## Chapter 1

The rain came down in a solid wall, so heavy the sea had vanished behind it. There was only the twisting path up to the keep and, beyond that, nothing but emptiness and the hammering storm. Dunk's cloak—good enough for summer drizzle—had long since surrendered; at first he'd kept tugging the hood and hunching his shoulders as if his own sheer size could shield him from the cold, but he'd given that up hours ago.

"Have you knocked yet, ser?" Egg called from his saddle on Chestnut. He had to shout to cut through the roaring rain, voice bright and shrill, and he looked like a sad, drenched sparrow. "Knock louder, please!"

*I surely couldn't figure that out without you*, Dunk thought sourly, but he guided Thunder right up to the massive gates and knocked once more.

No answer came for a long while. He was already turning, steeling himself to ride on and hunt for some village or inn, although there weren't many—Egg had told him that the Stormlanders only built castles, and the nearest port was at least a week's ride away.

Then, a rough voice bellowed from above.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

Dunk shielded his eyes, trying to make out the watch-tower. But the rain sluiced straight into them and up his nose for good measure. He snorted, clearing his sinuses, and managed between one nostril and the next:

"Ser Duncan the Tall and his squire," *Aegon Targaryen*, he almost slipped, but his tongue didn't betray him. "Egg."

"By invitation," Egg whispered helpfully from his horse.

"By invitation from Lord Lyonel Baratheon."

"Received during the tournament…"

"Quiet, Egg."

Movement overhead. Then, suspicious:

"Lord Lyonel received no letter of warning from you."

"I told you we should've written!" Egg hissed.

"Shut it already!"

Dunk didn't want to write a letter—first, because he couldn't, and second, because asking Egg would only earn him mockery, and the boy would have started respecting him a little less. And one couldn't simply smack a royal grandson. Dunk had barely survived the last time.

Besides, none of what Dunk wanted to say to Lyonel fit neatly onto parchment. Some things had to be said face-to-face.

"The matter was urgent," Dunk answered the guard, and felt his face burn. He was still a terrible liar, and their empty bellies hardly seemed grave enough to warrant these flowery speeches.

To his relief the mighty gates clanked and groaned. The huge leaves swung inward.

"We have orders to admit you at any hour," a younger voice said. In the opening stood a wet, disgruntled man in half-plate and glowered at Dunk sullenly. "Enter. We'll inform the lord."

* * *

Thunder and Chestnut were led to the stables while Dunk and Egg were escorted straight across the yard of Storm's End and into a lonely tower that looked like a raised fist. They were left in the throne room, drenched so thoroughly the water was pooling under them on the floor. Water squelched in their boots with every step; their cloaks could have been wrung out like dishcloths. Egg recovered first—he shrugged off his own cape, stripped Dunk's from his back, and handed both to the servants. The puddle on the floor didn't stop growing, though.

Dunk stood near a brazier, rubbing his frozen hands together awkwardly. The castle felt eerily empty for how huge it was, nothing like Ashford.

"Look, ser!" Egg pointed. "The throne of the Storm Kings!"

Dunk turned his head. Sure enough, where the lord of the keep should hear petitioners, a gilded wooden throne rose on a dais, bristling with antlers. Stags jumped at him from tapestries, banners, rich carpets—*Even the silver plates*, Dunk noticed, when servants brought a tray of hasty refreshments: slices of juicy duck, crusty bread, a jug of milk, and two pots of soft cheese that spread like butter.

"Oh, thank you!" Dunk fell on the food so greedily the words came out with crumbs. "Thank you, may the Seven bless you."

Even this simple supper—clearly thrown together from scraps off the high table—felt three times richer than everything he and Egg had eaten on the road. He sucked grease from his finger and reached for more duck, but Egg was already aiming for the same piece; Dunk left it for the boy and took another crust instead.

They were so absorbed that the familiar rolling laugh nearly made Dunk choke on his milk.

"By the Seven, Ser Duncan! Have you sprouted some extra inches?"

Dunk thumped his mug down—dishes rattled on the tray—and spun, wiping milk from his upper lip. Lyonel strode toward him light and lively, as though it weren't the hour of the owl and unannounced guests hadn't dragged him from bed. His magnificent black mantle, embroidered with golden thread, showed stags locking antlers. A nightshirt peeked at the collar. But the main thing was the smile. Dunk's heart, which had sunk to his boots, slowly started to thaw back to life again.

"Lord Lyonel!" Warmth flooded his chest, followed at once by a pang of sorrow. The last time they'd met, Prince Baelor had been waiting for his funeral pyre. "I doubt it, m'lord. Still the same gangly fool…"

Lyonel reached him, cupped Dunk's face in both hands, and hauled him down to plant loud kisses on both cheeks. Stunned, Dunk failed to come up with where to put his greasy hands, so he froze like a post.

"I'm no ‘m'lord' to you, Ser Duncan." Lyonel winked and slapped his cheek playfully. His hands were dry and warm. "Just Lyonel. Or has the cold frozen not just your arse but your wits as well?"

He laughed again, a loud and raucous sound, and Dunk finally understood why men called him the Laughing Storm. That booming mirth filled the throne room like a damn thunderclap.

"And hello to you too, lad." Lyonel didn't bother to kiss Egg, instead slinging an arm over Dunk's shoulder. His other fist he planted on his own hip. "Is this what you call a *dinner*? Utter shite. Iola! Escort Ser Duncan and his squire to their chambers. See they have dry clothes, hot food, and some goddamn wine."

He didn't even ask why they had come. Dunk startled—he hadn't explained, hadn't thanked properly. He wiped his fingers on his soaked breeches, then caught Lyonel's shoulder in return. They braced against each other like two trees, arms tangled like branches.

"M'lord… I mean, Lyonel. A moment, if you will."

His voice caught. So much time had passed—perhaps such familiarity was out of place now? But Lyonel stepped closer, gaze intense yet inviting.

"Ser Duncan?" Egg called from halfway across the hall; he had already followed the maid while Dunk stood there like an idiot, birthing words.

Well, Dunk wasn't much for talking. But he owed the lord at least *something*.

"You go on, Egg. I'll catch up." Then, Dunk turned back and gave the shoulder under his hand a light shake before blurting out, "Thank you. For your kindness. For the roof over our heads. I swear your hospitality will not be forgotten."

Lyonel didn't answer right away. Instead he smiled—that queer smile where he lingered on the reply and bit his lower lip. His look made Dunk uneasy. It was still welcoming, even soft, but there was such a gleam in his eyes—a feverish spark Dunk had often seen in those who aimed to best him. Or break him—for them, it was usually the same thing.

"Don't be a bloody idiot," Lyonel said, low and intimate. He kept one arm draped over Dunk and thumped his chest with the other. "You're a good man, ser Duncan. We've been through some right hell together. For that, you'll always have a place in my halls—plus a meal and a warm bed whenever you need them."

A dying coal popped in the brazier like a log on a funeral pyre. Dunk's eyes stung without warning. He turned away fast, but it was too late; Lyonel tensed, the smile vanishing.

"What is it, ser Duncan?"

Dunk blinked hard and shook his head, terrified that uttering even a single word would unleash shameful tears. And what will it make Dunk? Not only a lunk but also a whiner?

"Come on, friend. Spit it out." The hand on his shoulder squeezed encouragingly.

In the face of such kindness, nothing remained but the truth.

"I… don't know what to say, Lyonel. You've always been too good to me." Somehow Dunk kept the tears back. So at least some grit remained in him, then. "I don't know what I did to deserve it. Honestly, sometimes I don't even know what I did to deserve anything at all."

Suppers, for example.

Or sunrises.

Or Egg.

Lyonel's palm stilled on his chest. He, too, seemed to understand: in the walls of his family's stronghold, the ghost of Ashford now lurked. Who else could let it in but Ser Duncan the Tall? Now, shadows followed him everywhere.

"That's sobriety talking, my friend," the lord said quietly at last. "No wine in your veins, no heat in your blood—and an empty belly besides."

He patted Dunk's doublet again, each word or two followed by another tap—his touch fond and comforting.

"You'll see, my good ser: once you've soaked in a hot bath and changed into dry clothes, the world will look brighter. And if it doesn't…" Another smile flashed in his salt-and-pepper beard, and for a second, he looked oddly wistful. "Well, we have many nights ahead. Nights we can talk until dawn and, I hope, lighten whatever burdens your heart."

This time there was no smirk, no strange spark in his eyes, yet Dunk still felt heat flood his face. He thanked the Seven that the throne room was dim. He'd grown strangely used to Lyonel's hands on him—before, he hadn't really noticed, as he hadn't thought much of it. But now he began to take notice, and those hands had stayed on him for a good minute, even though Dunk was soaked and cold to the touch–

"You're right," Dunk sniffed to swallow the wetness and nodded firmly. "A bath'll be good. For both of us—Egg's half-frozen too. So I'd best catch up with him…"

"Magnificent!" Lyonel shrugged Dunk's hand off his own shoulder and cheerfully nudged him toward the doors. "I'll come by once you're done. I want to hear all about your good deeds—there's gotta be a bunch, with how much you moped about, right? We'll drink, dance, stuff our faces, and talk until dawn—or until we collapse."

"We'll wake Egg."

Lyonel waved that away with a laugh.

"Don't fret, ser. Your boy will sleep like a log."

* * *

The guest chamber had everything: a massive canopied bed, a roaring fire, an armor stand, a silver tray loaded with food, a dresser with a neat stack of folded cloth on top—Dunk recognised the black-and-gold stag pattern immediately—and even a wooden tub full of steaming water. Drifting on the surface were dried purple flowerheads of some kind.

One thing was missing, though.

"Sorry," he said to Iola as she tipped yet another bucket in. "Where's Egg? My squire."

"In his own chambers, ser."

So they were sleeping apart. There was no real danger in it: to everyone in Storm's End, the boy was still just a lowborn stable-lad; no one would bother him. Still, after so many nights spent back-to-back under the trees, Dunk suddenly felt profoundly homesick.

And—embarrassingly—he felt something else.

He shouldn't read too much into everything. But this past year had changed him. He started noticing things. Something had transpired that was now making him think about Lord Baratheon and those odd, lingering looks—made him turn the invitation to Storm's End over and over in his head, wondering what could have happened if he'd said yes.

No one else touched him so much. Only Lord Baratheon. On the road Egg was always climbing him like a squirrel—riding on his back, burrowing under his cloak at night to steal warmth. That was normal with children. Dunk was tall, Egg was nimble; the boy treated him like a moving tree.

Lyonel, though… Lyonel made Dunk uncomfortably aware that no one had really *wanted* to lay hands on him. Certainly not in that warm, affectionate way.

*Fuck*. Back in Ashford, he should have spent a penny on a whore and put the whole question to rest. This kind of hunger had a way of scrambling a man's thoughts—instead of women, he started thinking about– *other* things. Sure, after Ashford there'd been chances to slip into a brothel, but with Egg trailing him like a shadow, Dunk had been too ashamed.

Angry at himself, he yanked his shirt over his head and dropped it, then kicked off his breeches and smallclothes. He thought Iola had left, but she reappeared silently and gathered up every damp piece.

"Seven hells!" Dunk snatched a towel and covered himself. It felt almost like witchcraft—as though the maid had read every filthy thought in his head and now mocked him for it.

Iola gave him the blank stare of a dead fish.

"I'll take these to be washed and dried, ser."

"What am I supposed to wear then?"

She nodded past his shoulder.

"On the dresser."

…Ah. So that was a pile of garments—waiting for him.

"Will it even fit me?"

Iola shrugged one shoulder.

"It should."

She shut the door. Dunk had the distinct impression she disliked him.

Well. At least now he could bathe in peace.

He stepped into the tub—one foot, then the other—and sank down. After the cold driving rain the heat was almost painful. The tub was too small for him, so he couldn't stretch his legs, only sit with knees bent. He scraped at his chest, feeling weeks of road-dirt roll under his blunt nails. He and Egg washed every day the way Ser Arlan had taught, but a proper hot bath with a proper scrubbing-vine and fragrant rinse-water? That was rare luxury.

Three little glass vials stood ready atop the edge of the tub, each stoppered with a pretty glass bead. Dunk pulled one open and sniffed. Nettles, maybe? The other two aromas were unfamiliar.

He tried them one after another, then held both under his nose at once, hoping for inspiration.

That was when the door banged open.

Startled, Dunk dropped a vial. It floated a second, mouth-up, then glugged the water and sank. He was too busy closing another one to save it.

Lyonel kicked the door shut behind him. In each hand he held a dark-glass bottle.

"Well fuck me, am I early? Ah—what's a bath without decent wine!"

"Lyonel!" Dunk raised his voice, almost forgetting he was addressing a lord; his outrage overrode manners. "I haven't even finished yet!"

"Piss on that." Lyonel set both bottles on the dresser beside the clothes and plucked two goblets from a glazed cabinet. "I saw the maester fingering the hole between your ribs. Trust me, your arse isn't going to frighten me."

"You called him a witch," Dunk remembered. Despite his irritation he accepted the offered wine as soon as Lyonel filled the cup.

"Exactly! He thought you were a corpse in making. And yet—here we are." Lyonel filled his own goblet and raised it with mock ceremony. "To seeing you hale and disgustingly healthy, my friend. And I swear you've grown, you bastard."

He drank; Dunk followed his suit. Gods, the wine was good—sweet-edged, thick on the tongue, layered. The kind Ser Arlan said only high tables opened, the kind laid down for decades while young wines were sold off to keep the barrels turning.

Over his goblet, Lyonel squinted.

"How're the wounds, by the by?"

Was he curious about the scars? Perhaps the water was too hot—the heat felt twice as fierce now.

Still, showing battle-marks wasn't shameful. Men bragged about them all the time, and until the tourney Dunk had hardly had any worth showing.

"Healed clean." He set the goblet on the tub-edge, lifted his arm, and tugged the skin away from his armpit. Between his nipple and his rib lay a thick, ridged mark where the lance had punched through. Every time he saw it he thought of Prince Baelor. Did other men remember the dead when they boasted of scars? Or did they boast precisely because they wanted to believe a better story? "Your maester did good work, m'lord. Cleaned it properly. I'd still be limping like a three-legged dog without him."

Lyonel went still. Even the goblet in his hand froze mid-air. The silence was so unlike him that Dunk hurried on:

"I… I mean… I never properly thanked you. For standing with me at the trial. For sending the maester. For the invitation." Dunk leaned forward in the water, which swirled around his sides. Then, came the strong scent of flowers. "Truly, Lyonel. Thank you."

That hit the mark at last. Lyonel's shoulders lowered slightly; he made a lazy, dismissive gesture with the cup.

"You know me, Ser Duncan. I'd never miss a party this good." He drank again, then perched on the edge of the bed. His bed, technically. His castle. His sheets that Dunk would sleep in tonight. *Stop that*, Dunk told himself irritably. "Like I said before—you're a decent man, ser. Standing with you means standing for the right thing."

"I hope so." Dunk took the goblet, swirled the wine the way he'd seen lords do. "To staying on the same side, whatever trials the gods throw at us next."

He raised the cup, and Lyonel barked a laugh.

"Oh, don't make me weep, you ox—" Dunk thought he'd said something stupid, but his friend leaned forward and clinked their goblets together. "To fewer trials, and far more wine, feasts, and fucking!"

"Aye!" Dunk laughed too; he just couldn't help it, the man's mirth was infectious. "To wine, feasts, and… fucking!"

They drained the cups, even though feasts rarely included Dunk; strong drink he could take or leave; and the last thing… well, that remained a mystery to him.

"How do you like your chambers?" Lyonel asked, picking at the food tray now. "They've been waiting for you a long while."

"I thought Egg and I would share."

"Gods, no. Let the lad sleep alone. He'll only interrupt decent conversation."

*Conversation, is it*? Dunk almost asked. He swallowed the question. No, no—he was an idiot who imagined things. To keep from blurting something stupid he started soaping his hair and face; the loud splashing bought him a few moments' quiet.

When his legs had carried him into Storm's End, he hadn't accounted for one thing: he had no bloody idea how to behave in a situation like this. Say the wrong thing and Lyonel might turn cold, call it slander, and throw him and Egg out. Maybe he was supposed to accept everything silently whether he liked it or not. Or maybe there'd never been any strange looks at all. Who the hell would want him, anyway?

Maybe he should try something with Iola. Fuck the thoughts out of his head, old remedy. She was small, fair, didn't look at him—but approaching her wouldn't cost him a friend and a roof over their heads.

So half of him desperately wanted clarity, and the other half was despising how powerless he felt.

"I'm finished," he warned, gripping the tub-edges, ready to stand.

…Or maybe not *entirely* powerless.

He could test it. See whether Lyonel would look.

The scars and his height always drew eyes, but there were other places fewer men dared glance. Pushing up, Dunk rose with as much dignity as a naked man in a too-small tub could manage. He grabbed the crumpled towel, started drying himself—and flicked a glance sideways.

*Seven hells.*

Lyonel was *looking*. Not in the sleazy way Dunk had dreaded, but with open, almost startled wonder. His gaze lingered unmistakably lower than the scar from the lance, and there were definitely no scars there, and—Dunk jerked his burning face away, stepping onto the rug and wrapping the towel around his waist.

"Always wanted to see you in my colours, by the way," Lyonel remarked as Dunk reached the dresser.

Dunk lifted the top garment. A long, wide-shouldered robe, black, impossibly fine fabric. Simpler patterns than Lyonel's own, yellow thread instead of gold, but still the most extravagant thing anyone had ever offered to put on his body.

A cold shiver traced down his spine.

"Lyonel, this is—" He dropped it like it burned. "This is too much."

"Don't want it?" Lyonel didn't even blink. "I'll have another made. In the colours of your sigil, perhaps—sunset sky and green leaves, same as your shield."

Somehow that felt worse. Dunk wiped his damp brow. Started panicking. He was a knight, wasn't he? Yet he felt like a wench sprinkled with rose petals and gifted a pretty gown. He didn't even smell of horse anymore; instead, it was something rich and pleasant. A lady's underskirt should smell that way, not Ser Duncan the Tall!

"No. No, m'lord, I didn't mean—" He sucked in a shaky breath. "Your colours are… beautiful. The garment's beautiful. Far too fine for a brute like me. It's an honour, truly, but listen, all this—"

"You've convinced yourself that ‘a brute like you' doesn't deserve nice things? Even clothes?" Lyonel had set his cup down and risen from the bed, but Dunk failed to notice—they just suddenly got close again, and the lord was studying his face with an expression Dunk could only call guarded. "You tell yourself you are too coarse, too rough. This, ser Duncan, is utter horseshit. You are a fucking marvel, my friend. And yes, you can still cave a man's skull in with one hand—I fail to see the contradiction in it."

His stare was terrifying. Because it seemed like Lyonel knew everything, but chose to say nothing. Just flattery upon flattery, oiling the wheels, waiting for when Dunk will finally bite.

Anger flared again.

"Are you trying to buy me?" Dunk blurted. Ser Arlan had been right—Dunk was too stupid for lordly half-truths. "Barging in while I bathe, now this robe… like you want something! Lyonel, I'm no lord—I'm just a hedge knight. I need it plain. Is your kindness going to cost me something? And if it is… have you already decided **what**?"

Lyonel actually recoiled, even though half a step. Good. His face changed, the same shift Dunk had seen in the tent when the lord thought he'd been sent a killer. Surprise, realisation, a flash of shame. Then, Lyonel dropped his head and laughed, but this laugh served only to hide his embarrassment.

"Gods, Ser Duncan. You're… not entirely wrong." He rubbed his eyes. Those few moments of being right were the most frightening of Dunk's life. "Of course it looks like… well. It's no wonder you're startled."

Lyonel bit his lip the way he did when he was deeply in thought, then planted both hands on his hips.

"Let me confess something," he said, glancing sidelong. "I planned to spend the whole night asking about your life after the trial. Tomorrow I'd take you hunting, show

you the country, parade you round the keep. Those arms of yours would easily lift my great-great-grandsire's sword. Legendary blade, I should say. A treasure."

He reached out and grazed Dunk's collarbone with his knuckles—not the old careless touch, but deliberate. It wasn't unpleasant, Dunk realised. Despite everything, it felt… warm.

"You'd feast like a king, sleep on the softest bed, wear the best silks. Because—fuck, because I can give you all that. This is the life that I see for you. Understood? That's what I want for you."

Dunk closed his eyes for a second. There it was. He'd embarrassed himself again. His first real ally, ready to wrap a hedge knight in royal comfort—and Dunk suspected the worst.

"Understood," he rasped. What else was there to say?

"Later… I might have suggested *something else.* After all, am I not trying to court you, ser? But the choice stays yours. I swear it."

Dunk opened his eyes.

"…What?"

Lyonel's words sounded sure, but he seemed to be visibly hesitant. Which was suspicious in itself. His gaze slid away, as if searching the floor; found nothing.

"You're not a fool. Far from it." His voice dropped, soft and dark, sending shivers down Dunk's spine. "So you already knew, didn't you?"

The touch at the collarbone shifted. Lyonel turned his hand, laid it flat. Rough fingertips drifted down Dunk's chest—light at first, ticklish, then bolder, firmer, settling into a slow, deliberate rhythm.

As if Lyonel was caressing him.

"Seven fuck me bloody," Dunk almost moaned, and it felt as if a boulder rolled off his shoulders. Relief hit like fever-sweat and shivers at once; even his breathing became less laboured. He'd thought uncertainty was safer for a hedge knight. How stupid of him! Now everything was clearer, more honest, more direct—and he no longer felt like an absolute idiot. "I thought I'd lost my mind imagining something so mad!"

"No, no, you're perfectly sane." Lyonel chuckled; his other hand covered Dunk's forearm and squeezed, comforting. He looked relieved too. *Probably been circling the subject just as long*, Dunk realised. "I tried to make my intentions plain. Trouble with plain is that people can still miss it."

"Yeah." Dunk gave a shaky laugh. So that was it. He got his answer. Yet here he stood in nothing but a towel, fists clenched, heart slamming against the spot Lyonel

was still stroking. Every fantasy he'd ever had flew out of his head because—this wasn't fantasy. In real life Lyonel was clever and experienced, and Dunk was… clumsy, ignorant, and stupid.

*Now what*?

More gooseflesh rippled along Dunk's spine when Lyonel's palm slid from collarbone to shoulder. Now the man was half-embracing Dunk, the way men hold partners in a dance, fingers kneading the tense rope of muscle near his neck.

"I'm noticing something." White teeth flashed in Lyonel's salt-and-pepper beard. "I touch you—and you don't stop me."

*Should I?* Dunk flushed crimson, looked away.

"Something happened on the road," he admitted. "Afterward I kept thinking about… about you."

"Did you, now?"

Lyonel stepped closer until his breath brushed Dunk's chin, his throat. Heat rolled off him the way it had when they'd danced in the tent. Only now they were alone, Dunk's chest was heaving, and Lyonel's fingers had already migrated from neck to nape.

"I have a new proposal," the lord rumbled, low enough to make Dunk's stomach flip. "We can feast and talk all night and dress you all pretty. But first—how do you feel about a really thorough fuck?"

"*Fucking hell*," Dunk blurted. He had a feeling he'd bitten off far more than he could chew.

And then, he couldn't talk. Lord Lyonel crashed into his mouth like a starving man descending onto a roast duck. There was even a growl—or a moan edged with fury—as though Dunk had personally offended him. Amid the scrape of beard and the hungry pressure, something soft and clever flicked against Dunk's lips. A tongue?

And so they were kissing.

Dunk had kissed before, but now felt like he hadn't. All he could hear was his own hammering heart. Slowly he remembered he could tilt his head, grip the man's hips—

Lyonel broke away with a wet sound. Still half-growling:

"Stupid beautiful head of yours—" He tugged Dunk down by the back of his neck.

This time Dunk knew what to do. He sealed their mouths together, brushed with his own tongue, put his whole body into it—wrapping both arms around Lyonel,

squeezing hard. Lyonel melted against his chest with a hungry noise. His hands roamed Dunk's bare back, and he groaned fiercely into Dunk's mouth.

The second time Lyonel shoved him it was hard enough that Dunk had to take a stumbling step. He looked up, half-alarmed.

"Is it… all right?"

"Mother's fat tits—yes, you cunt!" Lyonel peeled out of his own mantle so fast Dunk fell first into ice, then straight back into fire. "I've been dreaming about you for months. I'm not letting a single second go to waste now. Sit down."

A strong hand clamped the back of Dunk's neck and pushed downward. He obeyed, sinking onto the bed.

"You've been… dreaming?" He repeated, dumbstruck. Meanwhile, Lyonel was already yanking his shirt off, left in nothing but smallclothes. Silver threaded the thick pelt across his chest too.

"Yes, and you were *too busy to notice*." Without any preamble Lyonel dropped to his knees between Dunk's spread thighs. "For that, you're going to moan loud enough to crack the bloody windows."

Dunk never got the chance to panic. Lyonel jerked the knot on his towel, and it fell apart around his thighs. Suddenly Dunk was staring at his own cock and Lyonel's face in the same impossible nearness.

"Fucking mag-*nificent*," Lyonel whispered—and gods have mercy. Dunk's fists crushed the coverlet as the curly head bowed, blocking the view, and a wet, prickly drag licked straight up his shaft. "Even here you're a bloody giant…"

Something shameless in Dunk's chest broke loose. Thoughts would not stay in his skull. Everything blurred together: Lyonel's hands spreading across his thighs, his face nuzzling along the length before pressing into the thick hair at his groin, the loud, hungry inhale as though the man had waited a thousand years for exactly that scent.

"What are you—how—" Whatever Lyonel was doing, Dunk could only pray he'd do it again. He tried, but his mouth stopped working; words were gone, breath was gone.

"What surprises you?" The heat vanished as Lyonel pulled back; clever fingers wrapped around him and—*gods*—began to stroke, slow and sure. It felt nothing like— on his own— "Remember this: every single person who sees you wonders the same thing. ‘Is he that huge down there?' And fuck me sideways, Ser Duncan, you are. Managing this monster must be half the fun…"

A hot bolt of shame flared—he'd never thought of himself that way; if he knew, he'd have hidden it forever—

"I'm s-sorry," Dunk almost bleated. But who was he fooling? He wanted Lyonel's hands on him, wanted that face rubbing against him, wanted more. "I'm sorry I'm… I…"

"Are you out of your mind, Ser Duncan?" Lyonel glanced up, but Dunk couldn't hold the look longer than a heartbeat; his eyes slid helplessly to the moving hand. "You think you're too much for me? Horseshit. My mouth is better than any whore's in the Stormlands. This is a gift from the gods—I just need to get the hang of it…"

Lyonel leaned in and kissed the tip—soft, ticklish tongue sliding underneath. Then his lips slid down the shaft and Dunk was suddenly surrounded by warm, wet, impossible tightness. It swallowed him, claimed him; a helpless, broken sound tore out of his throat. It was almost like he'd imagined a woman might feel, except this was Lord Lyonel—brow furrowed in concentration, lashes lowered, jaw working as he took more, deeper, slower.

