to speak to him. If he will vouch for you, bring him here with you on the morrow, at this same time.”

“As you say, m’lord.” He started for the door.

“Ser Duncan,” the steward called after him.

Dunk turned back.

“You are aware,” the man said, “that those vanquished in tourney forfeit their arms, armor, and horse to the victors, and must needs ransom them back?”

“I know.”

“And do you have the coin to pay such ransom?”

Now he knew his ears were red. “I won’t have need of coin,” he said, praying it was true. *All I need is one victory. If I win my first tilt, I’ll have the loser’s armor and horse, or his gold, and I can stand a loss myself.*



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