Dunk hit— *something*; Lyonel hummed, easing back, then repositioned himself more comfortable between Dunk's open thighs and slipped his mouth back with a wet glide. This time that *something* gave way and Dunk was sheathed in a soft, tight, scorching heat. His legs started trembling. He groaned, grabbing the handful of curls, but then panicked and moved his hand to grip Lyonel's shoulder instead. Lyonel held him inside—gods only knew how he fit in there at all—then began to move his head in earnest. The tight heat rode him, squeezing, and though Dunk almost stopped breathing so he wouldn't ruin anything, his hips bucked up on their own to meet that perfect mouth.

A familiar tension coiled low in his belly—far faster than he wanted—but on the other hand, he lasted much longer than he'd expected at all amidst all this madness.

"Gods," Dunk gasped, thighs clamping around Lyonel's head, one hand trying to shove at his shoulder. "Wait—don't—"

Lyonel batted him away, breathed the air in hard through his nose, and slammed himself down until his chin pressed tight into Dunk's ballsack and every last inch disappeared into searing depth.

He stilled, hands kneading Dunk's arse, but inside it was still somehow moving—rippling, working his cock. Dunk surrendered completely; the bowstring inside him snapped. His dick pulsed, spilling deep in that welcoming heat. Dunk made no sound beyond a strangled rasp. Hot flames were licking his belly, a sweet agony making him squirm.

As soon as it ebbed, he could breathe again—the sound of it ragged and noisy, like he'd run from King's Landing to the Spear on foot. Lyonel pulled off with a wet, throaty sound, then doubled over coughing. His forehead pressed against Dunk's hip. Without thinking, Dunk stroked the sweaty curls like he'd calm a winded horse.

"Mother's mercy…" Speech returned to him at last. He'd just been taken—by mouth— "That was… By the gods!"

"Yeah," Lyonel rasped, rising from his knees only to shove Dunk flat on his back. Dunk tumbled down without protest, and the man climbed astride his hips, grinning like a victor basking in his triumph. "I was told I fucked godlike."

He coughed once more into his fist, then loomed over Dunk, arms braced on either side. Heat rolled off him; sweat gleamed on his skin as if he'd spent an hour swinging his sword at the training grounds. He looked utterly pleased with himself. Could a man truly be this proud of his bedroom skills? Dunk must have stared too long, because Lyonel flashed a toothy smile, leaned down, and dragged his tongue in one slow, filthy stripe from Dunk's jaw to temple.

"Delicious," he murmured, then slapped Dunk's cheek lightly. Dunk jerked his head, but the hand stayed, cupping his jaw. "Did I suck your breath out of you, dear? You barely made a sound."

"Did I?.. I thought I'd wake the whole castle."

"Fuck the castle." Lyonel smirked and turned Dunk's face to the side. Dunk felt his lips and moustache brush along the edge of his jaw; teeth grazed the earlobe. "Don't get too comfortable, though. You owe me one."

He rolled his hips, grinding down his— ah, right. Dunk glanced into the space between their bodies. Lyonel was still in his smallclothes, but they tented obscenely and a small wet spot had bloomed on the linen. The sight stole Dunk's breath. He'd never cared what other men carried in their breeches before, but now, he wanted to touch Lyonel, to make him gasp and curse.

Lyonel was a wise man, since he simply took Dunk's hand and shoved it between his own legs. Dunk palmed him through the cloth; Lyonel gave a low, approving rumble.

"Tell me, darling," he said, closing his fingers around Dunk's and squeezing. Dunk squeezed back, and the lord above him blinked for a second, breathing rough, as if he'd forgotten his own question. "Have… Have you ever pleasured a man before?"

Blushing was pointless now, yet Dunk couldn't stop it.

"No, m'lord." He met Lyonel's eyes. "Apart from myself, but… Definitely not anyone else."

"Oh, an untouched knight?" Lyonel snorted, then paused some more—he was clearly struggling for both breath and words. "How… delightfully rare in these dark times."

He pushed himself up, sitting straight atop Dunk's stomach, and tossed his curls from his eyes. That was much better; Dunk now had both hands free if needed.

"Lucky for you, I'm the best teacher you could have found. Shall we begin with the basics?" Lyonel covered Dunk's palms where they rested on his lean hips and dragged them toward his groin. The smallclothes bunched against the touch. "Show me what those paws of yours can do besides holding a sword."

Dunk hated being in debt. With slightly trembling fingers he worked the tie at Lyonel's waistband, loosened the knot, and eased the linen down. The cock caught for a moment, then sprang free—thick, proud, swaying. Dunk drew a deep breath like a man about to dive, then closed his fist around it.

*Seven hells*, it was *hard*. And smooth. When he touched himself, he was always too focused on what his dick felt and didn't pay much attention to his hand. He stroked once, and the swollen head vanished into his fist, then reappeared, glistening with slick. The darkened shaft throbbed with need, so demanding and urgent.

Lyonel exhaled above him.

"Everything looks *tiny* in your huge fucking hand…"

Dunk glanced at his face, but Lyonel didn't look upset—quite the opposite; he was riveted, eyes glued to his cock. So Dunk tightened his grip and stroked full length.

"Better?" And he'd guessed right: Lyonel's jaw went slack, thick brows drawing together in an expression Dunk could only call *vulnerable*.

"Fucking *glorious*," Lyonel groaned, hips twitching forward to meet the stroke—and then they never stopped, grinding shallowly into Dunk's fist. "Mind you, your hands are quite rough, ser. Spit once, and you'll have me writhing in no time."

*True enough*—Dunk levered himself up on one elbow, loosening his grip, and glanced quickly over his calluses. He was used to them; others weren't. Hesitating only a moment, he sat fully upright and steadied Lyonel with his free arm so the man wouldn't tumble down. Lyonel seemed relieved: he dropped his forehead to Dunk's shoulder, wrapping both arms around him. Every breath he exhaled tickled down Dunk's chest.

Dunk rubbed his back—comfort or encouragement, he wasn't sure—then spat into his right palm. That was much better; his hand glided like silk. Lyonel's knees jerked and clamped around his sides; a low, purring sound rolled out of him.

"My sweet knight," Lyonel mumbled, mouthing lazily at Dunk's ear. "My boy. Such a *perfect boy.* Keep going."

No one had called Dunk "boy" since the summer he outgrew every doorway. Something shameful and sweet coiled low in his belly—yes, there were at least twenty years between them, he knew—but it also stocked his fire. This *boy* was about to give the Lord of Storm's End a ride the walls would remember.

Without effort Dunk lifted Lyonel higher, forcing him up onto his knees and pulling him close. Better leverage, wider stroke. Lyonel clutched Dunk's head to his chest as if it were the only thing keeping him upright and began to moan in earnest—beautiful, shameless sounds that shook not only the room, but Dunk as well—straight to the marrow.

Dunk panted, butting his forehead against Lyonel's sternum, and looked down to watch his fist fly over the swollen cock. His cheek scraped against coarse chest hair—and against something small, soft and perky. Acting on pure instinct, Dunk turned his head, found it with his lips, and suckled lightly.

Lyonel shuddered; a hand fisted in Dunk's hair.

"Well, well, Ser Duncan," he growled, sounding absurdly pleased. Dunk realized he latched onto his nipple. "Getting bold, are we?"

He didn't pull Dunk away, though. Instead he pressed him closer, and when Dunk closed his teeth around the areola, Lyonel moaned loud enough to rattle the halls. His hips rolled smooth and relentless, fucking Dunk's fist like he was chasing it.

Dunk sucked harder. Suddenly, Lyonel cried out, yanking him off by the hair—and then dove down like a hawk, tongue spearing into Dunk's mouth. Even through the kiss he was moaning; although it felt less like a kiss and more like being devoured. In Dunk's grip the cock pulsed and spit, spreading wetness all over his palm.

The tip slipped through his fingers and painted a stripe across Dunk's chest. He couldn't see most of it—Lyonel was in his face, claiming his mouth—but he felt every jerk, kept stroking through the last throes. Fuck it—he would do it till his arm fell off. Dunk always finished what he started.

Lyonel collapsed against him, breathing hard. His sloppy kisses had left Dunk's chin wet. Holding him in a warm embrace, Dunk finally withdrew his messy hand and examined it in the firelight. The mess was the same as his own, yet he couldn't stop the stupid grin. Served well, hadn't he? His oversized body wasn't so bad—especially when the task called for the strength and endurance of an auroch.

"You've got good aim," Dunk remarked, eyeing the filth on his chest. Hair was the worst to clean.

Lyonel barked a hoarse laugh and slid off his lap.

"What, have I disappointed you?" He stripped off the smallclothes, balling them up and tossing aside; then sprawled on his back across the coverlet. When Dunk glanced over, the lord's balls were staring straight at him between widely spread thighs. He looked away fast. "Wanted me to spend down your throat the way you did for me?"

Dunk froze amid picking up a towel. Honestly… he wouldn't mind that. Oh, he wouldn't mind that at all. But more than that he wanted to do exactly what they did—all over again; preferably, right now.

When he climbed back onto the bed, Lyonel stretched out an arm and Dunk settled against his shoulder, heart ridiculously soft. The lord pulled Dunk's head close and ruffled his hair. It felt good. Dunk barely had time to gather his thoughts, let alone consider how things would be after… whatever *this* was, but he surely hadn't expected such tenderness.

He dared to wrap an arm around Lyonel in return. The man did not protest.

"What a spectacular fuck," Lyonel murmured against his temple, then let out a huge yawn. Dunk was used to the man's crude tongue, but the words still stung a little. He'd imagined his first time would be more… romantic. Still, it was hard to regret anything right now.

"Seven hells," Dunk agreed on a long breath. Lyonel hummed in reply.

They fell quiet. It seemed Lord Lyonel had no plans to do anything more, nor did he mention repeating. But when would another chance like this come? With whom? A bitter pang twisted in Dunk's chest. Still, he told himself to be grateful. His hand found Lyonel's thigh and stroked the thick hair on his skin—meaning nothing, of course. It felt nice; his calluses rasped against the hair with a loud, satisfying sound.

Then Dunk remembered: that was the leg Lyonel had been limping on after the tourney.

"How did you fare?" he asked, glancing over. Lyonel lay with eyes lazily half-closed. Those long lashes cast trembling shadows on his cheeks in the candlelight. Laugh-lines at the corners of his eyes spoke of a man who had a good life. *A man who had everything.* "Was your recovery fast after Ashford?"

"Got home and the limp vanished the same day."

Somehow, talking to him felt easy. Even now, after all they've done. Since the night they'd met, Dunk had never once felt out of place at this man's side. This realization surprised him. *For someone like me, that's a rare thing.*

"All in a day's work, my ser." Lyonel kept playing with his hair. "Fact is, ruling is as thrilling as mud. Especially next to the wild life of a hedge knight, I'm sure."

"I'll never believe that."

Lyonel's eyes snapped open.

"Something happened to you," he remembered. "Whatever made you change your mind."

"Ah… yes." Dunk blinked, gathering his thoughts. "Before we reached Storm's End, Egg and I trailed a merchant caravan for a couple of months. There was a husband and wife. They let us sleep in their tent, but every night they, ah, enjoyed each other's company. I didn't watch, didn't listen—tried not to—but I still couldn't sleep. Then the husband offered me to… try it with her. And I thought I'd rather try it with him."

It felt awkward, especially with Lyonel listening so intently. Dunk's eyes darted.

"Anyway… he reminded me of you, I suppose. So I pictured us travelling together in your tent, sleeping under the same roof. And…"

"You started imagining yourself in her place," Lyonel guessed mistakenly but wholeheartedly certain.

Dunk snorted.

"I imagined myself in my place," he said. "Just… with you."

Lyonel caught his face and drew him closer. The kiss was so gentle something inside Dunk cracked open. He hugged the man tighter in relief. Lying together like this turned out to be just as good as everything that had come before.

Then his stomach gave an angry growl. He still hadn't eaten properly. Lyonel laughed and pulled back from his mouth.

"You have the nerve to starve in my own castle!" He slapped Dunk's belly. "Go eat, my good ser. I've shamelessly distracted you."

Dunk grumbled, embarrassed, but left the embrace to drag the tray closer and fall on the food like a starving wolf. He only remembered the wine when Lyonel rose—bare as the day he was born—and refilled both their goblets from the half-empty bottle.

"Thank you," Dunk rasped, immediately washing down a huge bite of duck with wine.

"You are a sight to behold, Ser Duncan. Eating like a man who expects the plate to be snatched away at any moment." Lyonel retrieved his mantle from the floor, swirled it like a dancer, and settled it over his shoulders.

"Where I come from they teach you to eat fast."

"And where is that?"

"King's Landing, m'lord. Flea Bottom."

It struck Dunk then: an orphan from the stinking alleys was now a welcome guest in one of the greatest keeps in the Seven Kingdoms. Supper was brought to him, the Lord Paramount himself poured his wine, and apparently didn't mind sharing his bed

either. The feeling swelled until his heart felt too big for his ribs. Dunk looked at Lyonel with open wonder.

"My friend!" He wiped his mouth with the towel and stood up abruptly. "My gratitude has no limits. Opening your doors to me was already more than I could ever ask for. But you… tonight… this is a greater honour than I deserve."

"Oh, dear!" Lyonel burst out laughing, and Dunk suddenly remembered he chose to start pouring his heart out while standing there stark naked. "What's come over you? All evening you've been laying yourself at my feet. You know, I could get used to this."

*Why does he want me? A useless orphan from Flea Bottom wearing a sigil he never earned.*

"And since you've nowhere better to be," Lyonel added, "you might as well wear my colours. If you hate them, you can strip them off at once. But indulge me at least in this small thing."

Well, since no one was trying to buy him… Dunk slid his arms into the sleeves while Lyonel draped the robe from behind. It fitted like it had been sewn on him; not a single seam pulled.

"How do you know my measurements?"

Lyonel took a lazy sip from his goblet and shrugged one shoulder.

"I made my men nose them out back at the tourney. What was your armourer's name—Pate?"

*That was a whole year ago!* Something huge and warm unfurled in Dunk's chest. He felt like a river bursting its banks after the winter melt. Despite everything, there were still people who were kind to him. And that…

That was almost unbearable.

Suddenly, he desperately wanted Lyonel to hug him. He wouldn't dare reach first.

"Why the long face?" Lyonel smirked into his moustache and grabbed Dunk's head, pulling him down. Their foreheads knocked together. "One moment… Ju-u-ust one more… There. I've memorised everything I wanted. You can take it off now."

Dunk caught him by the waist. Didn't squeeze, didn't embrace—just held his hands there, unsure of what he was even allowed.

"Thank you," he muttered again.

And somehow still did not cry.

## Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings in the end notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a strange awakening. Dunk surfaced not on hard ground but on the softest featherbed, a stone ceiling overhead instead of spring leaves. Rain still hissed against the window; in that grey light, telling the time of day was impossible. But Ser Arlan had always risen with the lark, and he'd trained Dunk the same—sun must be up over the horizon by now, crawling toward its peak.

The loneliness hit him slowly, a dull ache he couldn't name at first. Then memory crashed in: he and Lyonel...! Sleep vanished. Dunk bolted upright.

They'd talked until the hour of a nightingale, and when the black windows turned predawn grey, the lord had laid a hand on his neck and kissed him—slow, lingering, tender. Almost like a farewell.

"That was a beautiful night," he'd said, dead serious. "Might be the best I've had in a year."

The door had closed behind him, and a savage hunger seized Dunk. He tore through the bedclothes, flung pillows aside, and finally found it on one: the man's scent, smoky and sharp. Dunk nearly whimpered when he slid a hand under himself and gripped his half-hard cock. It had been another quick, shameful end. *My boy*, the echo whispered in his ear. *My perfect boy.*

*Oh Seven*, how wild it had been. Lyonel on his knees, swallowing him down, then kissing him with the taste still on his tongue. Dunk had been drowning in a thousand sensations—he couldn't even recall what Lyonel tasted like. One more regret added to his life already thick with regrets.

*Gods damn it*—just remembering made him feel it *again*. The familiar morning swell between his legs, the kind that sometimes left him waking already leaking. His hand found the hardening flesh; calluses scraped almost painfully. Had it felt like this for Lyonel last night...? Dunk squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his head back into the pillow. Oh, how the lord had straddled him—like breaking a wild stallion—so shameless and thrilling.

Dunk missed him. The hands, the mouth. The kisses. The jest was cruel: he had sampled only a taste of the pleasures Lyonel mentioned, and now he could think of nothing else.

At last Dunk spilled—and bit his lip so hard blood salted his tongue. *Third time*, he thought dizzily—*and all because of that damned stag.* He pulled his palm into the light: what kind of knight let his body lead him around like this?

A knock at the door. He jolted, shoving his messy hand back under the covers.

"Ser Duncan," Iola's voice came. "Your breakfast."

"Yes..." His throat was wrecked; he coughed to clear it. "Yes, thank you. Come in."

She entered without a glance, just as yesterday, and swapped the old tray of food for a fresh one. The smell of warm bread, fresh from the oven, filled the chambers—but his stomach barely stirred.

"Anything else you need, ser?"

"Er..." He needed to wipe his hand, but not with her watching. Oh! And he needed his clothes. "What about my things?"

"Still drying, ser. Should be ready by dinner."

Dunk dismissed her gladly and scrubbed his mess on a rag he found in the dresser. Mercifully, the encounter with Iola had chased the filthy thoughts away. Maybe he shouldn't bother trying anything with her if she stirred him so little. Or maybe the opposite: he could talk to her whenever he needed to shake off these foolish urges.

He stretched in the chill morning air to wake his muscles, then washed with cold water from the cooled tub. Without his own clothes, he had to wear what Lyonel had given him: fine linen shirt, warm doublet, sturdy breeches with a codpiece and real leather belt instead of twine. No smallclothes, though. *Damn it*—seemed like Iola took his own with the rest of his clothes.

How long were they staying in Storm's End anyway? Rain made traveling miserable, but Dunk couldn't abuse hospitality forever. Maybe he could do Lyonel a favour or two... *Or swear fealty*, whispered a voice he tried to ignore, because it only spoke unwise dreams.

Lyonel had mentioned discontented smallfolk yesterday—perhaps he'd welcome a knight riding the Stormlands with a Baratheon-sealed scroll. Dunk would pull it out with grave importance and read aloud the lord's words. Actually—he couldn't read, but his memory was sharp. One run-through with Egg and he'd have it forever.

*No—what fealty?* Dunk chided himself. He had Egg. He might not be a sworn man in the usual sense, but he'd given his word to dragons. He needed to keep that.

Still... Egg had been eager to come. The boy had long wanted to see the Storm's End, said to be raised by magic. Dunk wasn't sure he himself believed the tales, but the stones of the castle fitted so tightly you couldn't slip a knife-blade between them.

He should ask the lad what he wanted. With that thought, Dunk left his chambers, tray in hand—eating together would be more fun anyway. Servants in the corridor directed him: Egg was in the tower one floor below.

A minute later—fist raised to knock at the door—Dunk froze. He heard... sobbing?

"Egg?" He pushed the door open.

The room was tiny—half the size of his own. Breakfast untouched, bed made. Egg sat fully dressed on its edge, legs dangling. At the sight of Dunk he scrubbed his wet face.

"You didn't knock, ser."

Anxiety had already propelled Dunk across the threshold—he was shutting the door, but now halted. He shouldn't dance to his squire's tune, king's grandson or not. But one wrong move and those tears would double.

Unsure, he reopened the door wide.

"I can leave and then knock properly."

"No need, ser. I was waiting for you."

Dunk finally shut the door. His racing mind conjured a hundred horrors—someone had scared Egg? Sneaked in? The boy's memory of Aerion creeping in at night, threatening to maim him, had made Dunk watchful ever since. But they were safe here, weren't they? Lyonel wouldn't allow any harm.

He set his plate beside Egg's untouched one and sat beside him. The mattress groaned and sagged, making the boy bounce slightly.

"Are you crying?" Dunk asked clumsily.

"I don't like it here, ser." Egg clamped his hands between his knees, looking truly martyred. "It was nice at first, but then it wasn't."

"What happened?"

"I... woke up and thought I'd been taken prisoner. That Aerion had..." Egg sniffed, shrinking. "But it was already morning, so I remembered you'd come soon and scare him off. But… you didn't."

Shame hit Dunk like dragonfire. *What a fool.* No wonder Egg preferred sleeping under the stars to castles. Why hadn't he insisted they at least share a room?

*Because you'd been too busy warming the Lord's bed. And later your own cock. Twice!*

"I'm so sorry, Egg." *Impossible fool.* Tears pricked Dunk's own eyes, but he forced them back. "I overslept."

He slid to the floor and knelt facing the boy.

"Want me to search for Aerion? If I find him, I'll throw him out, promise?"

Egg wrinkled his nose.

"He's not even here. Father sent him away to Lys."

"In Lys he may be. Does that make him less frightening?"

"I'm not afraid," Egg said, embarrassed. "But... you could try anyway, ser."

Dunk lifted the blankets and peered under the bed.

"All clear."

"What of the wardrobe, ser...?"

No one was in the wardrobe, the dresser, behind the door, outside the window, or in adjoining rooms. Servants had seen no white-haired prince. When Dunk returned and sat down again, Egg leaned into his side and cried silently.

Dunk wrapped an arm around him, rubbing his back. Why was he such an idiot? Trading the boy's peace for one shameless night. Egg had only just stopped grieving for his uncle. (And wouldn't you know it—now Dunk was the one who couldn't get him out of his head.)

"When the tourney ended and they put Aerion to bed," Egg whispered, gaze on the floor, "I went to see him. He had milk of the poppy, so he heard nothing. And I had a knife."

Dunk's hand froze. Nothing prepared him to hear a child confess near-treason. Egg was a good boy; he wouldn't hurt a fly. Dunk knew him inside out.

Or—he thought he did.

"You're going to say brothers must love each other, ser Duncan?" Egg looked at him with sad, teary eyes. "That's what the septons say."

"No. I won't." He didn't know what to do. Worst of all, his heart understood Egg completely; he couldn't even muster proper anger. "But I will tell you attacking the helpless isn't knightly."

"Aerion isn't helpless!" Egg flared instantly. "He's bigger and stronger than me. You saw him fight with a sword, ser!"

"But when you're on your feet and he's half-dead in bed, that makes you the stronger one. And don't shout at me. You're the squire, and I'm the knight."

Egg scowled and turned away. He didn't want that lesson.

"I wish Aerion had died instead of Uncle," he whispered angrily.

It took every ounce of will not to agree. Deep down, Dunk probably thought the same. But it was disgraceful. He wasn't a good man for thinking it.

He sighed.

"Better if no one had died at all." Without letting Egg go, he stretched a long arm and grabbed a plate to pull into his lap. "Are you going to eat?"

"Don't want to. Not hungry, ser."

"The cooks lit the ovens for us."

"They'd have lit them anyway. We're not the only ones breakfasting in the castle."

Dunk felt a twinge of annoyance. *How are you so bloody clever?* Yet Egg never frustrated him half as much as he frustrated himself. Prince Maekar had trusted him with the most precious thing in the Seven Kingdoms, and here he was—wasting time.

"I've got a task for you," Dunk said, chest tight. "Eat what you can, then take the rest to the kitchen maids and thank them for the trouble. In return, ask for apples. Remember: the more you eat, the more apples they'll give. Any woman likes seeing her food cleared."

"What's with the apples, ser?"

"After breakfast we'll check on Thunder and Chestnut. Time to ready them for the road."

Egg stopped crying entirely and now stared with such desperate hope Dunk's already bruised heart ached threefold.

"Are we leaving today, ser?"

"Soon as the rain eases," Dunk promised. "But we won't sleep here another night."

* * *

They ate together, then went down to the kitchens. Dunk watched from afar as Egg thanked the cooks. One gave him a sugared bun; another handed over a basket of apples. Together, Dunk and Egg sat in a corner to cut them in quarters for the horses. Peel curled from Egg's blade in one long spiral. In a year, he had mastered

the knife alright. Dunk pictured him with that same blade at Aerion's bedside, and his stomach turned.

"I never sat the throne," Egg sighed into their silence, "Nor tried on the stag crown."

"That's the crown of the Storm Kings. No one would let you wear it."

"But he let *you*, ser Duncan."

Memory washed over him: smell of ale and burnt candles, raucous music, sweating dancers. That night Dunk had drunk deep and remembered little, but Lyonel's open-handed welcome had stayed with him forever. It felt like the start of all the kindness that followed at the tourney: Raymun (gods, how he missed him), Pate, Prince Baelor...

"How do you know?" Dunk grumbled.

"I heard a rumor that, instead of choosing a queen of love and beauty, the Baratheon knight mocked this tradition and crowned a giant."

Damn the man—*that's* what it was! Dunk had taken it for lordly whim—bold defiance not just of the vassals around them but of the whole order where some were born higher. And rumours had spread? What kind? Had the guests stared at him from the start and seen only a jester, a fool?

Maybe if not for that, more men would have volunteered for trial?

Maybe Prince Baelor would have been...

Egg looked up from his apple.

"Ser Duncan," he said, "you look red as a cherry."

"That's exactly what a man sitting near a stove looks like." Dunk wiped his sweating brow and stood up. The horses could deal with the rest of the treats on their own. "Grab the apples; let's go."

* * *

A stableboy named Gullen pointed out the stalls and fled the moment Dunk ducked inside. The lad probably got scared of his size. Or his scowl: Dunk was confused and furious in equal measure.

His reluctance to leave was battling with relief, then with his longing for last night, then with rage at last year's jest. But whatever he felt, it always circled back to shame. Well, suppose the lord *had* mocked him—Dunk was no better; he had eaten mockery from his hand and begged for seconds.

At least Egg cheered up. In the stall, he dragged over a mounting stool for riders, climbed atop and now cooed at Chestnut, scratching her sleek sides. Dunk hugged the basket to his belly and held it under the horses' muzzles—Thunder dove in at once; Chestnut first lipped his sleeve.

"Have you ever been to the sea, ser Duncan?" Egg asked, tempting her with a juicy apple piece.

"Once or twice. Not in the Stormlands."

"Did you know if a ship wrecks in the Narrow Sea, the pieces wash up right here at Storm's End?"

A voice came from behind:

"Right you are, lad. Where else would the Shipbreaker Bay get its name?"

Dunk's teeth ground so hard something cracked in his skull. He turned reluctantly. Lord Lyonel stood in the hall between stalls—yellow cloak sodden from rain, boots dusted with sawdust, ringed hand raking wet curls from his face.

"My lord!" Egg beamed at the attention. *So sociable you are*... "Have you ever found shipwrecks?"

"More than that—I was on a sinking ship once. Barely made it out. You'll hear the rest if ser Duncan approves your work." Lyonel winked at the boy, then flicked a glance at Dunk. It made his throat dry: yesterday they'd been tangled, kissing until mouths were slick and lips burned, and now... Dunk sincerely wanted to punch him. Not entirely from anger, but—gods knew why—somehow also from some vast, aching sorrow. "It's you I've been searching for, my friend. Hunt's delayed an hour: my brother's sent a letter and, sadly, demands a swift reply."

*A hunt!* Dunk nearly groaned. *Right*—they'd agreed yesterday to go hunting. No wonder the whole keep had been buzzing since first light!

"Lyonel, I– wanted to talk as well." Dunk glanced at his squire. "Egg, scrub your horse clean."

"She's already done, ser. Didn't you hear? Gullen said—"

"Then check his work! This talk isn't for squire's ears."

Dunk left the boy working; Lyonel followed. They stepped out under the roof's overhang: it was dry here, while the rain poured beyond. It felt like hiding from the world. Dunk felt an odd closeness to the lord—stronger even than last night.

Lyonel drew a deep, satisfied breath, filling his lungs with the scents of rain, wet earth, and damp hay, and then looked at Dunk. His gaze slid down the length of him, lingering on the gifted clothes with open pleasure.

"How are you, old friend?" A hand settled on Dunk's shoulder blade. Just as yesterday, Lyonel's touch was neither insulting nor unpleasant, but warm as hearthfire. "Neither of us got much sleep, did we?"

Dunk faltered. He had come to trust his own grudge too much: within it, the world made order. High lords mocked lowborn men—men like him. But even through anger he saw it: Lyonel was *genuinely glad* with their reunion.

*Seven hells, I… I **really do please him**.*

Breakfast churned uneasily in his gut.

"M'lord..." Dunk dropped his eyes, shifting weight to ease his back from under that heavy palm. "I do not wish to offend. But Egg and I will be leaving—today, I'm afraid."

At the last second, Lyonel's hand that slipped from his back clamped at his elbow—as if his body moved before mind.

"What? Why?" But he released Dunk and instead loomed himself, face impossibly close to his face. The air shifted around them: fury brewed inside the lord like a storm gathering at sea. "What about the hunt? The feast? Everything we planned!"

Dunk couldn't help but glance at Egg.

"Sorry, I..."

Lyonel noticed and followed his look. Rage flashed in his eyes—Dunk feared he'd storm the stall and unleash it on Egg, so he caught his elbow.

"Is it your boy?" Lyonel didn't move, but yanked his arm free. "*You're* the knight here—why the *fuck* does he decide for both of you?"

Now his fury turned full on Dunk. For lowly men like him, there was only one defence—stand still, face blank, and stare straight through.

"Egg doesn't like castles," he said carefully.

"Oh, doesn't he, now!" Lyonel's voice boomed through the courtyard, thunderous. His own volume seemed to steady him; he stepped back, grimacing, and hissed: "He's *just a squire.*"

Somehow Dunk had stung him. That wasn't good. A lord might strike for an insult—fist to the face, rings on perhaps. It would be unpleasant, especially with rings on. But men went to the dungeons or lost heads for less. If real danger came, Egg would step in as he did back in Ashford. All he needed was to flash his Targaryen signet ring. Lyonel would believe it.

…Dunk pursed his lips. Unfortunately, Lyonel could never know about Egg.

"Please don't," he said, firm and quiet. "He's a good boy. And he's in my charge. I take it seriously."

For a heartbeat the Lord of Storm's End stared as if Dunk had put a knife between his ribs. Then, his anger drained. The wounded look that replaced it made Dunk's own chest ache.

He knew, of course, Lyonel wouldn't like it, but the reaction was… wild.

"At least you have the conscience to look guilty," Lyonel said, voice strangely choked.

Dunk sighed, "Sorry, m'lord."

"If you keep shoving this title I despise in my face, at least use it right."

*Am I using it wrong?* Dunk froze. *And how could anyone despise being a lord?*

"Don't bother." Lyonel winced at his confusion and turned his head away. "I told you: to you it's just Lyonel."

They lingered under the overhang. Lord Baratheon didn't leave, but didn't dismiss him either. Dunk could excuse himself back to the stall with another apology, yet he stayed.

He wanted to... no, that's stupid. Take Lyonel's hand? Embrace him? Here, in plain sight? *All after trampling the man's pride, brilliant plan.*

"You, lad!" Lyonel called suddenly. Egg peered out. "I'm throwing a hunt in an hour. Are you coming? After that you'll decide if you're leaving."

"Wait—" Dunk started, "Don't drag him into this—"

Egg cocked his head, deeply thoughtful.

"But it's raining," he drawled, and his voice full of doubt made Dunk swing between hope and dread.

"Clouds are breaking any minute," Lyonel countered. "Our maester may have hands growing out his arse, but he's good with telling weather."

"Can I shoot the crossbow?" Egg asked him and glanced at Dunk, hopeful.

"Only if Ser Duncan allows." Lyonel looked at him too. His brown eyes gleamed unkindly. "You promised me a hunt, ser. Be good enough to keep your word. You're a *knight*, after all."

* * *

The hunting party was sizable, and all of them courtiers—minor vassals, distant heirs, daughters sent in hopes Lord Baratheon might glance their way. Dunk was introduced to each by name, but none stuck; only sigils flashed in his memory, one after another. Even so, he recognised half the faces from last year's feast in the tent. They'd seen him too—with antlers on his head, no less. He muttered an awkward greeting and retreated to Egg, who was snuggling a crossbow nearly as tall as him with pure delight.

At the last moment Gullen, the stableboy, joined them along with a dark-curled girl Dunk had glimpsed in the kitchens. From Gullen he learned she was Iola's daughter. So many things weighed on Dunk's mind that he could scarcely muster surprise. Iola looked young—perhaps only five years older than him. Has Lyonel sired a bastard...? The thought left a sour aftertaste. The sooner he and Egg left, the better.

As soon as the rain eased, they rode into the forest. Lyonel was cursing servants and bickering with vassals all along the way. Clearly Dunk had infuriated him—even more than when he'd first refused the invitation to Storm's End. But *why*? Sure, Lyonel had taken interest in him, but hadn't last night satisfied it? Seemed easy enough: see what's in the hedge knight's breeches, confirm Dunk was as green in bed as on the field, and be done. How did his decision to leave cause such offence?

From that thought sprouted a nauseating hope—one Dunk ruthlessly hacked down before it could take root.

A hedge knight might serve a lord for one night's pleasure, no more.

He could be no more than that.

He could not.

…Horns boomed. The master huntsman perked up and signalled them with his hand. Egg jabbed Dunk's ribs, his sharp elbow the only thing able to yank him from his thoughts.

"It's coming! Do I shoot now, ser?"

"No. You'd only waste bolts and hit one of us. Remember: no target in sight, no shot."

Dunk himself couldn't shoot, so he was armed with a spear. His job was guarding Egg while the crossbowmen and archers spread along the clearing, hidden in brush. The beast should burst straight into their trap. Across the glade, Dunk met Lyonel's stare. The lord looked as if he meant to shoot Dunk instead of the beast.

Heavy paws thundered behind trees, closing fast.

"Coming!" the huntsman rasped and blew his horn.

Everything moved.

A grey thing erupted onto the clearing. Voices shouted—"Shoot! Shoot!" Crossbows twanged, arrows hissed in the air; the beast yelped and panicked, tail tucked between its hind legs.

Egg dropped to his knees to recharge the crossbow. The wolf spotted the gap in their line and lunged for the boy. Dunk leaped forward but missed, spear stuck in the ground. His arm exploded in pain. Something shoved him.

"Ser Duncan!" Egg screamed.

The wolf tore into him, jaws shut tight like a Dornish fucking crocodile. The world spun. The ground slammed him; vision darkened. Growling, Dunk pinned the wolf's head to his chest with his trapped arm. The free one wrapped around its throat.

"Don't shoot!" Lyonel bellowed.

Dunk squeezed his elbow; the wolf whimpered, scrabbling paws.

"Someone help him!"

Fabric ripped. Egg shrieked—good, he was alive, then.

A crack. The awful weight slackened.

"Easy, easy!" Lyonel's voice came. The wolf started slipping away. Dunk clung tighter. "Let go, ser, let go– She's already dead."

Dunk obeyed. The wet muzzle vanished from his wet arm—he felt only wetness now, pain gone. Hands lifted him, sat him up on the ground.

"Ser Duncan!" Bald head appeared in his sight—was it Egg hauling him? *Gods, how is the boy so strong?*

"Are you hurt?" Dunk croaked.

"No, ser, not at all."

*Thank the Seven.*

"Maester! Now!" Lyonel roared in his ear. Dunk registered the broad hand on his back, breath on his cheek. "Friend, squeeze my hand if you hear me."

His palm hovered in the air like a challenge. Dunk seized it so hard Lyonel grunted.

"Oof, easy, Ser Duncan. Mighty lad." Moustache brushed his knucles—then something soft, tender. "Maester, where the *fuck* have you been? Help me with his doublet. Move!.."

* * *

The maester ordered Dunk into a cart to spare the wound, so the trophy was lashed onto Thunder. The old stallion ignored it and was impassively treating himself to roadside grass. Lyonel offered to take a look at the corpse, but Dunk shook his head fiercely—only to steal a guilty sideways glance anyway as they passed the horse.

It was a she-wolf.

Two rows of teats ran along her belly, fur worn thin around them. Tongue lolled from the bloodied muzzle. Eyes were still—two yellow glass marbles, clever as any yard dog's. She could look alive, but those eyes–

Dunk's stomach, queasy all morning, finally rebelled. Clutching Lyonel's shoulder, he doubled over and vomited beside the cart.

* * *

Egg chattered the whole short ride back. Together with the stableboy, he told Iola's daughter everything that transpired: "And then the wolf went awoo!—and my crossbow went thwap!.."

In the yard Dunk braced against the cart to dismount, but hissed as pain lanced his right arm. She got him good—he wouldn't be swinging sword or gripping spoon any time soon. But the doublet had taken the worst of it; beyond bruises and a few deep cuts, he was mostly whole.

"Ser Duncan!" Egg led Chestnut over as Dunk finally jumped down. "Let me take Thunder."

The trophy had been removed from the stallion. Dunk watched the limp grey heap dragged away and felt bone-deep exhaustion.

"I'll handle the horses," he said.

"Am I dismissed then, ser?"

"Yes, you are dismissed."

"Yesserthankyouser!" Egg almost started toward the children, but then doubled back. "Are you all right, ser?"

The maester said yes. Still, Dunk felt rotten.

"I'm fine," he said weakly. He wanted solitude, and never to speak again. "Go on. I'll call if I need you."

Gathering reins one-handed, Dunk led Thunder and Chestnut deep into the stables. He opened a stall, ushered them in, and followed himself. Chestnut turned to lip at his hair. Thunder found a fallen apple from before and was now gnawing it, content.

The apple cracked like vertebrae. Dunk only wanted to choke her to make her release his arm. He'd broken her neck instead. Most likely, she'd hunted these woods to feed her pups. Now she wouldn't return. The cubs would starve. All because of him—a huge, stupid knight too cowardly to refuse a lord.

Dunk pressed his face to Chestnut's soft cheek. Shut his eyes to hold back his tears—but she nuzzled his ear gently, as if she understood, and he cried anyway.

…What a fucking disgrace.

It was improper to fight five against one. So why would people hunt a single beast with a crowd?

"She gave you a mauling, eh?"

Dunk flinched at the voice. Lyonel had entered the stall, his expression complex. Doubt, perhaps—the first time Dunk had seen it on his cruelly handsome face.

"Could've been worse." Dunk wiped his cheeks so he wouldn't stand there covered in tears. "Maester's stitched it already."

"Does it hurt so much?" Lyonel touched the torn sleeve of Dunk's doublet.

Dunk considered pulling away, but moving his hand would hurt. Instead he watched, as if this were happening to someone else, as Lyonel took his huge palm in both of his own and smoothed it, absurdly gentle.

"Not much," Dunk said. Did Lyonel think his tears were from pain? "I just really don't like hunting, ‘s all."

He'd already learned: when Lyonel's face went dark like that, nothing good followed.

"Then why the *fuck* didn't you say anything?" the lord growled, careful not to raise his voice.

"You wanted a hunt, m—my friend."

"I wanted to cheer up your moody ass, not… *this*!" Lyonel made a wide gesture—as if pointing at all of Dunk's joyless presence. Dunk felt doused in ice—*of course*, what an idiot—

"I'm sorry," he blabbered quickly. "You're right. I should be more grateful. You gave me shelter, clothes, and—"

Lyonel almost groaned and let him go, rubbing his own face instead.

"I don't recognise you, ser. Where's the man I met at the tourney, the one who I fought for?" His hands dropped—now, Lyonel stared with fury as if Dunk had just shot himself in the foot with a crossbow. "Or did that vile dragonspawn break not only your shield but your *spine*?"

Rage flooded so fiercely Dunk almost saw white. He clenched his fists, heart thundering. How *unfair*! Hadn't Lyonel been twisting him up in knots and then admiring openly how good he looked, brought so low?

"But you are doing so much for me," Dunk reminded through his teeth. "I'm indebted to you."

If they were about to fight, Lyonel did the strangest thing: he cupped his face in both hands and pushed—firm enough that Dunk backed up.

"Ser. Listen to me." Dunk's back hit the stall wall, and he caught the lord's wrist—not a threat, just a warning. "I gravely need you to refuse whatever your heart doesn't like, even if I want it badly. Gods know I want so much all the time. But if it's not something that gladdens you, then I don't need it."

Dunk stared. It was an odd way to start a brawl.

"But I'm just a hedge knight."

"Not to me, no." Lyonel forced a crooked smile. "Is your boy just a squire to you?"

*You **don't understand***, Dunk thought weakly, but remained silent.

Whatever Lyonel saw in his eyes, it seemed to satisfy him. He patted Dunk's cheek, his touch encouraging, and moved both hands to his shoulders.

"Besides: you think I give a shit, ser Duncan? Think I wouldn't whip my cock out and piss on every title and its lack?"

Dunk frowned.

"I mean no disrespect," he argued, "but doesn't it thrill you to dress me up and pour fine wine exactly because you know that I *can't*?"

Lyonel didn't answer; instead, he just watched him, a strange look in his eyes. *Shit,* Dunk realized, *I've overstepped again*. He dropped his gaze, bracing for yet another apology.

"There you are," Lyonel rumbled suddenly, fiercely proud. "*This* man I recognise. Yes, dear, I need you to stand up to me. And yes, there's some truth to that, but—not much."

An uneven breath tore out of Dunk. Anger, hurt, heat—all fled at once. Only bewilderment remained. He sagged; Lyonel hummed in approval. His warm hands slid down Dunk's chest and settled on either side of his heart.

"Now tell me, Ser Duncan." Lyonel studied his face intently. "Whatever we did last night—did you, in your heart of hearts, not truly want this?"

Dunk looked at him wearily. Then glanced away: the clothes, the hunt, servants dogging his heels—he'd refuse it all without batting an eye. But not Lyonel's mouth on his skin. Not the moans, not the arms wrapped around his neck.

"No. Not at all." Dunk pressed his lips; a bad laugh bubbled up in his chest. "It's… the opposite, actually. I think I wanted it *too much*."

After all, he'd dragged himself across half the realm to tell Lyonel: *I thought of you*. No plan beyond that. What had he expected? The man would have been so delighted he'd name him his Lady Baratheon? Nonsense. Truth was, Dunk just wanted to see his face when he heard it. Unsoothed curiosity gnawed at him worse than marsh mosquitoes. And also...

Dunk missed him.

That was all.

Hands that were planted firm on Dunk's chest now took Lyonel's weight—the lord stepped closer, pinning Dunk against the wooden wall, his own body unyielding and solid.

Then—a low growl against Dunk's ear:

"Then why the *fuck* are you standing here arguing instead of kissing me?"

As if a lightning bolt shot right to his groin, knees nearly giving. Dunk shivered, breathing out hot into Lyonel's temple. *Am I allowed...?* He turned his head awkwardly—and Lyonel turned as well. His breath scorched Dunk's neck, then his cheek, then his lips.

Dunk seized his sides and lunged forward, fumbling, searching. Moustache, beard. Warm, yielding mouth. The moment he found it he kissed hard—latched onto Lyonel's lips, sealing them with his own, eyes clenched shut in a wordless plea to stay.

But Lyonel was here. And he did not resist his hands. Dunk twisted cloak-chain at Lyonel's chest in his good fist. His other palm only lightly cupped his hip, careful not to tug on his own injury.

Lyonel gripped back, and they spun like dancers. Dunk pinned him to the wall; flushed bright-red into the kiss when he felt Lyonel's legs part on the sawdust—*inviting*, almost.

Dunk probed with his tongue; Lyonel nipped at it gently, drew it into his mouth—*sucked* it *in*, as if it was another cock to please. Dunk whimpered, his fist catching and twisting not only the chain but the fabric of Lyonel's tunic as well.

Wet lips parted; they breathed into each other's mouths.

"Duncan," Lyonel rasped, curls in his face, grin in his voice. "Are you *moaning already*?"

*Yes*. Fuck. No. Not at all. He'd waited so long for this kiss that his cock was already hard.

"Shut—" Dunk barely managed to bite his own tongue. "Stop talking."

Lyonel looked at him amused, as if he'd never seen him before. Then started shaking, hissing breath escaping his chest. Dunk pulled back, alarmed by the sound—only to realize: Lyonel was laughing at him.

Dunk really didn't want to catch his laugh, but a shy chuckle jumped out of him anyway.

"Such a sweet lad," Lyonel whispered. His broad palm slid up Dunk's neck and spread at the nape. "Sweet—and *never mine*. You have no idea how colossal this tragedy is."

This time he guided Dunk's head down and kissed him fiercely. Dunk almost whined, but then silenced himself. Lyonel's hand slipped between them and, without warning, slapped his junk—the kiss broke loudly as Dunk almost *jumped*. It wasn't painful, but he'd never expected Lyonel to threaten his, well...

"Don't you dare hold back." The hand cupped his cock. Oh gods—oh *gods*—Dunk's jaw must have gone slack, because Lyonel yanked him by the hair and plunged his tongue into the open mouth. Dunk growled angrily into the kiss, eyes shut. Nothing stayed in his head but those possessive hands.

A horse whinnied sharply behind his back. Dunk startled back to himself. Lyonel was already rummaging in his breeches, and the horses... Dunk glanced over his shoulder: Thunder was chewing hay; Chestnut flicked her ears and looked away indifferently.

"Maybe not here?" Dunk muttered.

"Piss off. We're alone." From untied breeches—unrestrained by smallclothes—Dunk's cock sprang free. Lyonel made a pleased sound. "I told the servants not to disturb us here."

"We're *not* alone."

Lyonel barked another laugh.

"Are you shy of them?" He nodded at the horses. "Ser Duncan, you're the weirdest man I've known."

In Dunk's scattered thoughts rose a desperate want: for Lyonel to call him simply—Dunk. Or... *my boy*, like he did yesterday. *My Dunk. My boy Dunk.* But he never got it out: where he pressed against Lyonel's belly, rough wet fabric gave way to skin. Dunk felt his cock slide against Lyonel's thigh, his warm stomach, his groin thick with black curls.

Without releasing his hair, Lyonel squeezed his arse.

"Move, dear—rut against me." A demanding mouth nipped Dunk's ear; he almost choked on a whimper. "Oh!... Yes. Just like that—like a dog on his master's leg."

Face buried in Lyonel's shoulder, Dunk did everything he was told. His breeches and shirt turned suffocatingly hot, and sweat poured down his spine. Hips moved on instinct—shameless and primal—while Lyonel fisted his hair.

Then fingers clamped at his jaw, rings hard against bone. Dunk paused; Lyonel now cradled his head in both hands. They breathed mouth-to-mouth—so close Dunk's vision blurred; he couldn't read the other man's expressions. But he was certain Lyonel saw how mindless he'd become from mere permission to… to simply rub against him.

"Did I say we were done kissing?" Lyonel chided. Dunk's breath caught: *sorry, sorry, I didn't know—I didn't know I was allowed* ***both at once***. "Be good for me, ser."

Dunk crashed into his mouth. Lord's grip held his head steady—Lyonel dove his tongue deep like claiming conquered ground.

Their hips found clever rhythm: Dunk rutting against the firm belly; then Lyonel rutting against his cock. Their clothes rustled; they both were panting, mouths sliding wet. Behind Dunk, Chestnut snorted and shook her mane.

"Mmh..." something twisted in Dunk's gut. His hand clutched Lyonel's shoulder. The lord caught every moan: trapped, they became more like growls.

Dunk's head jerked as Lyonel fisted his hair and guided it aside, teeth sinking into Dunk's bared throat. That hand in his hair was perfect; the one that slid back to his

cock—even better. Dunk whined, curling around Lyonel and that fierce, swelling ache that grew tighter inside, and then—

He spilled; Lyonel kept stroking his length through the storm, murmuring praise. The right side of Dunk's throat burned from the bite marks he left.

"So sweet," Lyonel crooned low, scattering kiss after kiss across his face. The hand in Dunk's hair no longer held him but caressed steadily. "My precious boy. How beautifully you come undone."

Dunk couldn't answer—only a strangled sound left his throat. Shivers ran through him, throat scraped dry.

"Did I push you too far, dear?" Moustache brushed his face again. Dunk met his lips greedily. His mouth wouldn't obey—or couldn't keep up—so the kiss was uncoordinated and wet.

He took a minute to catch breath. Blinking, Dunk braced his hand against the wall. Stepping back, wiped his mouth on the torn sleeve. His hazed gaze caught Lyonel's red-kissed, smiling lips; his tunic rumpled over his heaving chest; and below...

"Lyonel!" Dunk startled, looking up questioningly. "You haven't..."

"Ah, forget it. I got what I wanted." The lord grinned, his flushed face unfairly pretty.

Dunk glanced at his own hand—tried to close a fist, but winced as it tugged at the wound. *Well, paying back would be awkward…*

"I can only use my left hand," Dunk offered and stared down at the lord's cock. It looked *insanely* appealing.

But Lyonel took his shoulder and pushed him aside—gently but firmly.

"You'll settle that debt next time you visit." He wiped the messy palm on Chestnut's saddle. Dunk would have roared in outrage if shame hadn't flared first.

…Right.

They had to leave.

Suddenly in a hurry, Dunk fumbled at his own breeches. A hiss left his lips: his wound was turning out to be a nuisance. Lyonel, who quickly finished getting his shit together, watched him with a detached curiosity.

Dunk missed the moment when the lord approached. His hands gently moved Dunk's aside.

"Do me a favour, Ser Duncan." Warm ringed fingers tucked his softening cock away, drew laces, tied the knot. Heat flooded Dunk to the roots—had he not just come, the

mere sight would surely do a number on him. "If you are to come visit me only to leave the next day, then please kindly **don't.**"

...Dunk hadn't expected that. He stared up as if seeing a ghost—and there truly was no former spark in Lyonel's brown eyes.

"But—" Dunk caught his arm. "You said—"

Something flickered in the lord's gaze. Lyonel chuckled and with masterful grace slipped out of his touch: the second their fingers met, he drew his hand back and scrubbed his face as if erasing some weird sensation.

"Gah, you're right. I did say that." He sighed, smiling, but Dunk felt no familiar urge to smile back. "Then don't mind me, ser. Come around whenever you need m— my hospitality."

When Lyonel left, Dunk stepped from the stall and watched him walk across the yard. It had all gone so *wrong*. Now Dunk wasn't just in debt—he'd upset the man deeply.

*Wait,* he wanted to call*, I've changed my mind. I'd go to thirty more hunts if it fixed this.*

But it wouldn't fix anything, and he barely stomached one.

* * *

In his chambers Dunk freshened up, changed into his own clothes, donned his mail and wrapped a dry cloak around. A familiar weight of a sword-belt settled on his hip. He rubbed the hilt with his thumb the way Ser Arlan used to, but it brought only bitterness. *You wouldn't be proud of me, ser.*

At the door he gave the room a farewell look. It could have been his room, *was* his—if he'd understood right. The luxurious robe lay folded on the dresser. The bed had been remade—as if they hadn't talked all night yesterday, lounging under blankets, touching, holding each other like—

Like *lovers*. Were they lovers? His soul ached exactly like it did after ballads where a couple couldn't be together. No—*horseshit*—Lyonel called them *friends*, so that's what they'd been. The lord seemed like a man who loved testing limits—he probably had heaps of *friends* to test limits with. Without Dunk around, someone else entertained his boredom.

Eyes stung. Dunk was faintly surprised by how much anger this one thought sparked. What a fool! Lyonel was a handsome man who drew lots of attention—of *course* he had someone else. He probably sired bastards all over the castle. Maybe with Iola, even.

...Pity Dunk wasn't that sort of man. It seemed he couldn't keep friendship and share a bed.

*Be grateful you had it at all*, Dunk told himself grimly and stepped out into the corridor. From the throne room below rose the raucous sounds of the feast celebrating the hunt. *Without him, you'd still be a green boy wondering how a mouth on your dick feels.*

"Egg, c'mere!"

It rained again in the yard. Bald head appeared quickly—Egg raced after Gullen and the bastard girl, stick in hand. Dunk was so used to seeing him grave as an old man he almost marvelled at the sight. Never once in his memory had Egg played tag.

"Ser Duncan!" Egg ran up panting. "Where are you going?"

Dunk stared at him as if struck.

"Where am I—" Gods be good, he was so close to getting it into his ear. "*You* wanted to *leave*."

"Oh... right..." Egg fidgeted with the stick, then glanced at the kids. Gullen pulled faces at him, mocking from afar. "Actually, can we stay a couple more days?"

Dunk drew a deep breath, tipped his head back, and loosed a heavy sigh to the bleak sky. Cold raindrops tapped his forehead and cheeks.

*He'll kill me.*

"...Yes. I suppose we can."

Chapter End Notes

> TW: animal death, blood, wounds, throwing up (Dunk's not having a good day)

## Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> Wooh, what a week!
> I haven't had the time to get into the smutty bit, so have this small-ish chapter instead.
>
> Thank you for all the kind comments! They make me want to write so much more stuff!

The tables in the throne room groaned under the weight of the food. The air was thick with the smells of roasted meat, onions, and fresh-baked bread. Musicians were still warming up with slow ballads; the guests hadn't drunk enough yet to start dancing. When the doors closed behind Dunk, only the people at the nearest table bothered to look around. One or two gawked at his sheer size, but most simply turned back to their conversations.

Dunk didn't cut straight across the hall. He slipped into the corridor between the columns and the curved outer wall. His feet felt as though he were dragging millstones. *Courage*, Ser Arlan used to say, *is not only standing up for the weak—it is also daring to look a fool when you've stumbled.*

Dunk had no desire to look a fool, yet he kept walking.

On the dais sat the most important guests: the master huntsman wore a drunkard's grin, the castellan was gloomily sawing at a slab of pork with his dagger. Dunk also recognised the sigils of Estermont and Swann. The last two had been part of Lord Baratheon's hunt, but their names slid right past his ears.

Lyonel sat at the centre, enthroned and every inch as splendid and reckless. The stag crown caught the candlelight on its antlers. He laughed at something Estermont said, but his eyes weren't laughing—they drifted across the hall like half-dead flies. The man found Dunk faster than Dunk found courage. All trace of mirth vanished from Lyonel's face.

Dunk felt clumsy as a giant. His own footsteps rang in his ears louder than viol and lute. Jaw clenched, he emerged from the gallery, hand on his sword hilt, and threaded between the tables. Several guards peeled away from the walls. Lyonel lifted a hand; the guards halted.

"Ser Duncan," Lyonel said when Dunk stopped at the foot of the throne. Estermont and Swann broke off their talk and stared down in puzzlement. "Come to say goodbye? How touching."

Lyonel had never spoken to him so coldly. Dunk shifted, glancing at the noble heirs. It would have been simpler if he could speak with Lyonel alone.

"M'lord," he said, not daring to drop the title. Lyonel's brows twitched. "I ask your leave to stay a few more days. If you'll allow it."

For a moment Lyonel looked at him as though he had forgotten the tongue they were speaking. Then he leaned forward on the throne.

"Was you not just saddling your horses and bidding me farewell, Ser Duncan?"

Oh, and what a farewell it had been. Dunk's ears burned.

"I was," he admitted, shame heating his face. "But… the wind changed. To keep out of the storm, me and my squire would be thankful to stay under your roof a little longer. With your leave."

"The wind has indeed brought clouds in from the bay," Estermont muttered. Of course he thought they were talking about the weather.

Lyonel did not even spare him a glance. His eyes pierced straight through Dunk.

"Leave us," he ordered.

The castellan, who had been lifting a forkful of meat to his mouth, straightened with a sour expression. He glared at Dunk as though it were him, not Lyonel, who was banishing the vassals.

Grumbling and scraping chairs, the men rose and drifted away from the high table. Only two remained: the crowned lord and the hedge knight.

Lyonel picked up a chicken leg with little interest and leaned back on the throne, sprawling like a man with all the time in the world.

"Sit." He pointed the bone at the nearest chair to the left of him.

Dunk did as commanded. Lyonel bit into the bird and stopped looking at him, suddenly absorbed in his meal.

"I'm sorry," Dunk began, "for all the trouble I've caused. For going back on my word. For… the offence I gave when I failed to value—"

"You changed your mind," Lyonel cut in, "or did your squire change it for you?"

Dunk did not want to shove more blame onto Egg than he already had. But the question instantly crushed the little speech he had rehearsed. He faltered, eyes darting, groping for words.

"As I said, Egg doesn't like castles—"

"No. I've already heard that." Lyonel shifted to the corner of the throne and swung his legs onto the stool where Swann had been sitting, turning half away. The carelessness seemed too pointed now, his voice too indifferent. "I clothed you, ser. I fed you. I *pleasured* you like a bride on her wedding night. And how did you repay me? You ran the moment your little *rat* started snivelling?"

Lyonel's fist suddenly slammed down on the table, bone still clutched tight. Cups and plates rattled. Dunk flinched. The nearest tables fell silent.

"What the fuck," Lyonel said, very softly. He still would not look at Dunk. "Actually, yes, this is exactly what I want to know. What. The. *Fuck*."

Dunk drew a shaky breath and leaned closer.

"I wanted Egg to be safe. He—"

"He is a *guest* in my *house*," Lyonel interrupted. "Of *course* he is safe."

"I don't doubt it. But Egg… he sometimes has trouble sleeping in keeps." Dunk could not give the real reasons. The need to hold back made him want to climb the walls. When he could not speak plain truth, he always felt like some slippery schemer. "Listen, these are not my secrets to tell. But you won't be surprised if I say his home has not been kind to him. The world's rarely kind to children."

Until now Lyonel had kept his eyes on the chicken. But now he glanced over—the first proper look in a minute. Relief washed through Dunk: his friend *was* listening. Although he didn't have to.

Dunk rubbed his cheek and dropped his gaze. The words that had been flowing so steadily a moment ago scattered again. He wasn't good with speeches, that was certain.

"I don't know… I'm not Egg's father, any more than Ser Arlan was mine. But I reckon he might grow up happier if I listen to him."

The bone clinked onto the plate.

"Hiding behind a ten-year-old boy, ser?" Lyonel almost growled. Dunk looked up, but the lord pulled a face, as if annoyed with himself, and waved a lazy hand. "Forget it. You needn't answer."

From the side Dunk watched Lyonel pick up a napkin and wipe the grease from his fingers. He still wore the same rings. Dunk remembered how they felt on his his jaw. And— not only there.

"Explain one more thing, ser." At least Lyonel had turned his head a little toward him now. "Why the *fuck* are you still here? You refused my generosity—and everything that comes with it. And now you think it proper to stroll back into my feast as though you *own* it?"

"Egg changed his mind… but I didn't." Dunk sighed, yet forced the words out. "Because I didn't want to go at all."

Lyonel pressed a fist to his forehead for a moment. From the side Dunk could see the long lashes lower, the throat working.

"You should have said that sooner," Lyonel muttered.

"Was it– not obvious?"

Lyonel gave a heavy sigh. Reached for his cup instead of answering.

"Lyonel, listen." Dunk touched the arm of the throne. "I never meant to insult you. Please don't think I don't value your friendship and everything you've done for us. Because…" He opened and closed his mouth. The words would not come clever or pretty —only plain. "Because I want to be *useful* to you. Not a burden."

"Oh, so you're protecting me now?" Lyonel looked at him, irritated. Their faces were a kiss apart. Dunk lifted his gaze from the lord's lips back to his eyes. "You protect me, yet the first tear from the boy and you're ready to bolt after him?"

"Why is this even—" Anger was starting to rise. They were going in circles. "Lyonel, let's talk about this in private. Better without an audience."

"Unfortunately you do have an audience." Lyonel waved his cup lazily to indicate the crowded hall, then took a swallow. "Huh… you say you value our friendship…"

His other hand suddenly settled on Dunk's shoulder. Before Dunk could feel glad of it, the hand gave a push.

"Prove it to everyone, ser. Declare your loyalty to me."

Ice slid through Dunk's veins.

"Prove it… how?"

Lyonel smiled over the rim of his cup. With the antlered crown and that toothy grin he looked like something sinister from the old tales.

"I am sure you'll find a way."

Dunk glanced at the people. Three dozen at least—courtiers, guards, servants. Those farther away were still laughing and talking. Those nearest the throne were trying to eavesdrop.

*He wants me to swear fealty?* Dunk's mind raced faster than Thunder. *No—he knows I'm shit with speeches, so he wants to humiliate me. Or teach me a lesson…*

*Or, out of sheer vanity, simply hear me praise him.*

Dunk looked at the lord again. Lyonel silently set his cup on the table and slid it toward him. Wine sloshed inside.

Well… Egg wanted to stay. Dunk wanted it too. He pressed his lips together, took the cup in his good hand, and pushed back from the chair—the legs scraped loudly across the floor. Eyes turned toward him. More when Dunk cleared his throat.

"Good folk of Storm's End," he called, voice carrying through the hall. For a moment he felt like the Laughing Storm himself. "I raise this cup to the health and glory of my good friend—Lord Lyonel."

Silence spread across the tables. People stared. He suddenly remembered that this speech would decide whether he and Egg slept under a roof tonight or under the open sky.

Despite his great height, Dunk felt small. As though it were not a knight speaking to these worthy folk, but a street thief from King's Landing wearing armour stolen off a corpse.

"A year ago, at the tourney at Ashford, Lord Lyonel was one of the first to stand beside me—on the side of common men." Dunk's chest heaved. It felt like a loose wheel on a cart, wobbling worse with every turn. "Since then I've seen no one worthier. Not on the field, not in spirit, not in heart—I know no man who can match my friend."

They waited for more. *Shit.* Panic stirred in his gut. Dunk feared he might throw up again.

"I am not a worthy man," he blurted. His voice cracked. "But Lord Lyonel's generosity keeps telling me otherwise. I don't know what I did to deserve such an ally. Yet I hope one day to repay his kindness—not with gold, for I am only a hedge knight, but with what I have in plenty: my support and loyalty."

Then Dunk remembered: the decision was not his to make.

"If Lord Lyonel would still take me," he finished, and tossed the wine down his dry throat.

The throne room erupted. "To Lord Lyonel!" roared dozens of throats. Cups rose. Dunk drained his own and stared at the bottom like a fool. Then—warmth at his side. A palm on his shoulder. With one hand Lyonel steadied him; with the other he took the cup back.

"I haven't taken you for such a smart mouth," he murmured in Dunk's ear.

Dunk felt the lord's heat against his right. *It's a jest. He's jesting.* He watched Lyonel set the cup down and refill it.

The words slipped out before he could stop them:

"You've only had the polite half of it so far."

Something inside Dunk died on the spot. *What am I doing?! This is not the time—*

But Lyonel barked a laugh, the sound of it thick and familiar.

"I *would* still take you," he said, looking up at Dunk. The tone made his knees weak.

As Lyonel slipped past him with the full cup, Dunk felt his other hand—hidden from the guests—trace across the small of his back. It slid along his side, and warm ringed fingers brushed his own.

"Come with me, ser."

* * *

The lord bounded up the stairs with a light step—past the throne room, past Egg's floor, past Dunk's own chambers. Dunk kept pace, yet could hardly believe his luck.

Finally, Lyonel shoved open a massive door and stepped inside. Only the lord's own chambers could be so grand.

A maid, startled by his bark, scurried past Dunk. He turned sideways to let her by, then ducked his head—missing the frame by a whisker. When he closed the door behind him, he thought: no one in the castle could doubt why the lord brought men like him up here.

But Dunk had no room in his head to truly worry about any of that. Lyonel stopped by the hearth and turned, cup at his lips. The great branching antlers of his crown cast menacing shadows on the wall. The lord's dark gaze travelled slowly over every inch of the knight's huge frame.

"Take your clothes off," he ordered.

It frightened Dunk almost as much as it stirred him. He wasn't about to be punished… was he? Dunk touched bis rope belt, glanced at Lyonel again—*You sure?*—and obeyed. He untied it and looked around for somewhere to set his sword. The nearest table was only a few steps away, but he doubted he was allowed to move. Dunk knelt and laid the sheathed weapon carefully on the floor so it would not clatter.

Lyonel watched.

"Your hands were covered in blood," he said. The voice sounded bitter. "I couldn't tell if it was yours or the beast's. I remember thinking: you're a knight, but it's not supposed to be like that. I kissed them, but what good did it do? Only got myself bloodied as well."

Dunk froze. The words felt enormous—more important and weighty than his entire existance. He had a vague memory of Lyonel taking his hand… *Seven*, had the lord truly kissed it in public?

*He crowned me like that, too—for everyone to see.*

Anger flared in Dunk, but not from outrage—only from deep, helpless confusion. He unfastened the cloak pin. The cloth slid off and pooled on the carpet in a half-circle.

Stripping off the clothes he had so painfully tugged on earlier because of his wounded arm felt *ridiculous*. He would have to dress again later, and wash again—

"And after the hunt the knight who slew the beast never came to the feast." Lyonel stepped closer. Even when Dunk was not looking, he felt the man's presence like a hot brand at the edge of his vision. "The guest of honour refused his own honour and ran off, because apparently freezing his arse in the rain is more pleasant than my company."

Dunk frowned.

"Lyonel—"

"Shut your mouth," Lyonel said. "Do you know how many eyes were on me while you were *gone*? Now your shirt, ser."

***Why** should they **care**?* The picture refused to come together in Dunk's head. He was starting to feel like some fickle tease playing with the lord's feelings. It was *complete horseshit.* With feeling he yanked at the ties at his collar and wormed his good hand under the fabric to pull the shirt off. He could not avoid tugging the wound; he hissed in pain as he worked his bad elbow out of the long sleeve.

Lyonel tapped the rim of the cup with a fingernail, waiting.

The shirt whispered to the floor beside the cloak.

Another step. The antlers loomed with a silent threat. Without warning, without a word, Lyonel raised the cup over Dunk. A thin stream poured down onto his head. It ran down his face, dripped from his brow, slid down the back of his neck, then between his shoulder blades. Drops fell onto his hairy chest and soaked into the waistband of his breeches.

Dunk pressed his lips together and stubbornly refused to move.

"This," Lyonel said quietly, "is for making me look a fool before every vassal I own. For thinking you could toss me aside like some used stable boy…"

"I didn't use you."

"Oh, *didn't you*?" Lyonel's grip tightened on the cup. Dunk flinched, but the lord hurled it past him. It rang loudly off the floor and tumbled across the carpet. "Then explain what is wrong with your *fucking rat*. Why is his head shaved? Why were you looking for a white-haired prince this morning?"

*Shit.* He had worked it out. Dunk crushed down the spike of terror. No—this meant nothing yet. Maybe he had simply guessed… Except Lyonel was no fool. To deny it or dodge would only insult him.

Dunk ran his tongue over his teeth and chose words with care.

"I made a promise," he said firmly. "Please don't make me—"

"So you are a sworn man, Ser Duncan? Is that why you would not swear fealty to me?" The familiar hand seized his jaw. Rings dug into bone. Lyonel forced Dunk to meet his eyes. "And what was your plan? To spy on me? Stir up a war?"

"What?" Dunk's brows shot up. For a moment he even forgot he stood half-naked and dipping with wine. "What are you talking about?"

"If I had kept you two in my castle even an hour longer, the dragons would see it as holding a prince hostage!"

What nonsense was this? Dunk caught Lyonel's elbows in a firm grip, as if he could force understanding into him with touch alone.

"Lyonel, it is nothing like that. I swear. Promise or not, I never swore fealty. I'm still just a hedge knight, and Egg serves me. We travel. I teach him anything I—"

"They sent the king's grandson with you? After you knocked teeth out of another?"

Dunk finally lost his temper. He almost stamped on the lord's foot just to bring him to his senses, but caught himself in time. The half-formed impulse already moved him: he surged forward, towering over Lyonel—

And redirected at the last second, dropping clumsily to one knee.

"My friend," Dunk said with all the heat of a man weary of a stupid quarrel, "I swear by the Seven that I meant no harm to you or your house. I have given no oaths except the one to watch over Egg. I don't know why I, of all people, was trusted with it, but that is not for me to question. Maybe his father wanted to be proud of at least one of his sons."

Above him the lord drew a noisy breath. Dunk kept his eyes on the floor.

"Egg doesn't give a damn about politics, Lyonel, I swear. He is a good lad. He loves ships and building. He wanted to see your keep because they say it was raised with magic. Or—with the help of magic. You know better than I do, I won't lecture you about your own castle."

Movement at the edge of his sight. Weight on his head. A hand?

Ringed fingers combed through wine-soaked hair.

"…And what of you, ser?"

Dunk sighed and looked up.

"I… wanted to see you again. We were passing close to the Stormlands anyway. And, truth be told, we were hungry. Our salt pork had run out, and the nearest port was still a week away."

Lyonel was silent. A strange look had settled in his eyes—the look, perhaps, of the Lord of Storm's End when he felt defeated.

"You travel with the king's grandson and can't afford anything better than salt pork and a moth-eaten cloak?" At last Lyonel gave a soft chuckle. "You are hopelessly noble, Ser Duncan."

"Egg was crying all morning," Dunk added quickly, sensing an opening. "Woudn't be good to force him to stay. But during the hunt he made friends with some kids, it seems, so he changed his mind. That is all, I swear."

"Obviously. Who do you think arranged those kids for him?"

Dunk's lips twitched despite himself.

"Lyonel…"

"That is why I'm coming to the conclusion that you are telling the truth. The moment your boy stopped sulking, here you come trudging back into my hall looking like a whipped dog."

"You believe me?" Dunk whispered.

"Damn you to the seven hells, Ser Duncan, but yes. Only the truth could be this foolish." Lyonel sighed. His fingers in Dunk's hair fell into a slow, soothing rhythm, as though petting a dog. "You are probably the only man in my castle without at least *some* kind of agenda. Everyone wants something from me. But not you."

*Well… the more you give me, the more I seem to need.* Dunk smiled without meaning to. Lyonel noticed at once.

"What is so amusing?"

"I don't know if it counts as having no agenda when all I'm hoping is that you'll kiss me again sometime."

The breath left the lord. Dunk stared up in alarm.

"Lyonel?"

Lyonel did not answer. He twisted his fingers in Dunk's hair and covered his mouth with his own—falling on him like a hawk, the antlers slicing the air with majestic warning. Dunk kissed him back, but his mind had a moment to marvel at the sudden heat of it. Still on one knee, he felt Lyonel's height for the first time, noticed the solid

breadth of his shoulders. Perhaps this was how people felt when they looked up at Dunk.

Without breaking the kiss, he rose slowly to his feet, one hand supporting the lord's back and drawing him against his chest. The wine on his skin soaked into Lyonel's tunic. Lyonel gave a muffled, low growl.

"Oh, Ser Duncan." Their lips parted, but Lyonel pressed Dunk's face to his neck, as though inviting more kisses there. The massive antlers tilted with slow, heavy menace. Dunk ducked carefully and pressed his mouth to the warm, musky skin that smelled of wine and smoke. "Only you could think of desire as having an agenda, eh? I dread to know what you would think of me if you knew wh—"

Dunk did not let him finish. He bit down on the damp spot he had kissed into Lyonel's neck and sucked sharply. Lyonel gave a soft grunt and pulled him away: the fist in Dunk's hair yanked his head back like a dog on a leash.

"You have an agenda too?" Dunk asked, heaving. That roughness—part challenge, part test of strength—stirred a boldness in him that he rarely felt.

Lyonel laughed. Dunk felt it vibrate against his chest, the sound rich and beautiful.

"About you? Oh, I've got plenty." Still panting from their kiss, Lyonel released him and reached for his own breeches. "I liked you better downstairs. On your knees, ser. The Seven may preach against greed, but I swear I'll fucking ride you to death."

Blood rushed to Dunk's face—and, against all sense, he grinned.

## Chapter 4

Dunk's heart hammered so loud he was sure Lyonel could hear it. Hell, the whole castle could probably hear it—the servants, the guards, every last man-at-arms would come running to see what the sly lord had done to get him so worked up. Dunk dropped to his knees. Or rather, he crashed down like a sack of grain. His joints popped in the rainy chill. He didn't even notice.

Those clever hands were already at work in front of him. One fisted the finely embroidered tunic high on Lyonel's chest; the other yanked at the laces of his breeches until the undershirt spilled free. Under the layers lay the flat, hard plane of his belly. A thick line of dark hair arrowed down into the linen. Each breath made his ribs sharpen under the skin.

Holding his tunic and shirt out of the way, Lyonel drew himself out of the loosened breeches in one smooth, practised pull. His cock was already thick, flushed dark from the swell. Dunk felt a shiver run straight down his spine. Lyonel's ringed hand curled around the shaft, gave it a lazy stroke, and the gold caught the fire of the hearth-glow.

"…You look good on your knees, Ser Duncan."

Dunk looked up. Lyonel was grinning, eyes bright with that same victorious gleam he wore after unhorsing a man on the tourney field. *Am I just another foe he means to break?* The thought should have stung, but it didn't. Lyonel stood there tall and magnificent, black curls wild, the stag antlers looming like some old god's crown. He looked like a forest king straight out of the Age of Heroes. Dunk might be proud, but he wasn't blind. Yielding to a man like that wasn't shameful. There was a kind of honour in it—same as losing a fair fight to a better warrior. Only this time he was laying his heart at the feet of the finest man in the Seven Kingdoms.

"You look good too," Dunk blurted. Heat flooded his face the instant the words left him. Seven bloody hells, what kind of fool says that? Lyonel was a *lord*, not some court *lady* to be *sung about*—

Lyonel gave a low chuckle—his dark eyes flicked aside, tongue flashing between his teeth. For half a heartbeat he looked almost shy. Almost. But the Laughing Storm could never be shy, could he?

"I'm irresistible, I know. But you don't have to just *look*, ser."

Dunk's throat went dry as Dorne. He swallowed, tongue thick, and dragged his gaze back to the heavy cock in Lyonel's fist. The lord stroked himself slow and sure, like he owned every second. How many Dunks has he had before?

"…Yeah," Dunk breathed, and reached out.

He took hold of Lyonel's hips. The wound in his right arm pulled, but pain was an old friend; a knight got used to it. Lyonel rocked forward to meet him. He twitched when Dunk pressed his forehead to that hard belly. The muscles jumped, then melted into his touch. Dunk sucked in the thick, furnace-hot smell of him and let his exhale roll down to the hairy groin. It felt *good*—skin on skin, being close.

"Oh, ser." The ringed hand slid to the back of Dunk's head. Fingers threaded gently through his hair. "My sweet boy."

In Lyonel's low, purring voice was something cruelly tender. His words sank straight into Dunk's gut and turned over slow, heavy as millstones. Being called *boy* by this man did strange things to him. Every time it sounded like a promise: *I'll look after you*. No one had looked after Dunk in his whole sorry life. In bed he had expected mockery, or irritation at his clumsiness. That was the only schooling he'd ever had—fuck it up, get laughed at, remember the lesson next time. Lyonel hadn't yet laughed at him. Sometimes Dunk almost wished he would. It would have been easier than his steady patience.

Dunk had no answer, so he simply rubbed his good hand up Lyonel's thigh. Then kissed the warm skin of his belly, then lower, lower still, until his cheek brushed the hot, hard length of him.

"Ever think about sucking a man off, ser?" Lyonel's hand smoothed down his neck, trying to soothe. It wasn't enough to quiet Dunk's frantic heart.

"Yeah." Dunk brushed his lips against the crease where thigh met groin. Swallowed nervously. "Yesterday. And today. Thought about doing it— to *you*."

"Bugger me sideways," Lyonel groaned, head tipping back—so sudden his antlers cut the air. "You're a fucking *treasure*, ser."

The praise hit just as Dunk pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the root of him. Embarrassed, he sucked in a sharp breath through his nose and—half kiss, half clumsy affection—sealed his mouth around the sac. It drew up tight under his tongue. The cock beside his face gave a heavy twitch, responsive and honest. Dunk's own prick had a mind of its own too, but there was something raw about seeing a proud lord like this—unable to hide how badly he wanted it.

And all it had taken was kisses. Or maybe the way Dunk had stood there and let himself be soaked in wine. Or stripped, no questions asked. Or the way he sang praise before Lyonel's vassals. To Dunk they were small things. Yet somehow this hedge knight had the Lord of Storm's End trembling.

"Ser. One moment." The hand that had been stroking his cheek slid to his jaw. Dunk looked up. Lyonel brushed a thumb across his lower lip with impossible gentleness. "Open up. Let me teach you a trick or two."

Dunk didn't understand at first. Only when Lyonel nudged did he part his teeth. Two fingers—index and middle—slid in, rings cool against his tongue. *Like a man checking a horse's mouth before buying.* It should have felt insulting. Instead Dunk's foggy mind decided it was the hottest thing.

Lyonel pushed deeper. Once. Twice. Dunk's mouth flooded with spit; he tasted metal and roasted chicken from supper. He swallowed and his tongue dragged over the fingers. *This is what it'll feel like when it's his cock instead?*

"Good lad." Lyonel stroked his tongue like it was his small, shivering pet. "Now careful—mind the teeth when I—"

The fingers drew back and scraped lightly on the way out. Dunk relaxed his jaw at once. Lyonel hummed approval.

"Quick learner." This time he pushed in sharper. Dunk met him with his tongue; fingers slid smooth, no scrape. "Such a sweet mouth. And no one's had it yet… What a waste."

Heat flooded Dunk's cheeks. But Lyonel wasn't satisfied with just making him blush. He let his tunic and shirt fall around his cock, then caught the back of Dunk's head and held him steady—trapped him between the fingers fucking his mouth and the palm that wouldn't let him pull away.

Dunk huffed through his nose. His eyes slid shut. Everything else peeled away—his worry, his spiraling thoughts. Nothing left but the slide, the stretch, the taste, the rhythm. Lyonel knew exactly how to use him. What he was good for. In moments like this Dunk's head went blessedly quiet. No ugly doubts. Someone who knew his business simply told him what to do. All he had to do was follow.

"Let me just—" The fingers sank until the webs pressed against Dunk's lips. He gagged, back of his head ramming into Lyonel's palm. A wet, ugly sound tore out of his throat as the fingers withdrew. "Remember: don't take it this far. Unless you want to show me again what you had for supper."

Dunk's mouth felt suddenly empty. He panted.

"Sorry," he muttered, grabbing Lyonel's hips. "Give me another chance. I can do it. I swear."

"Ser Duncan." The spit-slick hand tilted his chin up. Dunk looked up, pleading. Lyonel wasn't angry. He looked— *wary*, almost. "We're having fun here, yes? Enjoying ourselves. Not sitting a bloody exam at the Citadel. Let's keep it simple."

Dunk sighed and pressed his face to the warm cloth over Lyonel's belly. He already missed the feel of his skin, the way the curls at his groin tickled his cheek. His breath ghosted over the base of the cock. He'd have to bend awkwardly to reach it with his mouth.

*Actually…* Dunk settled back on his heels, pulling Lyonel closer. The lord stepped wide, bracketing Dunk's thick thighs. Dunk met his cock with his mouth and—maybe it was wrong, maybe it was stupid—*kissed* it the way he would kiss a mouth. Small, careful pecks from root to head. He'd learned how to kiss by now: how to suck lightly, how to nip, how to use his tongue. Lyonel sent out a sigh above him. Then, both his hands cradled Dunk's head—and shut the whole world out.

Darkness swallowed him. Eyelids closed on their own. Dunk felt his way to the head, kissing, and licked the salty musk away until his mouth watered. A low, approving rumble rolled through Lyonel's chest. Dunk opened wide, relaxed his jaw the way the lord had taught him, and swallowed the tip.

It was thick. Smooth. Took up far more room than fingers. And the further Dunk sank, the less room there was. Lyonel let out a grunt; the cock throbbed on his tongue.

"Those fucking lips of yours, Ser Duncan…"

*Nothing special*, Dunk thought. Just pink as any girl's—all of Flea Bottom mocked him for it. But the thought fled. All that stayed was the hot, solid weight on his tongue. He'd never done this to a man before, but some deep, wordless urge rose up: not just to hold it, but suck. He drew deeper. At first, the dry skin dragged at his lips; but when he drew back, the shaft glistened with slick.

Lyonel's chest was heaving. His belly moved steady under the tunic. Calloused fingers stroked behind Dunk's ears. It became startlingly quiet. In his heart and in his head. Just the same simple motion, over and over, and everything would be *all right.*

When Dunk cracked his eyes open, he noticed Lyonel didn't fit. His lips only reached halfway down the shaft. There was still so much left. Did the lord's cock feel lonely the way Dunk's mouth had before it was filled? Dunk wrapped his good hand around the base. Only a few fingers fit; his palm was so big the rest of the shaft would have disappeared inside of it.

That made it easier to guide. Easier to learn as well. Flick the underside with your tongue and the sounds overhead grow louder. Lick the tiny slit and the tone turns sharp, desperate. Dunk knew some spots on himself were more sensitive—seemed every man was built the same.

"I see you've taken to it, ser." The hands left his head and settled on his shoulders. Lyonel leaned on them and rocked his hips forward. Dunk took him deeper, braced with his hand so he wouldn't choke, and Lyonel eased back smoothly. "Such a grave look on your face…"

He said something else. Dunk missed it. He simply leaned in again, hungry, but the hands on his shoulders stopped him. Dunk made an unhappy noise as the wet cock slid free.

"Ser." The voice was insistent. So were the hands.

"What?" Dunk looked up, irritated. Lyonel was watching his face.

"You've gone awfully silent."

Dunk bought a second by wiping the spit from his chin. It was soaked.

Truth was, he didn't quite understand what Lyonel wanted. Talking with a mouthful was impossible, not just rude.

"…Sorry."

Lyonel didn't answer. Dunk stared at his cock with open longing. Wet and gleaming, it all but begged to be back in his mouth.

"You should stop apologising so much," Lyonel said at last. "I'm trying to figure out if this is alright."

Anger flared. Dunk lifted a scowling look. *Are you joking?*

"It was till you stopped me. What's wrong?"

Lyonel—because he was an arse—barked a sudden laugh, half relief, half something warm, almost fond. Instead of feeding Dunk his cock again he grabbed his shoulders and hauled him up. Dunk rose heavy; blood rushed to his head and black filled his eyes. But when Lyonel's mouth crashed into his, he met it hard. Lyonel made up for his teasing with tongue—it was smaller than fingers or cock, but still good.

In the kiss Dunk wrapped a spit-slick hand around Lyonel's prick and stroked firm. Lyonel groaned into his mouth, the sound raw and needy.

Their lips parted again.

"Seven fuck me bloody, Ser Duncan. Are you sure you've never done this? I mean, Mother's fat cunt, you're a natural."

*Oh. His chatter returned.* Slightly annoyed, Dunk leaned in and set his teeth to the lord's throat. Lyonel groaned at the ceiling, head flung back. The antlered crown almost slipped from his curls—the lord's hand jerked from Dunk to steady it.

"Change of plans." Lyonel stepped back a fraction; Dunk stubbornly caught his hips, the distance felt wrong. With the familiar motion the lord lifted the crown from his head. "It pains me to tear you from this, but I mean to sample every last thing tonight. Who knows, Ser Duncan? You might try to ride off again tomorrow—makes no sense anymore to wait."

"Dunk," he said suddenly.

"Hm?"

"Just Dunk."

Lyonel stared at him a moment. Then pressed the crown to his chest and touched Dunk's face with the other hand, gentle.

"That's what your family called you?"

*I never had a family. Not till Ser Arlan. He was near enough a father. Egg's near enough a brother, though he's from the top of Aegon's Hill and I'm not.*

But Dunk had no time or heart to drag Lyonel through the miserable details of his childhood.

"If you want, call me Dunk. Instead of ‘ser'."

Lyonel closed his eyes and rested his forehead against Dunk's lips, sighing. His palm slid from cheek to neck.

"I do want this, actually," he said quietly. "So very much."

He kissed him again. This time it wasn't just raw need and fire. It was something quieter. With that street-honed instinct no Flea Bottom orphan could survive without, Dunk sensed—his plea seemed to move the man deeply.

*He's too good to me.*

Not thinking, Dunk tightened his grip on the lord's hips. The stitches over his wound pulled; he muffled a grunt and let their mouths part. Lyonel's palm immediately found the maester's bandage on his arm.

"Careful with that, dear. I still have plans for using it."

Grinning, Lyonel took the antlered circlet and shoved it into Dunk's hands. Dunk smiled back. *I know what you want these hands for.*

"Put it over there, where the swords hang." Lyonel jerked his chin at the long table against the wall; an impressive rack of weapons gleamed above it. "Find oil in the box. Take an unopened vial. We'll want plenty."

He moved to walk past Dunk, but Dunk froze where he stood.

"You serious?"

"Hm?" Lyonel glanced back. "Oh, no, no. I'm not rejecting you. How could I let you go, my glorious knight?"

He leaned past the circlet and kissed Dunk's bare shoulder where the wine had dried. Dunk stopped understanding anything at all.

"…I'm not polishing your sword."

Lyonel pressed his forehead and shook with silent laughter.

"Fair point—you've already handled that splendidly." He pulled back and clapped Dunk's shoulder. "Have mercy, dear. I mean to survive our lovely tumble—and do it again at least fifty more times."

Dunk stared, stunned.

"*Fifty*!—"

So this wasn't some passing fancy. Not like the hunt or the feast or the tourney where the lord tried to chase his boredom away. Taking shameless advantage of Dunk's shock, Lyonel leaned in and caught his earlobe between sharp, hot teeth—a whole army of shivers marched down Dunk's spine; his cock throbbed hard in his breeches.

"You must have already learned," Lyonel rumbled low, "that I'm a greedy bastard, Ser Dunkan. I mean—*Dunk*."

* * *

By the time Dunk returned—crown left behind, fresh vial clutched in his good hand—the lord had already shed every stitch of clothing. He lay naked on the bed, lazily stroking his softened cock. Dunk felt a flash of irritation at himself. It happened to him sometimes, too—when he got too distracted. *Shouldn't have started asking about names and such…*

Lyonel, however, looked entirely unbothered. He just bared his teeth in a grin.

"You just gonna stand there gawking, or what?" He lifted his hand from his cock and slapped the inside of his own thigh the way a kennel-master called his favourite hounds. "You should be *here*."

*Gods*—Lyonel had spread his legs for *him*, wanted *him* between those wiry thighs. Dunk planted one knee and his oil-clutching fist on the mattress, then hauled himself up. The bed gave a mournful creak. It was the biggest he'd ever seen. Soft as a cloud. Better than the one in his chambers.

Lyonel dragged him closer. Their mouths crashed, refusing to part even when the lord rolled them over to climb on top. Dunk fell gratefully onto his back. Lyonel covered him with his frame, still kissing, grinding down on the cock trapped in Dunk's breeches. Dunk moaned into his mouth. *Hells! Finally some relief*— He hooked the arm with the vial around Lyonel's neck, and the lord gave a satisfied huff. *Don't you dare stop.*

Lyonel let his full weight settle, and his body compressed Dunk deliciously against the featherbed. The lord's hand slid down from his collarbone, ruffling the pale hair on his chest, and then spread over his right pec—squeezing soft, meaty flesh.

"Dunk, forgive the bluntness," Lyonel murmured against his mouth, "but gods damn, those are some fucking *perfect* tits."

Dunk flushed crimson. Compared to him Lyonel was lean, all hard edges. Dunk looked like he ate at the high table every day instead of surviving on salt beef. *Body of a miller, not a warrior.* He ran through four sarcastic replies in his head, but discarded every one. Finally he managed:

"Any woman would have a bigger—" He broke off with a gasp as Lyonel ducked his head and sealed his hot mouth over the nipple.

No. No! This was too much. As if Dunk weren't a man at all but some– *bride* the lord was warming up for the wedding night. He didn't even need all that—his cock was iron-hard already, and Lyonel was still rubbing against it. But those teeth, that clever tongue, those lips…

Well– no. But maybe– *oh, crap.* While Lyonel worked his right nipple, his hand found the left. Dunk was caught in a double trap—triple, even, since Lyonel hadn't stopped grinding on his cock either.

"Wait." It pissed Dunk off how badly he shivered the instant Lyonel's calloused fingers started rolling his left bud. "Lyonel, stop–"

Lyonel released him with a wet pop and looked up. Curls kept dropping into his eyes—like that, he looked bold and lawless.

"What, you won't let me play with these pretty milkers?"

*Oh, Seven.*

"*Don't.*" Dunk was already writhing under him like a maiden. And now *that* word.

"Ugh, you are no fun." Lyonel sucked the nipple back in, biting and nibbing, and then let go with a soft sound. "All right, my boy. I've got plenty of other plans for you anyway."

The lord *actually listened*? To him, a hedge knight? Dunk was genuinely surprised. A little… disappointed, even. But there was no time to examine it—Lyonel sat upright on his hips, pressing his arse down on everything that so dearly missed his attention.

"Give it." Lyonel took the vial, muscles flexing as he worked the stopper. He was a strong man. Dunk could have pinned him in a fistfight, but with swords Lyonel would have danced circles around him and left him bleeding.

The oil popped open. Lyonel held it out. Dunk dipped the fingers of his good hand and scooped the cool, thick mass. Good for polishing swords. *And— not only that.*

He wrapped his oiled hand around Lyonel's half-hard cock and stroked, spreading the oil in a couple smooth passes until it glistened.

"Oh–" This time Lyonel sounded more puzzled than pleased. "Dunk, what are you doing?"

Dunk jerked his hand back. It was still slick, so he held it over his own chest in case it dripped—after the wine earlier, it didn't really matter if it was him.

"You said I've got rough hands."

"Aah," Lyonel drawled. He leaned closer, gaze intense. "You need the oil so you can fuck my brains out of me."

Dunk wished the bed, the floor, and three storeys of tower would swallow him whole. All he managed was a nervous chuckle.

"Holy fucking–" Then, before he could stop himself: "You mean—right now?–"

Lyonel huffed and stroked his shoulder.

"Got something against the idea?"

Thoughts scattered like leaves in a gale. He needed to change position, didn't he? Lay the lord down, climb atop… Dunk's body moved before his brain finished the plan; he started wiggling under Lyonel, trying to push himself up on the good elbow.

"Easy there. Where do you think you're going?" Lyonel held him in place. (Dunk could have thrown him off without effort.) "Give me that paw of yours."

Dunk offered the oiled hand, embarrassed. Lyonel turned it palm-up, rose a little, and guided it between his own legs. Dunk's fingers brushed the sac, slid behind the balls, and Lyonel made him sink them deeper.

"Come on, feel me like you mean it."

Dunk curled his fingers and found the tight rim of wrinkled skin. *Oh. Right*. Men had a hole too. He wasn't so thick that he didn't know what other uses it had. He'd seen plenty in Flea Bottom. But he'd never asked himself *how*. It felt so– *small*.

His confusion must have shown. Lyonel cackled.

"You won't break me, Dunk. Nothing left to break. Press inside, dear, but slow. Bit by bit."

Dunk couldn't see what he was doing, so he worked by feel. He rubbed until the rim was slick. *Now, eeeasy*– He pressed with middle finger—the muscle fluttered, then gave, letting the knuckle slide inside. It was impossibly tight.

"Oh… good lad." Lyonel's eyes half-closed, face intent. Dunk knew that look: when every thought turned inward and nothing existed but what you were feeling. "Now start to slowly back out– y*es,* like *that*."

Dunk rocked the finger gently. Friction quickly turned to smooth glide. The oil made wet sounds. Stroking inside, he tried to imagine how much thicker his own cock as. Heat flashed through him. *If he already feels **this** narrow around **one** finger—*

He pushed deeper—down to the second knuckle. Pressing further was awkward; he'd have to twist his wrist, and his left hand was clumsier anyway. Feeling the stretch, Lyonel gave a low growl. Dunk glanced up, worried; smoothed his wounded hand along the tense thigh.

"No, no—you are *perfect*, ser." Thick black brows drew together as Lyonel remembered his plea. Then, he smiled a little. "I mean—Dunk. My darling boy."

As if remembering the world existed beyond the overwhelming expanse of his feeling, Lyonel lowered himself fully onto Dunk's chest. His warm, slick tongue traced along the collarbone. Breath burned against Dunk's neck.

"Don't be greedy," Lyonel whispered. The bites he'd left after the hunt throbbed sweetly under his mouth. "I can take more."

*Right. He wanted more.* There was a problem, though: Lyonel's weight pinned Dunk's arm. So Dunk grabbed his arse with his hurting hand, wincing, and hauled the man higher. Lyonel's cock dragged wet across his belly; hot breath rolled over the ear.

Freeing his left, Dunk squeezed a firm cheek and pressed a palm down the cleft. He *could* reach it from here. *Good*. So he rubbed the soft skin and slid carefully with two fingers. Lyonel's body opened for him, eager. The lord himself moaned and buried his face in the sheets. Dunk wished he had more hands—one pair to please, another to hold him. He ran his palm up the long line of Lyonel's back—spine, shoulder-blades, neck. Feeling it reach his curls, Lyonel gave a choked little sob.

Such fierce, brutal tenderness flooded him at that tiny sound. Forgetting he was clumsy and stupid, he wrapped an arm around those shoulders and worked his fingers deeper. Lyonel groaned low and slid one knee higher, opening wide.

"Gods, you're *huge*," he panted. "Just two and I'm already fuller than—"

Dunk kissed whatever he could reach. Ended up with a damp, sweaty temple. Lyonel lifted his head at once and their mouths met. New moans disappeared into the kiss.

"I like it on top of you," Lyonel whispered against his lips. He didn't even pull away. Funny: the moment Dunk started, eh, *properly* taking him, Lyonel seemed to lose all desire to move.

Dunk smiled.

"I like it under you."

Lyonel sighed, brought a hand to Dunk's face and stroked it. Pressed their foreheads, cheek to cheek. They fitted together like two pieces of a kid's puzzle. Dunk's already big heart swelled, threatening to crack his ribs.

*To hell with it.* Dunk wasn't supposed to, but… he could do something better. He *had* to. He rolled them smoothly so Lyonel lay on his side, head pillowed on Dunk's shoulder.

"Ah—decisive, are we?" Lyonel chuckled and hooked a knee over Dunk's thigh. Dunk caught the leg and, without thinking, slung it over his shoulder to keep it out of the way. Lyonel grunted but didn't protest. Dunk caught the glassy look in his eyes. *He likes it when I boss him around.*

Dunk braced on the arm that held Lyonel's neck. His good hand was free now. It slid between the cheeks and settled. When he twisted two fingers deep, Lyonel groaned hoarse. On the third his head fell back. Dunk bit the offered throat. He felt Lyonel's palm slide over his own neck, grip the nape—the man was clutching him too, inside and out.

"Dunk," Lyonel rasped, "bend your f– No, not that way. Feel for the wall—deeper, yes— *Oh!*"

The muscles clamped *hard* around his fingers. White flashed behind the lord's lashes. Dunk didn't have time to panic—Lyonel cursed with pure bliss, and a rush of filthy pride flooded Dunk.

"Yes, darling, yes—*gods*, you're so– Keep going, dig in there properly. Fuck, just your *fingers* and I'm *already*—"

New thrusts drew sharp, broken moans. Dunk discovered the reason quickly: on the front wall, deep inside, a firm little spot. Every time he rubbed it Lyonel lost his speech. And that was his weapon. He never lost it.

*Bloody hell.* Proud Lord Lyonel Baratheon—the man who could destroy or exalt with a single word—reduced in his hands to incoherent, loud moaning.

All because of Dunk, because of *him*.

"Dunk," Lyonel called weakly. His whole body trembled; the shake reached his voice. "Enough. I need you to fuck me."

Dunk was almost sorry to stop. He was just getting the hang of it.

"I could finish you like that." He twisted his fingers deeper. Lyonel made a strangled noise and clamped a hand around the base of his cock.

"Wait, wait, wait." He was panting between little moans, face flushed dark. "Stop, Dunk, or I will— *Listen*, at my age a man gets *one* good shot a day. The rest are at the Warrior's mercy—fickle, just like his battlefield blessings, and *at least* an hour apart each."

*Ah*. They were different that way. Dunk could have gone again in ten minutes. He eased his fingers out carefully; he didn't want to wait an hour.

When he lowered Lyonel's leg from his shoulder the lord groaned again—far less eagerly.

"Your faith in me is flattering, but I'm not that flexible." Wincing, Lyonel stretched the leg out on the bed. *It's gone stiff.* Dunk rubbed the thigh with his oily hand to get the blood moving. "Fuck me, you've bent me alright."

*Right*. Dunk was still gripping his neck. Grimacing at the wound, he slowly withdrew his elbow. Lyonel slipped free from his hold and flopped onto the bed, slightly dazed.

"Nearly finished me off with that big paw." Even then, the lord caught his hand and kissed it. Dunk felt the same thing he had after the hunt: moustache, beard, soft lips.

*How does he do that? How does he make me blush with such little things?*

"You nearly died?" Dunk asked. "Or nearly came?"

"Yes." Lyonel released him. "Move over."

He pushed Dunk until he settled between spread thighs. Dunk, tired of the last position, obeyed with relief. Lyonel's hands slipped between their bodies. Dunk watched, impatient, as ringed fingers tugged at the laces of his plain wool breeches.

Suddenly there was room. His aching cock sprang free into Lyonel's waiting palm, which closed around it at once. Dunk nearly whimpered when the lord stroked him. *Hells*—his boner was far harder to ignore when someone reminded him of it so eagerly. On the road he was accustomed to pretending it didn't exist, but now—

"Since you've decided to be an utter asshat tonight," Lyonel said, still stroking, "you'll come only after I do. Agreed?"

He had an unfair diplomatic advantage. Dunk nodded frantically; he would have agreed to anything.

"Good." Lyonel released him, breathing hard, and patted the bed in search of a pillow. "Oil, Dunk. Don't forget."

*Yes. Oil.* Dunk had been staring. Lyonel did everything with calm certainty born of long experience. Dunk had imagined his first time differently—with someone as green as he was. But the gap felt enormous between him and the lord.

Dunk knelt between Lyonel's legs. He just shoved a pillow under his own hips. *Strange*. Did the lord's back ache? Did his bones complain before rain? Dunk slicked his own cock with an uncertain hand. Honestly, if not for the order to hold off his release, he would have spent just looking at those spread thighs and the glistening rim.

He'd have to guide with his left, the good one. That meant bracing on the injured arm. Dunk lowered himself as carefully as he could onto his elbow. It pulled on the wound, unpleasant.

"Let me help," Lyonel's hand slipped between their bellies and replaced Dunk's.

*That* was deeply appreciated. Dunk braced on both elbows, and the pain settled. Their foreheads touched. Wine-scented breath brushed his lips. Lyonel was probably watching him. Or not. Whatever. Dunk would have liked to see his face, but then he would surely die on the spot.

The hand on his cock stroked, guiding lower. Dunk rocked his hips and felt himself bump against something firm.

*Won't I hurt him?*

"Go on. Take me." Fingers gripped his nape. Lyonel knew what he was doing.

Dunk repeated it to himself like a prayer.

*Lyonel knows what he's doing.*

*Lyonel knows—*

Tightness gave way. Turned into heat and pressure. It welcomed him gently, the way a sheath welcomed a blade. Lyonel breathed out. A raw sound tore out of Dunk's throat.

The rim closed around the tip of his cock. The ringed hand slid down and claimed his arse. Lyonel gripped it so fiercely as if someone might dare to snatch Dunk away. It was almost funny. Briefly. Then—the hand pushed, and the heat swallowed him deeper.

Dunk groaned. Or tried to. It came out a broken rasp. Fingers ruffled his hair; lips brushed his sweat-damp temple.

"*Such* a good boy," Lyonel purred. He could be so kind. *What did I ever do to deserve you?* Dunk's eyes stung. "My boy. You're my boy. *Say it*."

"You're my boy," Dunk repeated.

He did not understand why Lyonel laughed. The strangest thing was—he could felt the laughter around his cock.

The glide stopped. He could not go further. Lyonel's arse was pressed flush against Dunk's crotch. Dunk had leaned in so far he had no room to thrust. He was afraid to even start moving. Lyonel didn't want him to come yet, but gods, Dunk didn't know how to hold back. He had *no chance.*

"So sweet," Lyonel murmured. He talked a lot. His chatter wrapped around Dunk like another blanket.

He had to do something. More than anything he wanted to feel that tightness pull him in again. Dunk rocked back clumsily and drove forward again. It was easy, the motion. Easier than he'd expected. Harder was not losing his mind to get absorbed

by the squeezing heat. Lyonel under him was warm and pliant. Inside too. No one had ever surrounded Dunk with such warmth.

A thrust. A little surer. Another. Each one came better—the tightness resisted less, and more oil sipped inside. Lyonel stopped groping his arse and held his shoulder instead. He made soft noises, sighing when Dunk moved. Fingers stroked behind Dunk's ear. That was a good anchor. Something to focus on.

Dunk tried to think about his hands. The rings— *One of them could probably buy me a sword.* The calluses made Lyonel's grip rougher. Nothing like the silky heat of his—

*No. Don't.* Dunk growled low and thrust harder in frustration. A cry—Lyonel's hands scrambled; the left nearly poked him in the eye.

Dunk didn't stop.

Nothing could have stopped him.

Distantly he knew Lyonel was moaning—*loud*. Felt the knees clamp his hips. Filthy praise poured into his ear—about size, fathers, and for some reason women's parts. Dunk vaguely wanted to shut it. *Actually*—just one thing could distract Dunk from fucking, drowning everything else. He shifted his left elbow, fisted a handful of curls, and held Lyonel still to push his tongue into his mouth.

The moans became muffled. Lyonel kissed him fiercely. The skin around Dunk's mouth started burning. Each hard thrust dragged Lyonel across the sheet—Dunk scraped his face raw against the lord's moustache and beard.

But it worked. It seemed his brain couldn't handle two overwhelming feelings at once. What a *wonderful* hell of relief. Dunk had forgotten how badly he needed something to occupy his mouth. Kissing brought him back to the place with no thoughts. Just peace. And the slow dance of tongues.

Lyonel moaned into his mouth. Desperate. Rings scraped; a hand wormed between them to the cock rubbing against Dunk's belly. Dunk regretted he couldn't suck Lyonel and fuck him at the same time. Would have needed two Dunks for that. His lower belly tightened. *Damn it. Don't think!*

It grew tighter. A sudden spasm—Dunk snarled into the kiss and kept thrusting through it. Lyonel broke the seal of their lips and cried out. His body shuddered. Wet heat was spreading between them.

The spasms didn't stop. *Fuck*. Dunk squeezed his eyes shut and found Lyonel's throat with his teeth. His mouth kept searching for something. Anything.

*Don't think about how he's clenching around you.*

*Don't think.*

*Don't—*

*Torture* would have been easier! Tears almost spilled. Dunk had to stop. Lyonel kept rolling his hips, still rubbing greedily on his cock. As if he could never get enough of it.

*Don't fucking think about that!*

*Think about… Iola's sour face. Or Prince Maekar. What would he say if he saw you with the Lord of Storm's End?* Dunk tried to picture the tone. *Disgusting. Have you no shame, ser? Debasing yourself like that. You're no knight! Just a* ***fucking*** *disgrace.*

Hells– it was almost hot. Dunk whimpered against Lyonel's neck. He needed to come so badly.

"Dunk, dear," the lord managed, words slurred like a drunkard's. "Holy fuck, love, you nearly sent me to Stranger. Mother's fucking– Dying on a cock like that…"

There he went about size again. In bed Lyonel's talk always circled back to it. Dunk pushed up, breathing hard; their sweaty bodies peeled apart and cold air hit his belly. Lyonel had come hard, white streaks coating both of them.

"Duncan." Those ever-present hands caught his face. Dunk expected the right one to be wet, but Lyonel must have wiped it. On the sheets, probably. "You with me? Sweet Maiden's cunt, I'd make you my concubine just to fuck you day and night."

"Lyonel," Dunk forced out. His eyes wouldn't focus. "Can I?.."

"Can you what?" Lyonel watched him, hands gentle. Then—realization: "You haven't?.."

"Please. Ser. M'lord. I'm begging."

"You son of a bitch," Lyonel swore, almost admiring.

His hands left Dunk's face. Dunk hung his head. Then jerked it up again with a weak moan as hard fingers pinched both his nipples from below.

"Ask permission," Lyonel ordered. He tugged the nipples, pulling Dunk higher. Dunk rocked up to ease the sting and his cock sank back into that slick heat. "And ask nicely."

Fuck, *why* would he squeeze so hard—Dunk whimpered; fucking– *geese* wouldn't pinch like that. He begged:

"Lyonel—"

"Lord Lyonel." The stern voice dripped sudden mockery. "What did you want, sweetheart?"

*Ask him. Like a servant.* Dunk screwed his eyes shut; tears spilled anyway.

"M'lord, please let me—"

"Fill it with your seed?"

"Yes! Yes, please—"

"Dunk, no slacking. Full sentence."

"Please let me come," he blurted.

"Granted. Do it, love."

Dunk collapsed into the waiting arms—bit the sheet so he wouldn't whine—and then *fucked*. Hard.

For those few seconds he wasn't a knight. Wasn't even a man. Just an animal full of primal need—raw hunger that would drive anyone mad.

The wet slaps grew obscenely loud. They probably rang through that room every night. Dunk hoped, in some distant corner of his mind, that no other man made Lord Baratheon howl like that.

It crashed over him like a wave. He needed so little to tip over. The tension that had built and built finally snapped, spilling deep into velvet heat. His cock pumped as if wanting the seed to take root. *Then he'd be my concubine, not the other way round.*

Lyonel was moaning into his ear, though it hardly mattered now; this was more like dogs rutting. Dunk wasn't even thrusting properly anymore. Just grinding. Coming and coming and coming. His face went numb. He was *exhausted*.

…Breathing.

Under him a belly rose and fell steady.

Hands moved over his back—from head to waist. Dunk knew those hands well enough by now to recognise the scrape of calluses. Lyonel stroked him in silence, the way you might pet an enormous, stupid cat. A hound wouldn't be allowed on the bed. A horse certainly not. So Dunk was the cat. Just stupid.

The stitches in his right arm started to throb. Dunk hissed. When he shifted he felt it—his cock was still in Lyonel, just softer now. *He's probably uncomfortable.* Dunk eased back carefully; the shaft slipped free. Lyonel gave a low sigh.

*Well; that makes me a man.* Though after the last day Dunk had lost count of how many times he'd become a man. Did the hands and mouth stuff count? He'd thought so then. When he'd taken Lyonel in his mouth? Of *course*, even more so!

But no one could argue this: they made love. Though Lyonel used other words—a tumble, a fuck. Dunk was tired of those words. Or maybe of the whole crazy day.

"I'd appoint you my personal blanket," Lyonel said. His voice vibrated under Dunk's chest. "Quarter you in my keep and pay you wages, hm?"

Dunk managed only a choked giggle. He wasn't ready for conversation yet.

Lyonel drummed a lazy rhythm on his back with his fingers.

"I keep wondering, Dunk. You're from King's Landing, that's clear. But giants live only beyond the Wall. Is there northern blood in you?" He gave a thoughtful hum. "You are so fucking huge. With you, anyone feels like a mommy's little princess–"

Flattery was one thing, but outright lies Ser Duncan the Tall would not abide.

"You're tall too," he said. Or tried to; his tongue felt thick in his mouth.

"Exactly! That's why you're quite the prize."

If anyone was the princess it was Dunk. Yesterday Lyonel had dressed him in silk and poured him finest wine. Today he'd thrown a hunt as if Dunk was the most precious guest. If he weren't a man he might have thought Lyonel was trying to win his hand. But his time at the Storm's End had been too short—maybe he simply hadn't bored the lord yet.

*Right*. The lord. Lyonel had changed his mind about the title after all.

"M'lord. Sorry, I— lost my head. Got carried away and—"

"What are you on about?" Lyonel turned his head a fraction. "Ah! bugger that. In bed anything goes if it gets me off. But none of it leaves these sheets."

*Uh huh*. It was hard to think. Sleep dragged at him. Fingers worked into his wine-stained hair, and Dunk closed his eyes.

"By the way, you cried a little." Then, the hand moved to his face. Dunk winced and turned away. "Nothing to be ashamed about, of course. But I'm curious… It happens sometimes as one strikes the right chord. Could be a word, or a touch at the wrong moment."

An irritated groan bubbled in Dunk's throat. He was *tired*. He'd slept maybe two hours. So many wild things had happened it felt like a whole lifetime.

"Look, can you…"

Lyonel laughed under him, not offended at all.

"Fine, have it your way. Rest, lad."

# Chapter 5

The shutters cracked like a thunderclap, and a gust of storm howled into the chamber. Dunk startled awake, struggling to pry his eyes open. Outside, the gray sky had only thickened a shade—barely half an hour had passed—yet his body had already shaken off the fevered heat of their lovemaking. Chill was starting to creep in.

"Oh you fuck– Maiden's *cunt*," Lyonel grunted from under him.

He must have woken too—for one icy heartbeat Dunk thought the curse was aimed at him (had he crushed the man?)—but when he shifted sideways and lifted his weight, Lyonel's hand found his shoulder with easy warmth.

"Sorry, lad. I'd stay till the rain itself surrendered."

Only later did Dunk grasp that this was how Stormlanders said *forever*. He blinked, still fogged, watching Lyonel slide to the edge of the bed and swing his legs to the floor. The man sat there a moment, heavy-limbed, spine curved like a candle softened by its own flame. The skin of his belly folded in soft creases; the knobs of his backbone stood sharp between his shoulder blades. Dunk felt a sudden urge to kiss every one of them—they looked made for it, as if carved solely to mark where to press his lips.

Without Lyonel's heat on him, the chill got worse. The mess that spilled between their bodies had cooled into a sticky film. Dunk's breeches—never removed—were soaked through with sweat and clung like a second skin. He still lay there debauched, balls and all. Dunk tucked himself away and knotted the laces, but it helped little. *A bath. That's what I need. Right.*

"Sleep as long as you like," Lyonel said through a jaw-cracking yawn. He straightened, rolling his shoulders; something popped in there pleasantly, the muscles in his back flexed and settled. "Alas, I've got to get back to the bloody business of being a lord."

"Business?" Dunk sat up too. Down below, the celebration still roared—fiddlers had swung into a rowdy jig, boots hammered the flagstones, laughter roared. "Didn't you just throw a feast?"

It came back to him then—the reason why the feast had been called in the first place. Dunk's wounded hand tightened into a fist. Shame washed over him hot and sudden. He had killed an innocent thing that day—hardly seemed right to enjoy himself afterward.

"Welcome to a lord's world," Lyonel said. "Even joy finds a way to become another chore." A beat. Then, as if catching himself, he glanced back, "Except you, of course!"

He leaned in on one fist and stole the shortest kiss—barely a brush of lips.

"You're always a pleasure," Lyonel added, serious. "Even when you're stubborn as a mule."

"Than—" Or was it a backhanded compliment? Dunk eyed him warily. No; seemed earnest. "Thank you?"

Was he supposed to have been offended? But it was nothing, really. *Of course* the lord would someday grow tired of him. Dunk rubbed the last of sleep from his eyes. It was hard to think with gray fur and branching antlers tangled in his head. Sorrow had sunk its hooks deep. Old Ser Arlan would have called it a jealous mistress, the way it demanded all his attention.

Lyonel's face suddenly changed.

"*Oh*. It's *leaking*." Before Dunk could ask what he meant, he grinned like a boy and grabbed his face. "You've bred me, you *stallion*—now I'll have to bear your children—and since you're built like a bloody warhorse, they'll be *monsters*, pray I don't split in two pushing them out—"

Dunk stared, fully lost. "*What*?"

Lyonel barked a delighted laugh, slapped his cheek and rolled off the bed with impossible energy. "Don't worry, I'm not that easy to knock up. While you snore, I'll wash away the evidence—and my bloody maester will have to dose me with moon tea."

A wheeze of laughter escaped Dunk before he could stop it—not because the jest was clever, but because in all his twenty-odd years he had never heard anything so ridiculous.

"You're *mad*," he said, helplessly charmed.

"You've no idea." Naked and barefoot, Lyonel wrestled the shutters closed. The wind fought him, howling, but he won, slamming them home.

The room fell quieter. Sleep, however, had fled for good. Dunk slid to the edge and planted his boots on the cold stone. He was still wearing them, and his breeches were stained with wine and grease. *Iola's going to hate me.*

"I'll sleep with Egg tonight," he said. "Might set up a cot beside my bed."

Lyonel sighed. "If you must." He stood over the washbasin. Without his crown and fine clothes, he was still every inch a lord—back straight, movements sure, as if

every stone in the floor had been laid to serve him. "Your boy didn't sleep last night, did he? Give him a cup of wine—he'll drop like a stone. Works every time."

Dunk made a noise between doubt and agreement, not wanting to linger on it.

"Listen," he asked while Lyonel soaped his hands, "what'll you do with the she-wolf?"

Lyonel's gaze drifted across the wall. He shrugged, still busy. "Have her stuffed, maybe. Or just the skull." He ducked to the basin, flung water over his face with a noisy snort, and raked the dripping curls back. "I want to remember this day—and every trophy it gave me."

His grin was bright, yet it missed its mark. Dunk's gaze finally took in the room—bears, stags, boars were glaring down from every wall with glassy beads in place of eyes. The brazier stood trapped in a web of young antlers—much smaller than those he saw in the pavilion.

He had never paused to count how many deer died for the lord's comfort.

"I could have a cloak made for you from her pelt," Lyonel offered, sensing the shift. "The hedges get cold too."

The words were out before Dunk could swallow them:

"Gods, *no*—"

Lyonel paused, hands braced on the basin's rim, water dripping from his beard. "Then what would you do?"

Dunk thought a moment. "Bury her?"

Lyonel's eyebrows shot up. Then he gave a rough, surprised laugh and reached for a towel. "You are a wonder, Ser Duncan the Tall." He soaked the cloth and began scrubbing his belly from the mess.

Anger flared beneath the shame. "It was her woods," Dunk said. "She hunted there by right. *We* were the ones—"

"I'm not arguing." Lyonel gave him a discerning look. "Take her, then. Bury her if you think it right. She's yours, after all. Bring the boy too—he's never seen a proper burial, I wager."

Dunk looked outside. The sky had gone almost black, rain hammering the panes in silver sheets. The worst time to venture into the night.

"Too dangerous to go back to the forest now," Dunk muttered. "Ground's gone to mud."

"Forget the forest. Use the godswood, ancient ground—proper for such beasts."

*There's a godswood?* Dunk shivered. He had never been easy with gods, old or new, and preferred to keep clear of both. The she-wolf would lie far from her home. Still, the godswood was the only chance to lay her to rest tonight.

"And you?" he asked.

Lyonel twisted and raised his arm to scrub beneath one hairy armpit. "I have to show my face to the vassals before they think I've dropped dead. Though I'd run from their company at the first chance—dry as dust, the whole miserable pack."

Vassals? After *this?* Dunk's head spun. He was beginning to see why most people tumbled at night and left it behind them when morning came. A new day wiped the memory clean. Easier that way—because right now, he wanted to see no one at all.

"But when you're done," Lyonel added, "come back to the feast." His dark eyes washed over Dunk with steady warmth. "We'll drink to her. And sit quiet."

Dunk managed a small smile. He could have lied to himself all he wanted, coming up with clever ways to justify the way his cheeks burned. But even the dullest fool could see who made his blood run hot.

"I'd like that," he said, sincere. "But I still need a wash."

Lyonel looked at him as if he were simple and pointed at the basin. "My chambers are yours. In its *entirety*, I might add."

"Not in that wee tub." *Though a splash would help.* "A proper bath—"

"*Again*?" Lyonel threw his head back and roared. "Seven save us, you're the cleanest man in Westeros!"

* * *

Egg was in the kitchens, devouring ham and chattering with a curly-haired bastard girl while she stirred the pots. Dunk halted in the doorway, suddenly awkward; he had forgotten about Iola's daughter. Other people's children had never left him so addled. Even Egg, when the truth of Ashford came out—Dunk never managed to stay angry for long.

The girl looked about ten years young. Ten was a lifetime. Long enough to learn hard lessons. Youth made fools of everyone—Dunk himself was a prime example. But ten years ago Lyonel had already been past thirty. Thirty was no age for such recklessness. Would a man like him truly saddle a child with the stain of bastardy?

*He has a younger brother,* Dunk remembered. *Could be his. Aye, the ages fit better.*

A shameful relief flooded him.

"Egg," he called, cutting the chatter short. The boy turned. "Fetch two spades and meet me at the gate."

"What for, ser?"

"We're burying the she-wolf. Lord Lyonel says the godswood."

"Godswood!" Egg's face lit up, then fell the second he remembered the weather. "In this rain, ser?"

"We've been wetter before. No arguing."

One of the cooks wiped her hands, vanished into the storeroom, and returned with two oiled cloaks—plain, sturdy sailcloths that kept off water. Dunk thanked her from the heart. *I might need a bath, but not in a downpour.*

* * *

At the gate a one-legged, bald servant waited, also cloaked, a wooden peg below his knee. He was pushing a cart draped in canvas—a cart the size of a body. The day became even grimmer.

"This one looks like a pirate," Egg whispered. He had heaved the two spades, each taller than himself, into the cart and now trudged after Dunk behind the servant.

"He *is* a pirate," Dunk argued. "Lord Lyonel sailed a lot in his youth. Likes to tell the tales. Even fought off reavers on the Stepstones once."

Egg sighed the wistful sigh of every ten-year-old who dreamed of ships. "He's *interesting*, ser."

Dunk felt his face heat. "Yeah."

It turned out the cloaks slowed the soaking but did not stop it. Soon their breeches were sodden to the knee, boots squelched, water found every gap at hood and collar. Yet the cool summer rain washed the memory of hot hands and tight, greedy heat from Dunk's skin. For the first time since waking he felt like himself again. In hardship, there was a familiarity he started missing.

The cart rattled to a low wall within the keep. Beyond lay a smaller enclosure. The servant unlocked a gate—a patch of untouched wood waited inside. Heavy drops drummed on leaves; Egg ducked gratefully beneath the canopy. It broke the worst of the rain, though everything still dripped.

"Hold the gate for me, ser," the servant said. Dunk lunged to help and, in his haste, almost caught the stone lintel with his crown.

The cart trundled past. Canvas slipped, and a great paw flopped into view, bouncing lifelessly over every root.

The wood was no different from the lord's hunting grounds at first. Then they reached a clearing—at its heart stood a colossal weirwood tree; the other trees kept a respectful distance. Red leaves shivered under the rain. Its carved face wept blood. Dunk blinked hard—no, just sap.

"Lord said here," the servant rasped, pointing with a long yellow nail.

This patch of ground was clear of trees. But over thousands of years, their roots had surely woven through every inch of soil beneath the castle. Storm's End must have stood not on bones of fallen strongholds, but upon a net of ancient roots. Dunk tested the earth with the spade, checking how quickly he would strike one. Wet soil clung heavy; he could shift it easily enough, but Egg would struggle.

"Here, then." No choice, really. He did not like the way the bleeding face watched their backs. Dunk drove the spade in, stamped it down, turned the first clod. His wounded arm flared. *It'll have to wait.* "Come on, Egg. Start digging."

They set to work under the drumming rain. Pain settled into a dull, steady throb—never gone, just there. Spades rang on roots; mud sucked and gurgled; the hole grew, but filled again almost as fast.

"Ser!" Egg straightened, shading his eyes. "Look—there's a wreath."

Dunk turned. A small barrow rose near the weirwood, already trodden flat. A wreath of thorny branches had been nailed to the white trunk; the flowers inside had rotted away.

"Someone buried here?" Dunk asked, driving the spade again.

The servant gave an ugly, crow-like laugh, as if the question were stupidly obvious. "Lady Meera Baratheon, ser. Our lord's mother."

Dunk froze, a spadeful of earth suspended. It had never occurred to him that Lyonel had once been a child—small, noisy, needing a parent. He glanced at his squire. *Once Lyonel had been that size, that young.*

"What was she like?" Egg asked, his bright boy's voice slicing cleanly through the rattle of rain on leaves.

"A harpy, no less!" the servant cawed again. "Kept the whole castle on a tight leash, and her sons tighter. Ruled her husband too, Seven rest him. Gentle man, he was. Opposites, but they loved each other—"

"You spin yarns, Frons," a voice cut in. "They hated each other's guts so much they refused to sleep on the same floor."

Dunk spun, spade raised like it could somehow help him. The last thing he wanted in this wood and this weather was someone creeping up behind him.

"Seven hells, Lyonel!" Dunk yelped. Egg snorted with glee. "Warn a man, shall you?"

Lyonel grinned at him and took a wineskin from his belt. He was standing a few paces back, his rain cloak finer cut and dyed black. Rain streamed over his hood.

"I said I'd come. Gods, the Estermont—dull as a closed tomb. Another minute in his presence, and I'd suffocated." He unstoppered a wineskin and took a swallow. "Taking a bath, Ser Duncan? You and the boy look like drowned otters."

Dunk looked away, muttering.

"Is it true your mother's buried here?" Egg planted a foot on his spade, clearly shirking. "My condolences, milord."

"Old times," Lyonel said, mouth twisting. "Father followed her a year ago. I left for a tourney still a knight, but came home a lord." He corked the skin with a savage twist. "Father had been sick for years. Stroke took his speech. He ruled from his bed with nothing but seals and signatures. By the end we couldn't tell if the mark on the parchment was his or a rat dragged its tail across the ink."

Dunk dug in silence, uncomfortable. He had known none of this. *Fool.* Spade in, boot down, heave, turn. A year was no time to outrun that kind of sorrow. He knew it in his bones; Prince Baelor still came to him in fever and sometimes in his dreams. Grief made him reckless. He crossed half the realm chasing nothing but the promise of warmth.

He felt like a thief now—as if he had taken advantage without even realising. He should have spoken to Lyonel properly that first evening. In the throne room—Should have asked how the man was truly faring. Then he would have heard about the father. They could have talked the whole night about things that mattered. Dunk would have stood by him, not– turned the night into mere distraction.

"They kept my lord father on ice till I arrived," Lyonel said suddenly, voice flat. "It didn't help. It didn't help at all. Had to close the boat for the funeral."

Dunk stole a glance and saw it plain—in the last hour Lyonel had drunk more than was wise. Did he come here to pour out his heart at a parent's grave? Yet so recently they had parted merry, joking, Lyonel helping him into his shirt.

"Storm lords bury their dead at sea," Egg said, eager to impress. "Lay them in boats, set adrift, then shoot with burning arrows. Old Durrandon ways."

Lyonel gave him a slow, theatrical round of applause, and the boy flushed. Dunk paused to wipe his wet face on his sleeve, and the *fucking* stitches burned again.

"I'm sorry for your loss, m'lord," he said quietly. "Losing is never easy."

Lyonel looked across the grave at him, as if remembering something. "You said you buried your old man?"

"I did." Dunk had dug that grave as well. "Ser Arlan was like a father to me. A chill took him. After that, I had no one else."

"Well, the she-wolf isn't Ser Arlan. No need to dig to the center of the world." Lyonel waved them on. "Bury her before the hole turns into a pond. And hurry, or the next chill will come for you two."

Getting drenched was nothing new to them, of course, but that would never have convinced Lyonel.

They lowered the wolf's body—Dunk lifted her in his arms and climbed down into the grave. The scent of wet fur filled his nose. The huge head slipped under the rising water, limp like a ragdoll; he caught it, but—yeah, Lyonel had been right, they had taken too long—the pit was already starting to resemble a small brown lake.

*Should have thought this ahead.* Generally, there was a long list of things he should have done.

Egg helped shovel the dirt back. A neat mound rose above the ground—Dunk patted it smooth with the flat of the spade; the wet earth packed well.

"You want to say words, ser?" Egg asked.

Lyonel gave a soft huff, but when Dunk cast a glare, he only shrugged as if saying, *"You are the 'ser' here, not me."* Dunk looked at the barrow. Maybe this much he could give her.

"Well… I suppose I will."

It was not his first speech today, and, thankfully, far fewer people listened. Dunk cleared his throat and rested both hands on the spade as if it were a greatsword. Then, shifted his weight. Proper funerals needed septons, but the she-wolf… hardly a believer in the Seven, was she? Probably hadn't had the wits to suspect they existed. *Beasts can only blame their misfortunes on men.*

"She was brave," he began. "Fierce. And…" He faltered. *Gods*. What else? Grey?

"And a good mother," Lyonel supplied quietly. *Yes. Right.*

"Her pups never went hungry. She fought to get back to them. Deserved to die old, in her sleep."

This time Lyonel said nothing. He stared at the grave, face unreadable.

"Well, now it's sad," he finally complained, displeased.

"Yeah." Egg sighed.

*No help from either of you.* Dunk grit his teeth and knelt, pressing a hand to the wet earth.

"I'm sorry I broke your neck. I didn't mean to. But there's nothing I can do now."

He patted the mound once. When he rose, every muscle complained. He should never have lost himself so completely in the lord's bed. You could chase pleasure as long as you liked, but you could never outrun what you had done.

"Ser," Egg said. "I think I don't like hunting so much after all."

"Me neither, Egg."

"You two are a tragedy," Lyonel grumbled. "Enough. Let's go get *fucking* drunk—do you think I threw this feast for nothing?"

"I'm hungry again," Egg agreed.

Dunk snorted. "So am I." Though far as he could recall, he never stopped being hungry.

* * *

In the hall Lyonel seated them near the great hearth instead of at the high table. The fire's heat was a blessing. Dunk and Egg were almost soaked to the bone, but Lyonel was luckier—only his breeches had taken water.

Dull pain pulsed in Dunk's hand. After the downpour, the warmth sent a shiver through him. They ought to have changed into dry clothing, but Lyonel was already pouring hot wine—full cups for himself and Dunk, a careful splash for Egg—and fixing them with a hard stare.

"Bottoms up, both of you."

Egg glanced at Dunk for permission. *Well, one swallow wouldn't hurt.* Together, they had drank to the ones they had lost. The wine tasted sour tonight; Egg tried so hard not to grimace his ears went scarlet.

"Now eat, for fuck's sake" Lyonel said. "You'll warm faster." He dropped onto the bench beside them instead of returning to the throne. Dunk thought longingly of that bath, but leaving now felt wrong. They had come back from the godswood heavy-hearted, and Lyonel had stirred up old ghosts. It would be cruel to leave him alone with them.

Dunk sat too, rubbing his cold hands. He pulled a roasted chicken closer and tore off a wing. When he glanced at Lyonel, the man watched Egg with an expression that hovered between irritation and reluctant acceptance. Dunk trusted him, of

course—Lyonel was a man of honor; he would not harm a child. But sharing a room with Egg tonight still felt reasonable.

"What a day," Lyonel muttered, and drained his cup.

Yeah. Strange one. Mostly because of Dunk. The quarrel, the hunt, the goodbye in the stables, his walk of shame through the hall, another quarrel and making-up in the lord's bed—and now the burial. Finally, now they sat in full view of vassals and servants, and each of them carried secret marks of their recent lust.

"I wanted to thank you," Dunk said around a mouthful of chicken.

Lyonel raised a lazy brow. "For what?"

"Well—" Dunk gestured between both of them, awkward. "For— everything, if I'm honest. Letting us stay. Letting me bury her beside your lady mother. If I'd known—""

Lyonel wiped wine from his moustache with the back of his hand. "Pfft. Anything for a friend."

"Will you tell us about your mother, milord?" Egg asked, unaware he was half the reason this day was so odd. "What was she really like?"

"Terrifying," Lyonel answered without missing a beat. "Unbelievably sad. Spoke to the wind more than to us. Believed it more, too. And the wind never brings good news."

"Why?"

"Ever since Durran stole its daughter, the wind has hated all mankind." Lyonel leaned closer. *Oh*—a story was coming; the lord loved telling them. "But my mother was no ordinary woman. Ironborn blood on her grandmother's side—Kennings of Harlaw. Explains why I was such a fine sailor, no? Their sigil bears—"

"The hand of the Storm God," Egg breathed, drinking in every word.

*Look at that: Lyonel has charmed you too.* Dunk felt an odd flicker of pride in his chest.

Lyonel snapped his fingers. "Exactly. The terrible Storm God who drowns ships and punishes sailors. You'd think no one would listen to that brat. Yet my mother listened plenty."

"You buried her in the godswood because she didn't believe in the Seven, milord?"

Lyonel paused. "No. Because her death *offended them greatly*."

Dunk's stomach tightened. *Trouble*. Egg had been gaining ground with his curiosity; now it seemed he had thrown every advantage away.

"She climbed to the top of this very tower to the voice in the wind," Lyonel said, voice suddenly cruel, "and it told her to step off. And the Seven do not smile kindly on *murderers*—even those who kill themselves."

Hatred of dragons brought out the worst in him. Or perhaps the subject. Dunk shifted so he shielded Egg with his shoulder.

"Beg your pardon—the boy meant no offense. Your stories are so gripping it's easy to forget one's manners."

Lyonel looked at him, and his shoulders eased. A laugh trembled in his chest; he shook with it and clapped Dunk on the back. Relief flooded through him like warm wine.

"Nah. Takes more than that to offend me." Lyonel drank again. *Ought to ease up on the wine, but who would he listen to?* "In this house no one gets punished for asking. That's my rule."

Dunk and Egg exchanged a glance. The boy wisely chose that moment to excuse himself to the kitchens.

"Change your clothes," Dunk called after him. "I won't be nursing you if you get sick."

"Dry by the oven!" Egg yelled back.

"Curious, this one," Lyonel remarked when they were alone. Dunk glanced at Egg's plate; the boy had barely eaten, but the kitchen maids would fix that. "So full of questions."

"He's a good lad." Dunk looked Lyonel in the eye, firm. "I'd have asked the same."

"Would you?" Lyonel picked up a fork. "Interested in my mother too?"

Dunk hesitated, then reminded him quietly, "You once said the fiercest fighters are the ones their mothers never loved."

Lyonel speared a pickled gherkin and bit down, crunching loudly.

"Aye, speaking from experience."

Dunk could not make sense of it. The part of him that had always ached with being an orphan had fed for years on a single thought: if his mother had known him, she would have loved him.

Lyonel was a legend across all Westeros—witty, deadly, swift as lightning, handsome as a god. Lady Meera had known him for *years*. How could a mother not love such a son?

"Why?" Dunk asked, deep in thought.

"Why what? Why did she hate me?" Lyonel chuckled into his cup. "If only I knew, my dear. The wind never whispers to me. I only know she thought my brother the worthier heir—and never let me forget."

A clumsy longing rose inside—to draw Lyonel against his chest and simply hold him for a little while. But they were not alone, and Dunk had never been good for comforting touches. He felt useless. *Fine friend I am.*

Well… He could at least take his hand. That would draw fewer eyes. But when Dunk looked down, his right sleeve bloomed with brown spots. The blood had come through the dressing and the linen.

"Your stitches," Lyonel said, straightening. "Come—maester, now."

"No need," Dunk said quickly. If they slipped away together again, no one would doubt what they did in private. Although after crowning him and kissing his bloodied hand, Lyonel might have destroyed any chance of secrecy. "I'll go to my quarters—get clean and see to the bandage."

"Alone?" Lyonel's brows rose. "And left-handed as well?"

Dunk let out a shaky breath. He still lacked the courage to speak plain. Yet the raw honesty of the evening—or perhaps the trust Lyonel had shown him—pushed the words out.

"I take too much from you," he spit out. "Your time. Your attention. Y– you know how it is. You've got duties—you shouldn't have to set them aside just to keep me company."

Something like understanding flickered in Lyonel's dark eyes. For a second he looked at Dunk the way only he could—making a man feel stripped bare. His fingers, poised over the goblet like a waiting spider, drummed lightly on the rim.

"You take too *little*, I'm afraid," he said finally.

Dunk nearly bristled—honest to gods, it was *slander*; he *always* needed something from Lyonel, the man must be *tired to death*—but under the table something nudged his thigh. A knee. The hall was full of watching eyes, yet Lyonel had still found a way to touch him.

"Answer me true, Dunk. Do you really think you're not a worthy man? Or was this just a slip of the tongue from your feast address?"

The question rocked him. Dunk looked away. He could not force the answer out; not because he lacked it, but because such words were never meant to be spoken to another man.

Lyonel understood anyway. His dry palm slid onto Dunk's back and gripped the tired muscles of his neck without warning. A protesting noise escaped Dunk—for all the gratitude he felt as those fingers began kneading the knotted muscle, right now it felt they should *not– One wrong look, and everyone would know—*

"Dunk, I'll risk being rude," Lyonel murmured, voice low at his ear. *Seven hells*, his hand—blood rushed so hard the room dimmed, and gooseflesh rose on Dunk's scalp. "There's modesty, my dear, and then there's humiliation. You're dancing far too close to the second."

"I'm not—" Dunk began, but the words died. He ought to stop the man before the whole castle guessed— *fuck,* the touch felt too good. *Outrageously* good. *Seven fucks*, those fingers mattered more right now than his need to protest.

"You needn't remind me," Lyonel went on, thumb working deep, "that you're a humble knight who wants nothing from life but an old elm tree, some salt beef, and the occasional kiss." The low voice and steady pressure made Dunk's eyes want to close. "But when life offers you more, must you torment yourself? That's life's business to offer things. Why it chose you is none of yours."

True enough. Who knew what fate had in store? More hardship, perhaps, paid for with fleeting comfort. Or maybe the worst had passed and a patch of clear sky had shown itself at last.

Dunk sighed and slid his own knee to bump against Lyonel's.

"Sorry," he said. "We were talking about your mother. Didn't mean to—"

"Oh, no, thank fuck we forgot her." Lyonel's warm palm slid lower, leaving the neck, and settled with familiar ease between his shoulders. The easy way it moved across his body made Dunk think of other places he would like it to travel. "Tell me this instead—how long do you and Egg plan to stay?"

"We hadn't settled. Till the weather clears, I suppose."

"In this corner of the world it never clears, Duncan."

Dunk's mouth curved. *Aye, I have already gathered as much.*

"Then till Egg learns every secret of your castle. All of them."

"I could give him a master-at-arms," Lyonel offered, eyes brightening. "Teach him the sword. You too could use a few proper lessons. I might show you one or two of my tricks."

Warmth bloomed in Dunk's chest.

"Settled, then." He nodded, then again for courage. "We stay till the paths dry and I've learned your tricks."

Lyonel looked at him in a way that made Dunk's cheeks heat up.

"I'd shove you right there against that wall," he said slowly, "and kiss you till your mouth burns."

Dunk grinned. A tiny, warm dragon of want curled tight in his stomach.

"Tomorrow, maybe." He rose and, before he could think better of it, dragged his broad hand across Lyonel's back—shoulder to shoulder—just as the lord had done to him earlier after the speech. "By the way– you are right, actually. Best send the maester to me after all."

## Chapter 6

From the next morning their life in Storm's End began in earnest.

Dunk woke early. In the stone hush, Egg snored softly on the narrow cot. How the boy had got there Dunk could not recall, nor how he himself had ended up in the great bed; the bath had left him so heavy and warm that memory had simply melted. Yesterday his head had been iron, thoughts crammed. But today he had slept like a lord—the skull no longer rang, and his body felt light, as though the hot water had washed out every ache and tension. He honestly couldn't remember when he had last felt so perfectly unburdened in his own flesh.

Dunk rolled onto his back. The featherbed sighed and folded round him, yet even that was only half as fine as Lyonel's own bed. If Dunk had slept there he would have woken with the lord beside him, callused fingers drawing slow circles over the hair on his chest, that rough voice murmuring about sailcloth and the savage winds that flogged the Stormlands.

Maybe they would have taken each other again. Dunk could have proved he had learned every lesson of the night before.

Heat climbed his face. So much had happened in a single day, and only now did the truth strike him full. *They had done it.* He and Lyonel—had *done it*, and the shock of it—terror braided tight with delight—sent him first into a cold sweat, then into a flush that left him dizzy.

Well, then. Looked like Dunk hadn't made a complete fool of himself. With a lord as worldly as Lyonel, he had half-expected to fumble like a green boy, but no—it had come easy, almost of its own accord, the way their best conversations did—one word always pulling another behind it. All his life he had dreaded the first time, but when it came to it, he had not been thinking at all. It had simply been *good*. Gods, it had been *so good.*

Restless energy seized him. He couldn't stay in bed another second—Dunk kicked the blanket aside and sat up. He wanted to find Lyonel, to kiss the man stupid, to say something—*anything*—about what had passed between them.

"Egg, up with you," he called, already reaching for the clothes on the dresser. His own lay neatly folded, but he took the things Lyonel had given. Strange how things turned. Yesterday he'd sworn he'd never wear the doublet again; this morning he was glad it had been washed. "Come on, lad. I can't dress one-handed."

The boy grumbled like a bear cub dragged from winter sleep and sat up with a yawn. Only then did Dunk remember that Egg's own day had been no gentler: wolf jaws and new friends and perhaps a first sweet ache for a kitchen girl. While Egg, barefoot in his nightshirt, helped slide the shirt over Dunk's bad arm, Dunk began fishing for what he had missed.

"Sleep all right in the new place?"

"Well enough, ser." Egg guided his right arm into the sleeve. "How's the wound?"

Dunk flexed his fingers; the lad did not miss his chance to fuss with the cuff. The torn muscles gave a sharp tug—harder than yesterday. He hissed through his teeth and soothed his good hand over the wound. The bandage sat almost too tight beneath the linen.

"Only hurts when I move it."

"Maester Irwyn showed me how to bind wounds proper. I can do it for you now."

"You dressed it?" Dunk regretted he had not even looked closely. "I don't remember a thing."

"You were dead on your feet, ser. Fell asleep in the tub. I woke you."

Dunk studied the boy's clean, earnest face. In moments like these he could hardly believe Egg had once lifted a knife over his own brother.

"Thank you, Egg." The lad beamed and tackled his left sleeve. "You like the maester better than swords? Lyonel offered you a proper master-at-arms."

Egg's pale brows drew together in a frown that aged him a hundred years. "I don't need another. I've got you, ser."

"I know, I know." They had danced this same circle before, and every time the boy's fierce loyalty melted something in Dunk chest. "But Lyonel's twice the swordsman I am."

"He is not. You'd beat him in a heartbeat, ser."

Egg believed what he needed to believe. Dunk sighed and rose to step into his breeches.

"So what'll you do with yourself here? Sneak back to the kitchens again?"

He meant to tease the boy into talking about Iola's daughter, but Egg did not rise to the bait.

"Won't we have duties, ser? I thought you'd sworn already."

Tension coiled along Dunk's spine.

"Not yet."

"Why not? He'd pay you wages."

Dunk stared at the laces he could not tie one-handed. Swearing fealty had a fine ring to it in the quiet of his head, but he already carried an oath. *And a loyalty.* He glanced at Egg, who watched him fumble with solemn eyes, every scrap of his small will bent on not interfering.

Besides, the tourney at Ashford painted a clear picture of Lord Baratheon—generous, merry, glory-hungry, and far too fond of the smell of war. Lyonel seemed to dream of it, scenting it on the wind the way old bones sensed coming rain. He had spoken of it only a handful of times, and each time Dunk had disliked the look that came into the lord's eyes.

They *lit up.*

"Would you want to stay?" Dunk asked, dodging clumsily.

Egg sighed. "I would, ser. But we still haven't seen the Wall."

"Summerhall is a fortnight's ride."

The face Egg pulled made it plain he would sooner walk barefoot to the far north than visit his blood. Dunk let it drop.

"Which matters more—the Wall or that kitchen girl?"

"Her name's Vyola. She's older. And her brows meet in the middle."

"Think that's a flaw?"

Egg considered. "She laughs when I jest."

Dunk chuckled. "*That's* a virtue worth keeping."

A knock. Iola entered with breakfast enough for three smallfolk: ham, crusty bread, a fish pie, apple jam, and a tall jug of forest-berry drink. "Ser Duncan," she said with a

shallow curtsy, "Lord Lyonel bids you and your squire attend him in the Sailors' Hall the moment you are ready."

Dunk's heart gave a foolish lurch. Seeing Lyonel again felt like both torment and utter necessity. When the door closed he sat at the table, wondering distantly how he and Egg always managed to do everything backward. The boy was the one to chase noble ladies; Dunk should be chasing kitchen maids.

"You like her at all? Vyola?" he asked, spreading butter over a crust of bread.

"Sometimes she vexes me," Egg admitted, mouth already full. "Then I think about kissing her and it vexes me worse."

Dunk hid a grin behind a mouthful of ham and bread. The lad was well and truly smitten. *Best keep him busy—might be approaching the age.*

"Learn the sword proper and you might impress her."

Egg wrinkled his nose. "A practice blade's not the same."

Over the meal they debated which weapons most dazzled women. Egg, of course, knew more. When they had eaten, washed, and stepped into the corridor, Dunk realised something: Lyonel vexed him too, yet the urge to kiss the man only grew stronger for it.

He stepped straight into the doorframe—CRACK. The impact rang through his skull.

"Careful, ser!"

"Seven bloody—" Dunk clamped a hand to the blooming knot on his forehead and cursed the entire castle under his breath.

*Oh no. No, no, no—*

*Don't you **dare** fall for him, you lunk!*

* * *

Lyonel's laugh rolled down the passage the moment he saw the lump. Of course he had to prod it. The touch only made the blood surge hotter and the bruise throb worse.

Besides, they were not alone. Egg watched curiously from the side, and a lean stranger stood a polite distance away—polished courtier's smile, hand resting easy on the hilt of a curved sabre. Dunk guessed they had been summoned to get introduced.

"Well, well, Ser Duncan! Did you mean to knock my wall down?" Lyonel crowed, arms folded, hip cocked against a red-wood table. He looked rested and, now that he had something to mock, thoroughly pleased. "Keep that up and Durran's keep might fall for the eighth time. Who knows—there could be god's blood in you, not giant's."

The smile he gave felt like it was for Dunk alone. Warmth fluttered low in Dunk's belly. He twitched the corners of his mouth, then caught himself. *Stop that. If you're not in love, then why look like a smitten fool?*

It didn't help his cheeks to stop burning.

They had met in the solar, not the lord's private chambers—thank the gods, or Dunk would have thought of nothing but last night's moans. The vaulted ceiling was painted with a map of stars; the moment they entered Egg gasped, "The legendary Sailors' Hall!"

Lyonel's table sat at the centre, buried under letters and scrolls so long they spilled off the edge. Books that had never made it back to the library were stacked in leaning towers. Dunk regretted he could not read what the covers said.

"To the point, then," Lyonel said, and jerked a thumb at the stranger. The man stepped forward without a word. No older than thirty, leather armour, straight back, strong yet graceful hands. A noble knight, Dunk recognized, *and a good one*. "Ser Ronnel Storm has kindly agreed to give your squire a few lessons, ser."

Egg shrank beside him. Dunk felt the same unease; even if Lyonel vouched for the man, handing a prince to a stranger felt reckless.

"Thank you, m'lord. And your, ser." Dunk eyed the knight warily. "You're very kind."

"It's my job," Ser Ronnel answered, blessedly without zeal. Of course—who wanted to drill a strange boy? Egg looked no more special than any street urchin. "I've heard of your stand at Ashford, Ser Duncan. A true knight's deed."

Dunk grimaced. "I wouldn't call it a deed. The tourney's remembered for the tragedy. Same as me." He added hastily, "Still, I'm grateful, Ser Ronnel. What say you, Egg?"

The boy hesitated. "But… I am *your* squire, ser."

"Learning's good from anyone, especially a warrior. Ser Ronnel will teach you blade-work I never could. Because—"

"I learned the sword at sea with Lyonel," Ser Ronnel supplied, bless the Seven. "We've sailed many waters together. Even the Stepstones."

‘*With Lyonel*'? The familiarity stung like a wasp.

"You served aboard ship, ser?" Egg perked up at once.

"Cabin boy first, then common sailor. For loyal service Lyonel knighted me."

Dunk nearly growled. *How dares he call the lord by name!* The bloody stag, blissfully unaware of his irritation, clapped Ronnel on the shoulder.

"Don't sell yourself short, Ronnel—you saved my hide. Knighthood was the least I could do."

Right then and there Dunk took an instant and permanent dislike to Ser Ronnel—his thin moustache, jug ears, scarecrow arms, and most of all the easy way he looked at Lyonel. They had history—years of it. Dunk did not. He deeply regretted not being older, not having a chest full of stories he shared with the lord.

"So, Egg?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady. "Will you take a lesson from Ser Ronnel?"

"I serve *you*, ser."

Pride flared in Dunk's chest. *Take that, you smug bastard.* But Lyonel gave a nervous laugh.

"Come now, just one lesson! The boy won't be any poorer for it." He looked at Dunk. "What say you, old friend?"

Suddenly, Lyonel's gaze slid down the whole length of him. The look said he had spent the morning remembering the same things Dunk had. *Not only me, then*.

Still, would be foolish to waste the chance. Learning a trick or two from a pirate was no small gift; the skill might one day save the boy's life.

Dunk turned to Egg. "One lesson. Then you show me what you learned."

*And maybe teach me something too.* If old Ser Arlan had heard how often he listened to his squire, the man would have laughed himself sick. But Ser Duncan the Tall might be a fool, yet in a year he had picked up more than a few useful tricks from the boy.

"After that you'll go on teaching me, ser?"

"We'll see." Maybe he'd develop a taste for a shipman's sabre.

"Settled, then," Lyonel said, and gave Ronnel a shove toward the door. "Off to the armoury, you two—blades and armour are already waiting. You stay, Duncan. I promised you a tour of the castle."

Watching the two depart, Dunk said, "Better wait till Egg joins us. He's mad for the story of your cas—"

Lyonel stepped so close the fine yellow doublet brushed Dunk's own—the one the lord had given him.

"You look *fine*, Ser Duncan the Tall," the lord rumbled, voice low and warm.

He smiled. Dunk's lips twitched in answer; he glanced at his patched sleeve. Yesterday it had been torn to shreds. Today, Egg's stitches held it in one piece, wandering like a drunkard's fence.

"Shame about the tear."

"Tear?" Lyonel caught his wrist, fingers finding the mending more by touch than sight. It seemed his eyes were not as sharp as they once were. "Ah, yes. The she-wolf. Pfft. I'll have another made."

Still lordly, he caught Dunk's chin. The touch startled him—perhaps because Ronnel's footsteps and Egg's bright voice still echoed down the corridor, perhaps because the shift from talk to such intimate handling had come without warning.

Lyonel was looking at him closely. Studying. Wanting to kiss?

"Blue," the lord said suddenly. "To match your eyes. I swear, Dunk, I've never seen a blue so fierce."

*Oh.* He was meaning the doublet.

"No need," Dunk said. "I'll end up with more clothes than I know what to do with."

"Admit it—a pleasant problem to have." Lyonel barked a laugh and slapped his cheek, then took Dunk's other hand—big, clumsy, useless. Dunk stared stupidly at their clasped palms. "Come. We've a deal of ground to cover."

They separated before the corridor, but the drum in Dunk's chest refused to quiet. Ronnel might be an old friend, yet Lyonel had never held *his* face, never taken *his* hand, never moaned into *his* ear the way he had last night.

"These bloody smallfolk will put me in my grave," Lyonel complained as they climbed the winding stair. "If they've nothing to pay with, they've nothing to pay with. Gods know the land's thin enough already."

He had been chewing on the peasant question for months. Dunk remembered this dimly from their drunken talk the night he arrived. Lyonel's brother Gowen had gone to sort it when gentler means failed. But other details slipped away.

"Why are they rising?" Dunk asked.

Lyonel waved it away. "My stand beside you at your trial didn't go unnoticed. The crown raised taxes—Maekar's spiteful little hand in that, I'll wager. So I raised them on my lords, they on their vassals, but in the end the peasants sharpening pitchforks

are the ones who work the land. Good luck telling them the accounts simply will not tally unless something gives!"

Dunk stopped dead. "And you throw feasts? Talk of new doublets?"

Lyonel turned on the step above, eyes black and scalding.

"*Enough*. We are not so deep in debt that we cannot throw a *fucking feast*."

*I've been feasting and dressing in silk while the peasants pay?* Dunk's lips thinned in quiet fury. Taking from people who could barely make ends meet was the lowest thing a man could do. He remembered that feeling all too well—belly empty, pockets whistling.

"Lyonel, this is too much," he said quietly, thinking of Ronnel's pay, their chambers, his own ever-growling belly. "Your people are starving and you—"

"Dunk, for the love of gods, *no*." Lyonel came down two steps and gripped his shoulder, heavy and warm. "No one is starving. The peasants sit well on their wheat and fat pigs. In fact, it is *my* coffers that take half what they once did. But I *can* still afford *one fucking doublet*—especially with no wife and no brats sucking me dry."

He would rather bleed his own purse than theirs. Dunk looked at the lord with new eyes—warm despite the quarrel.

Lyonel exhaled, hand sliding from shoulder to nape. His gaze dropped to Dunk's mouth. "Gods, you can't imagine how much I want to twist your arm, drag you against me, and—"

A servant darted past—Dunk realised the steady rhythm he heard was not his own heart but the man's boots. They froze, eyes locked, until the footsteps faded.

In those few heartbeats Dunk saw that Lyonel was not truly angry. Or rather—not angry enough to threaten whatever lay between them. The old spark was back—the same wicked gleam from their first meeting when they had danced and twirled and Lyonel tried to step on his toes.

"You could try," Dunk drawled.

"Twisting your arm?"

"Suppose so. Doubt you've the strength."

"Oh, you *cunt*," Lyonel said with open admiration. "One little victory at your trial and you're cocky already, Ser Duncan?"

He laughed and seized Dunk's elbow and hauled him upward. The last flight and a half passed in a leash of his warm grip.

They had reached the upper floors. Yesterday's tale of Lady Baratheon flickered in Dunk's mind; the fatal window could be close. But Lyonel turned into a corridor that split the level in halves, and the stairs continued upward another flight or two.

The passage was little used. Closed doors, a long runner on the floor. Tapestries hung on the walls; beneath each stood a suit of armour, hollow knights keeping silent watch.

It was the armour Lyonel was heading for.

"Wait—" Dunk protested; the helms were strange, the breastplates older than any he knew. Egg would have named the century at a glance.

But Dunk never got the chance to ask; Lyonel suddenly shoved him against the tapestry. Dunk braced for stone, but it gave like a curtain. Soft fabric swallowed him into a low, hidden alcove, the ceiling brushing his hair. Lyonel followed; his smile flashed. The heavy cloth fell back, swallowing them in velvet dark.

Cold stone met Dunk's back. Hot, solid body pressed against his front, thighs fitting neatly into his palms. Their mouths found each other as though they had never parted. A shiver of pure relief ran through Dunk. All morning the lord had haunted him; now they were hidden, kissing like starving men.

Lyonel's hand fisted in his hair, possessive. He liked to hold on. Dunk answered in kind—crowded closer, biting into the demanding mouth until Lyonel's back arched and his hips rolled slow and filthy against him. The man was a peacock even in the dark—graceful, impossible to fluster.

A strong hand turned Dunk's head. Wet lips traced his jaw, his throat above the collar, then bit and sucked hard enough to draw a stifled groan. In the sliver of light leaking under the tapestry, Lyonel's curls gleamed and the earring winked.

"I missed you yesterday," the lord growled against his ear, teeth grazing the lobe. "Missed these hands. This body. Couldn't sleep for thinking how you fucked me open."

Blood surged south so fast Dunk's head spun. The crude words—words he had known since Flea Bottom—should not have hit so hard, yet they did.

"Quiet," he managed. "We're in a corridor."

"No one comes here." Lyonel's palm cupped him through the breeches, stroking the full length as though relearning it. Dunk's cock jumped eagerly. *Bastard*. He had always been quick to rise, but *one kiss*? It was ridiculous.

The lord's mouth moved lower, teeth scraping the pulse beneath his jaw. "I can still feel how sore I am. Someone was greedy yesterday—wanted every last inch of that *fucking* cock inside—"

"Wait." Dunk caught his wrist at his groin. "Sore?"

"In the best way."

Lyonel tried to kiss him again. Dunk turned his face away, stubborn. "Did I hurt you?"

In the gloom he could not read Lyonel's expression, only felt a warm breath on his face.

"Yes," the lord said, voice vibrating against Dunk's chest. "And I *wanted* it, you great ox."

But nothing could stop the wave of guilt that crashed over Dunk. He thumped his skull against the stone and let out a frustrated breath.

"*Shit.*"

Pain was pain. You endured it, you did not crave it.

"Don't even start," Lyonel warned. His trapped hand began stroking again. Dunk cursed under his breath and gripped the lord's shoulder blade, too weak to stop him. "I *waited* for you. Thought every night about you pinning me down, taking me rough enough I'd feel you for days—on the throne, in the saddle—"

"I don't want to be rough with you," Dunk protested weakly.

Lyonel growled—the same low, frustrated, affectionate sound he had made their first night—and claimed Dunk's mouth again. Dunk took the onslaught, catching bites, letting the tongue plunder. When the storm passed he cupped the lord's cheek and eased him back.

"Tell me if it hurts," he insisted.

No matter how much conviction Dunk put into the words, they seemed to slide off Lyonel. The lord only chuckled, turning his head, and caught Dunk's thumb between his lips. Wet heat enveloped it—it felt so good Dunk suddenly ached to be back inside that tight, welcoming sheath that would hold and rock him like the sea.

But the clever mouth released him with a soft pop.

"Dunk, let me be plain," Lyonel whispered, hand working the shaft through the breeches in tight, perfect strokes. "With a prick like yours there'll always be a little pain. But I *want you*. I want your cock so badly I don't care. I'd ride you from sunup to sundown and never leave the bed."

Dunk's breath caught; his belly tightened, cock twitching hard in Lyonel's fist. A helpless sound tore from his throat. He shut up at once—remembered they were in a corridor—but it was too late; he had already lost. Lyonel slid down his body to his knees. Laces whispered open; breeches and smallclothes dropped. Cool air kissed

the head of Dunk's cock, then a teasing lick across the head. Then wet, scalding heat closed around him, sucking, swallowing, and—gods—Dunk shook all over.

Dunk sagged against the wall, fingers scrabbling at stone as though only the castle itself could keep him upright. Lyonel's mouth moved in a slow, steady rhythm, tongue clever and kind. Somehow Dunk kept from moaning aloud, but his breathing had turned ragged, every exhale carrying a helpless little whine.

The lord's hands kneaded his arse, urging him deeper. Dunk fought the urge. It felt as though anything could shatter the sweet spell. Here behind the tapestry Lyonel truly seemed like a dream-ghost. In the dimness he could just make out lowered lashes, stretched lips, the thick shaft disappearing into that render mouth. The Lord of Storm's End on his knees for a hedge knight. Luck like that was not meant for men like him.

What a dream indeed.

Tension coiled low and hot. He was close. He leaned back against the stone, spreading his legs wider; his arse clenched under Lyonel's hands. A little more—almost—

The mouth slipped off. Cold air stung. Dunk made a wounded noise. Lyonel pressed his face to Dunk's belly, kissing the trail of hair.

Seven save him, it took every scrap of willpower not to growl. In sour gratitude Dunk rested his clumsy hand on the silver-streaked curls, able to offer nothing but his awkward tenderness. The lord's eyes flashed in the dark.

"Easy, my boy," he murmured, lips brushing skin. "Hold my head. Fuck my mouth."

Meaning– thrust with his hips the way he had last night? Dunk hesitated. Lyonel had just complained of pain, of size. Could he even take it?

"Nothing to fear," Lyonel added, reading him effortlessly. "I'll tell you if it's too much."

"...You won't be able to speak."

Lyonel gave a short, amused huff and tapped Dunk's thigh twice—calm and clear. "There. That's the signal. Nothing else you need to mind."

It sounded simple. And gods, Dunk wanted it. He wanted it *so bad*. He took Lyonel's head in both hands, thick fingers sinking into dark curls. Lyonel inhaled sharply through his nose.

"Those bloody hands of yours…" He kissed the side of the shaft, then sealed his lips around the head.

Dunk rocked forward carefully. Wet heat, clever tongue guiding him past teeth. Another thrust, deeper. Holding Lyonel's head like that brought a feeling he could not

describe—raw and powerful. Lyonel could not escape; he simply took it, humming softly around the thickness. He *liked* it.

Dunk grew bolder. Another approving sound. The vibration rolled through Dunk's cock and into his spine.

He forgot the corridor, the servants, everything except the tight, welcoming mouth. He groaned low and began to thrust. Lyonel's hand shot up his body, gripping his arse, nails digging in hard. Still no signal.

When he grew bolder the head bumped the back of Lyonel's throat. Dunk nearly snarled. He wanted to bury himself to the root, drown every swollen inch in that sucking heat. On the next thrust Lyonel opened for him, taking him to the root. The ring of muscle clamped hot and narrow; Dunk froze, panting.

*Seven save me.* So tight. So alive. Lyonel swallowed around him and something inside Dunk's skull simply blanked.

He pulled back just in time. The lord coughed wetly around the mouthful.

"You all right?" Dunk rasped, alarmed.

Lyonel ignored him, gripped his arse, and drove himself forward again, burying Dunk to the hilt.

"Fuck…" Dunk's thighs trembled; his belly clenched in sweet spasm. The moan that tore out echoed off the stone—loud enough to wake the whole tower. It went on and on and he could not stop it. His fingers tangled in curls; he held Lyonel there a few heartbeats longer, savouring the wet heat, the helpless little swallows.

Two quick slaps on his thigh. Dunk released the man at once. Lyonel pulled off, coughing, and sagged against Dunk's legs, gasping like a man hauled from drowning.

"Seven fucking hells," Dunk muttered, half-terrified. He bent, feeling for the lord's back, and tried to pat.

Lyonel's cough turned to laughter. "I'm… fine, Dunk. Mother's mercy—let me up!"

He rose by clinging to Dunk like a tree. Their mouths met, slick and salty with spend. It should have been disgusting; instead a terrible hunger seized him. Dunk licked into him, greedy, and Lyonel laughed into the kiss breathlessly.

"You're impossible," the lord panted between kisses. "So huge I can't breathe. You stuff me full like—"

He broke off with a startled sound as Dunk hooked his good arm round his back, lifted, and pinned him to the wall. Lyonel's knees spread wide; his cock—somehow already freed and dark and straining—rubbed against Dunk's belly.

"Mother and Maiden," Lyonel breathed against his mouth, "you do that with one arm. Could probably fuck me like this, feet off the ground."

*Maybe he could.* Dunk pressed the lord harder to the stone. Lyonel tried to hook his legs around. Though Dunk had already spent, he ground against him; the lord's cock clearly missed attention.

Lyonel moaned into his mouth; Dunk swallowed the sound. For a moment they were back in the bedchamber, bodies moving together. He wished he could take the lord properly right here—spread him open until he could only moan and take and take.

Lyonel pulled back, panting. "Dunk… little more and I'll—"

"Tell me what you need. Anything."

Lyonel tipped his head back and ground, "Gods be good, just *eat me alive*."

Dunk understood by instinct alone. He pinned the lord to the wall with his hips, spat into his good hand—awkward with his left, but it would have to do—and closed his fist round Lyonel's cock.

The lord's bared throat begged to be marked. Dunk bit down, sucking hard. Lyonel clutched his shoulders, moaning high and broken, and his cock pulsed in Dunk's fist. The palm grew slicker. Damn it all—Dunk would have given anything to have that spurting cock in his mouth.

"Dunk… oh, fuck…" Lyonel clawed at his shoulder, eyes squeezed shut, gasping. Dunk did not stop until he had wrung out every drop.

They stayed there, sweaty and stunned. Lyonel peeled away first, sagging against the stone wall. He touched Dunk's fist where it still cupped him. Dunk opened his hand; together they stared at the glistening spend.

"Lick it clean," Lyonel whispered, voice rough. "We wouldn't want to leave traces, would we?"

He seemed to expect argument. There was none. One word was enough. He raised his palm and sucked the taste from his own skin—bitter, sharp, stronger than his own. The lord watched, biting his lip, a low groan caught in his throat.

"You do *everything I say*," Lyonel breathed, astonished. His hand slid from Dunk's chest to his face. "My boy. My good, good boy."

Dunk braced his slick palm on the stone and kissed him again, deep and hungry. Their mouths tasted of the same salt now. For long minutes there was only wet sound and breath and the slow glide of tongues. Then Lyonel shifted on Dunk's hips and had to be lowered back to the ground. They leaned together, catching breath. Dunk's spent, still-wet cock nestled comfortably against Lyonel's.

"Seven fuck me," Lyonel mumbled into his shoulder, "you are magnificent."

It could not be true, yet Dunk flushed. It was so good to have *pleased*, to have done something well.

"Can't speak for the Seven, but I'll volunteer in their place."

Lyonel shook with silent laughter and nipped his ear.

"My generous knight. How I missed you last night. Had to sleep alone. Cold bed, empty arms."

Dunk grew bold. "I could come to you tonight."

"Oh? And for what purpose?"

*…Wait. Had he not been hinting?* Dunk faltered. In that tiny pause Lyonel gave an amused chuckle.

"Easy, I'm only prodding. Can't help myself." He kissed the corner of Dunk's mouth, then claimed it properly, quick and fierce. "Of course, sweetheart. After midnight. Everyone else will be asleep—everyone but us."

Dunk smiled. If Lyonel kept inventing reasons to summon him, they would run out of castle long before they ran out of want.

"I thought you were going to show me the keep."

"I am. Every corner where I can have you."

Lyonel's hands drifted down, tucking Dunk's spent cock away with careful fingers. The touch made it twitch; Lyonel hummed, pleased, but mercifully did not try for another round. They had already lingered too long. The lord was probably missed—if not discovered already behind the tapestry, thoroughly occupied.

"I wanted you here especially," Lyonel said, then started lacing him up. Dunk realised the man was not teasing; he simply remembered the injured hand and was helping him dress. "I used to hide in these nooks as a boy. Later too—daughters of servants, stable lads…"

Dunk was too dazed by the care to linger on Lyonel's youthful conquests. In the dark he could only picture Lyonel's face: bold brows, long lashes, the laugh-lines that spoke of a life lived joyfully. How such a beautiful man had chosen him, Dunk could not fathom.

"Which am I more like?" he asked, too melted to be truly sour. "The serving girl or the stable boy?"

Lyonel laughed outright, busy with his own clothes. "Neither of them was built like a siege tower, I can tell you that."

Their eyes met. Lyonel's hands settled—one on Dunk's shoulder, one at his waist—stroking idly. The realisation hit Dunk like a wave: *He's beautiful, and kind, and he cares—and I'm about to fall arse over teakettle like some green boy.*

"Mind you," Lyonel went on, unaware of the avalanche inside Dunk's chest, "hiding behind a tapestry is much the same as a cupboard. There's a little world of your own. I outgrew cupboards, though…"

Dunk gave a quiet chuckle. "I'd say you outgrew this nook too."

"Thank you," Lyonel whispered suddenly. "For the taste of the past. I hate to leave, but I fear we must."

So be it. There was still the evening ahead, and then as many days in Storm's End as Lyonel would allow him. Dunk touched his forehead to the lord's but winced as he bumped the fresh bruise. Lyonel smiled at him and stroked the back of his neck in comfort.

*I'm done for,* Dunk thought, dazed by the tenderness. There was so much of it. Endless. Every time he reached for Lyonel, the man had more to give. *I'm lost. If he asks me to swear to him again, I won't be able to refuse. I won't.*

Stepping back into the corridor was unpleasant; daylight struck like a slap. The world outside forced them to pretend nothing had happened. The corridor appeared empty, yet the silent suits of armour seemed to judge them.

Dunk glanced at his hand; dried spend had crusted. Without a word Lyonel produced and offered a scented handkerchief. Dunk took it, clumsy with gratitude.

"I needed that more than you know," Lyonel said, stretching until his back cracked. "Like cool ale on a hot day."

Dunk smiled, stealing glances. The lord's face glowed, hair delightfully tousled. No one would guess what they had done—but he knew where to look at.

"Back to business?" Dunk asked, thinking of peasants and letters.

But Lyonel pulled a face and headed for the stairs. He did not reclaim the handkerchief, so Dunk stuffed it into his pocket.

"You think I spent all morning just to steal a few minutes with you in a corner? Why limit ourselves?" The lord stepped onto the stairs. Dunk followed, ducking his head. "Let's see how your boy's faring. Fine day to watch a dragon get thrashed."

* * *

The lesson was well under way. Ser Ronnel parried while Egg swung a short blade, training armour flapping on his skinny limbs. Dunk was surprised they made practice armour so tiny, until he caught Lyonel's eye. Maybe it had been his. The man had to learn somewhere.

"So you hid behind tapestries as a lad," Dunk murmured while they watched from the colonnade. "Tell me something else about little Lyonel."

"Well, give him a couple of hours and he'll be hard again." Lyonel leaned close and whispered, "Faster if you take him in your mouth."

"*Lyonel*."

"What is there to say about me?" The lord shrugged, as if his collar had suddenly grown tight. "Boring."

*Nothing about you is boring to me*, Dunk did not say, but asked instead, "What did you like as a boy?"

"Running off," Lyonel answered at once. "Staying awake all night. Ever notice how quiet the world gets after dark? No one wants a single fucking thing from you."

Dunk glanced sideways. He was beginning to understand.

"Hard, being a lord?"

Lyonel made a face. "Look—"

Ronnel hooked Egg's ankle; the boy went down in a clatter of steel and dignity. Lyonel roared with laughter and strode over to clap the knight on the back. "Splendid show, ser!"

Dodged the question, then. Though that was an answer of its own.

Dunk bent over Egg. The lad lay staring at the ceiling. *Hope the fall didn't rattle his small brains.*

"Still alive?"

"Alive, ser." The boy's violet eyes—nearly black in this light—fixed on him. "You saw it?"

"I did," Dunk admitted, hauling him upright with one hand. "You held your own."

"Clear the floor, gentlemen," Lyonel called. "Five minutes. Ser Duncan and I are going to change."

Dunk blinked. "We? Now?" His body still hummed; the last thing it wanted was armour.

"Why not, Ser Duncan? Don't want me to beat your arse raw?

Lyonel grinned, pleased at how neatly he had wrapped the suggestion in a jest. Dunk went beet-red, doing nothing to help their cover.

* * *

In the armoury Lyonel helped him into the largest training suit—padded, dark, forgiving. Noblemen had special clothes even for mock fights. Dunk tried not to stare as the lord stripped off his fine doublet. There was something charged about changing side by side.

While Lyonel debated whether to beat him with mace or longsword, he said suddenly, "You know, Dunk, I've realised something remarkable. I run to you the same way I used to run behind tapestries."

Dunk, busy with the buckles of his cuirass, looked up blankly.

"…Hiding behind me?"

"If only I could hide behind that broad back of yours from all my troubles." Lyonel laughed, pulling on a glove. "No. I mean… I used to hide in the godswood, or the rookery. Always so peaceful there. Being with you also brings peace."

Understanding broke over Dunk like cold water. The air caught in his throat. *So that's it*, he thought. *That's why you want me.*

He had never known the late Lady Baratheon, but his stories made it clear no one has been allowed to be simply a child. Dunk was raising one such kid now. Egg was ten; Lyonel was four times that. Yet the connection was clear. Boys needed to be boys. Not princes, not lords, not heirs. Whacking nettles with sticks, pulling girls' braids, kissing in corners, sharing secrets.

"Going back to boyhood?" Dunk asked, voice ridiculously soft. Try as he might, he could not kill the smile.

Lyonel visibly recoiled. "*Gods, no*." A stiff laugh. "Remembering's pleasant. Going back? I doubt it, Dunk. Childhood's a pretty humiliating business, wouldn't you say?"

Of *course*. That explained the wild feasts at Ashford, the way Lyonel drank freedom like a man half-starved. He had seized it with both hands and still wanted more.

Maybe Lyonel had never truly had a childhood, but the boy he had been was not gone—only hiding, peeking out in wild smiles and bright eyes. That was what the lord needed from a hedge knight: a place to let this boy come out and forget duty for an hour.

Everything clicked at last. Dunk finally understood his exact place at this court, what use Lyonel had for him, and—most important—Lyonel started making perfect sense. The suspicion was gone.

Dunk was still a fool in most things, especially the delicate ones, but right now he knew one truth: the lord's mouth needed kissing. Dunk took his shoulder and turned him face-to-face. Lyonel went abruptly silent, staring as though the Storm God himself had come to collect his debt. Dunk drew him forward by the nape, and the lord opened to the kiss at once—though a startled pause still lingered.

The hunger that rose in Dunk was new: not merely to hold, but to surround, to shelter. When their lips parted Lyonel drew back to look at him, eyes suddenly young. In the way his brows lifted, in the open, puzzled stare, Dunk suddenly stopped seeing the madcap lord and saw only Lyonel. The man beneath the title, the golden doublet, the thunderous laugh, the jests, the bravado—whatever else he hid behind.

"What's come over you?" Lyonel asked in a voice stripped of every mask—plain, small, and wondering.

Dunk snorted. Had he actually managed to fluster the Laughing Storm?

"Don't know." He brushed Lyonel's cheek with his own; the lord's breath caught. "Just glad."

"…Of what?"

*That it feels good for you too.*

There was no explaining it. Right now he did not want to. He only wanted Lyonel—his mouth, his hands, his voice. Dunk pulled him closer and kissed again, pressing his back against the table of weapons. Humming, Lyonel braced one hand, the other still tangled in Dunk's hair, gloved fingers ruffling the ridiculous tufts at his nape.

When they broke apart, Lyonel was breathing heavily. "Dunk– are you hard again?"

"Shit," Dunk realised, glancing down. "Sorry. I didn't—"

Lyonel's mouth stopped the apology, hand sliding between them to confirm. Dunk whimpered softly.

The door creaked.

They sprang apart so violently that half a dozen blades clattered to the floor.

"Lord Lyonel," Maester Irwyn began, then stopped as steel rang. Dunk, face flaming, dropped to gather the swords. Lyonel coughed once.

"More letters from that wench?"

"Your brother, my lord. The raven arrived moments ago. If I may—"

Dunk busied himself laying the blades back in order. Behind him parchment rustled, a seal cracked.

When he finally dared look, the wide-eyed, boyish Lyonel had vanished. The man frowning over the letter wore the face of the Lord of Storm's End—jaw tight, shoulders set. The change hurt worse than Dunk expected. Without that fool of a maester they would still be *kissing*—

"Is this a **fucking** joke?!" the lord suddenly thundered.

To his credit, maester Irwyn did not even twitch. Dunk, however, jumped hard. Lyonel's roar shook the armoury and rolled down the corridors.

Ice settled in Dunk's gut. Lyonel, face twisted, dismissed the maester and paced a tight, angry circle. His eyes ran over and over the same few lines.

"Something wrong?" Dunk ventured.

Lyonel thrust the parchment at him. Dunk pretended to read; the letters swam like eels.

"Gowen demands *two thousand swords*! Why the *fuck* does he need an army? No—*who* does he mean to fight?"

"I could ride out," Dunk said before he remembered he had not sworn.

Lyonel grimaced. "I need you here. Watching that lizard of yours."

"Lyonel—"

But the lord was no longer listening. He stood frozen in the middle of the armoury, chewing his lip. "Wrong fight, you little shit. Wrong bloody enemies." He gave a strange, bitter laugh and shook his head. "Stop gawping, Dunk. Get your arse into that armour. Enough tit-twiddling—we've got shit to do."

Dunk glanced at the letter. "You're not going to answer him?"

"Not yet." The lord's struggles came to an end—he simply reached out and took the nearest weapon. A sword, then. "I need to think."

* * *

"You took your time," Ser Ronnel remarked when they finally returned to the yard.

There was reproach in the knight's tone; he looked sour, Egg sourer. They had clearly clashed. It happened often when people treated Egg like a commoner and the lad suddenly remembered his blood.

Lyonel strode to the centre, rolling his wrist with the sword in his arm, loosening the joint before the fight. "Wouldn't believe it, Storm—tripped over some correspondence."

"Ser Duncan!" Egg trotted up, cheeks red, sweat cutting clean tracks through the grime. "I'll train with you now, ser?"

Dunk winced. He wanted to keep his promise, but as a teacher he was…

"Not with Ser Ronnel anymore?"

"No, ser."

"Even if he can teach you to fight like a pirate?"

"Doesn't matter, ser. I want to train with you."

It clicked. Dunk studied the boy head to toe. "You want to train with me… but not necessarily *from* me?"

Lyonel finished a figure-eight with his blade and shot him a dark look.

"Not right this minute," Dunk added quickly; the lord had troubles enough. "But maybe you'd like to train under the lord himself, Egg? He'll be teaching me too."

"Am I allowed, my lord?"

Egg turned hopeful eyes on Lyonel. Dunk watched the rare grace dawn on the man—unexpectedly mattering to a child. His scowl softened a fraction. He glanced from boy to knight, exhaled, and rolled his shoulders.

"Why the hell not?" Sword steady, he settled into a guard stance. "Right, then. Both of you—come at me."

## Chapter 7

Lyonel had driven Dunk through training with all the pent-up fury of a man carrying a realm on his shoulders. It was barely past noon when Dunk started dreaming of a scalding bath and the lord's magnificent featherbed. He killed time as best he could.

They ate. Egg insisted on a reading lesson—four sad letters swam up from memory, but Dunk's mind was elsewhere. Afterward he volunteered to split wood for the kitchens, his sore shoulders begging for more labour. While the axe rose and fell, his thoughts circled the uprising, Ser Gowen, Ser Ronnel, but mostly the lord's commanding hands.

The stitches on his right arm started throbbing again. In the lesson they'd spared it, drilling mostly shieldwork, though Dunk landed a few solid blows with the practice blade. He sank the axe into a thick log and probed the wound through sleeve and

bandage. Healing slowly. A year ago he'd worked with a pierced palm—*Thanks, Aerion*—and thought nothing of it. What had changed?

After supper Dunk sank into a tub and sighed the sweat and grime away. Egg bathed after him, then launched into another tale of the Storm Kings. Dunk never learned how it ended—the boy lulled himself to sleep.

Clean, full, pleasantly drowsy, he listened to his squire's breathing soften into quiet snores. Then it hit him: he was free. *Finally*. The whole night lay ahead.

Dunk eased the blanket aside and rose without a sound. The motion stirred an old memory—slipping out of the deaf old man's cellar with Rafe while he slept upstairs like the dead. A dangerous game; getting caught meant finding new shelter and dodging gold cloaks.

He eyed his clothes with doubt. Dressing just to climb stairs felt ridiculous. His gaze fell on the robe Lyonel had given him that first day. He already knew the gift had been waiting a full year, but only now joy surged in his chest.

He allowed himself the pleasure.

Easy: arms through sleeves, slip out, close the door without a whisper. For half a minute he stood listening, but Egg didn't stir. Only torches hissed in their sconces and wind moaned through the passages.

Silence greeted him in the lord's chambers too. He knocked. No answer. He hesitated, palm on the latch. Had Lyonel fallen asleep waiting? Kept by some late duty? They *had* agreed on midnight…

A faint sound came from within. Dunk pushed the door open.

"Lyonel?"

The bed was untouched, the room empty. No supper tray, no discarded clothes. As he lingered in the doorway, a voice drifted from deeper in the chamber.

"I'm here, Dunk." Water splashed; warm, humid air rolled out like bathhouse steam. "Unless you mean to fuck the doorframe, I suggest you follow the heat."

Dunk spotted the open inner door. The lord's chambers had its own bathing room. A deep pool had been carved into the floor, large enough for four or five. A stone gargoyle spat a steady stream. Candles flickered everywhere. Mist beaded on the walls.

Lyonel lounged in the water like a sea king on his throne—arms draped along the edge, head tipped back. Droplets gleamed on the dark hair of his chest.

Dunk's throat went dry as Dornish sands.

"You're late," the lord mused. "I was starting to think you'd changed your mind."

"Had to wait for Egg to fall asleep."

"Did you sing him a lullaby? Tuck him in proper?" Lyonel cracked one eye open, lifting his head. Their gazes locked, the moment stretching like warm honey. Heat flooded Dunk's face. The lord smiled, noticing. "Get in, lad. I've dismissed the servants. The night is ours."

Dunk glanced at the pool. He'd just bathed, but who would refuse such luxury? Turning away out of pointless modesty, he undressed: the gifted cloak folded carefully, nightshirt, boots. Last of all, after a pause, his smallclothes. A low chuckle came from behind his back.

Prepared for shameless scrutiny, Dunk turned and approached. Perched on the edge, lowered his legs… *Gods*!

"Why's the water this hot?" he blurted, astonished. Servants couldn't have carried that much.

"We draw it from a deep well and run the pipes along the furnace flues," Lyonel explained. "Only bath like this in the entire castle. The moment these quarters were empty, I had my things moved in. Honestly, I'll never tire of soaking in here."

So these had been his father's rooms. Dunk stayed silent, unsettled. The bed they'd shared the night before—had the old lord died in it? Was this some kind of desecration on their part? *I hope the Seven won't curse me for it.*

Lyonel flicked water at him. "What are you waiting for? The water doesn't bite. I can't promise the same for myself if you keep dawdling."

Dunk exhaled and slid in. A ledge under the pool wall, then deeper water. He settled a respectful distance away, right arm along the rim to keep the bandage dry.

"How was your day?" Dunk asked, thinking of Gowen's letter. Lyonel pulled a face.

"I thought it would never end. Council meeting, the castellan chewing with his mouth open… Gah. A true nightmare. And no, I haven't answered Gowen yet. Let the little shit stew."

Lyonel shifted closer, ignoring Dunk's attempt at propriety. Under the water his hand found Dunk's knee and squeezed. The lord slipped neatly under Dunk's right arm and into his space. Dunk wrapped an arm around him; his palm came to rest on a damp shoulder.

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Water dripped from dark curls. Strands clung to forehead and temples. Dunk got so lost in the sight he almost missed how skillfully the lord had dodged the subject.

"You're not terrible with a blade," Lyonel mused, "but you pulled that last strike. Afraid of breaking me?"

"I would have cracked your ribs if I'd followed through." Dunk hesitated, then pressed. "Doesn't seem like something that can wait. Your brother, I mean."

Lyonel's hand stilled on his knee. "My brother is a genuine *cunt*, Dunk. My job is telling when his usual pointless noise turns into the stink of something burning."

"But—"

"Can we forget the bastard for one night?" The grip tightened—not in warning, but something closer to plea. "I waited for this. For *you*. Not a lecture."

Dunk stared at those dark, asking eyes. Felt a fierce rush of embarrassment. Lords did not *beg*—especially not from the likes of him.

"Sorry— You're right, you must be tired." His gaze darted, searching for amends. Spotted a washcloth. "Shall I scrub your back? Or knead those shoulders?"

Lyonel's brows rose; the soft surprise melted into satisfaction.

"*Both*." He turned within Dunk's half-embrace, presenting a strong back—broad shoulders, the ladder of his spine, pale tracery of old scars. "You and that boy ran me ragged. Muscles are still screaming."

Dunk took the cloth in his good hand and moved closer. From somewhere outside himself he watched his own boldness—how he rubbed those battle-hardened muscles, knuckles working the knots.

Lyonel dropped his head and *groaned*, utterly shameless. Dunk paused, weighing it. Good sound. Like last night. His lips twitched; hidden, he let the small smile bloom.

"Quiet, m'lord," he murmured, thumb circling a tight spot. "Servants will think I'm doing all sorts of wicked things to you."

Lyonel's shoulders shook with laughter, the deep rumble vibrating against Dunk's palm. "Let them. Let them burn with envy. Nothing new for either of us."

Just to be an ass, Lyonel let out another moan, louder, more sensual. The sound kindled fire low in Dunk's belly. The water was hot, yet his face burned hotter. For a second it became too easy to imagine they weren't in a bath at all.

"Pure bliss," Lyonel sighed, arching. "These hands of yours. I want them on me every day. On me, in me. But first the back—we can fuck later."

Dunk would still be blushing at the filthy praise if Lyonel hadn't declared, "Your turn. Your shoulders must be killing you too."

Dunk froze, hands raised. But Lyonel was already turning him, already setting those strong palms on his back. No one had ever done this for him. He didn't need it, really—he was hale enough, wound aside—so why bother?

"No, really, it's not—" Too late. The touch came anyway. Callused fingers traced his shoulders. Each of Lyonel's breaths ghosted warm across his skin.

Old instincts flared: breathing at your back meant danger. A stone to the head, or worse—the kind of thing that had once happened to Rafe before Dunk met her. Even with Lyonel it felt… *vulnerable*. Wrong, somehow, to sit idle while someone worked on him. Dunk suddenly couldn't wait for it to end. They were wasting time.

Then the voice came low against his ear, "Lean on me."

A hand slipped around and drew him back.

Dunk toppled slowly through the water and landed against a solid chest. Now it was almost an embrace. Yet Dunk had never sat in anyone's arms so tense, every muscle braced for something that wasn't coming.

Lyonel found the knots, working them with surprising gentleness. Even now, while Dunk sat useless as a log, he was—

"My *sweet boy*," Lyonel suddenly purred, unprompted.

Dunk's eyes burned. Breathing failed him.

"I'm good," he rasped, hauling himself upright. "I'm good. Thank you."

The trembling hit him hard: throat locking tight, stomach trying to fold in on itself. A sob slipped out; he clamped a hand over his mouth. He hadn't meant to cry.

He twisted away and pressed his back to the cool stone wall. The chill helped, if only a little.

"All right, all right," Lyonel said, backing away. Water rippled as he moved, but Dunk couldn't look. Only listened.

The cloth started scrubbing. The lord pretended everything was fine. But the silence roared. Shame swallowed Dunk whole. Lyonel had probably planned to seduce him, or— simply wanted to be *kind*. And Dunk had *ruined* it.

The thought brought fresh tears. His lungs *burned*. He had no choice but to sob openly. The humiliation felt endless. He didn't even understand *why*.

A splash on his right; Lyonel set the cloth aside.

"If you need to cry, I won't think less of you," he said quietly. "Tears wash the poison out. Better not to carry it."

"...Sorry." Dunk pinched the bridge of his nose, wincing. "I've gone soft lately. Crying all the *fucking* time."

At least before he had known the reason. Now he had *none*.

Lyonel finally turned. Dunk felt the gaze but refused to meet it. How much irritation would he find there? He didn't want to know.

Under the water, something familiar nudged his thigh.

"*Soft*," Lyonel repeated in that flat tone Dunk still couldn't read. A broad palm settled on the back of his neck, gently insistent. "If tears make a man *soft*, then I've been soft for *eleven years*—since my *mother*—"

He stopped, swallowing. Dunk shivered despite the heat. He had stepped on something sacred. Lyonel had buried both parents, his father just a year ago. Dunk had lost Ser Arlan, but it just could not be compared. And Prince Baelor—well. That was an entirely different story.

"I didn't mean you were—"

But Lyonel's voice came impossibly tender, "You didn't insult me, you great fool. I'm only trying to say…" His fingers traced a slow circle on Dunk's neck. "Grief doesn't care for *titles*. It might be the only thing that makes us equal—kings and smallfolk, lords and hedge knights. We all weep the same."

Dunk's mouth twisted. There was nothing equal about grief. He hadn't been allowed to see Prince Baelor one last time. Just watched the smoke. He knew exactly where Ser Arlan lay beneath the grass. But Prince Baelor? Where was he?

His lips warped with the effort of holding back. But Lyonel's patient hand made the battle hopeless.

"Do you ever stop crying?" the question tore out of him. "Does it ever stop?"

Lyonel sighed.

"No. But some days you'll wake and it won't be the first thing you think of. Other days it will hit you so hard the world will stop making sense. You'll stare out the window and no longer know tree from cloud."

Tears spilled.

Dunk didn't know what did him—Lyonel's compassion, or the steady warmth of his hand. He squeezed his eyes shut and shifted awkwardly, unsure how to entrust his clumsy body to the man. But the palm on his nape gently guided his forehead to Lyonel's wet shoulder. Under the water, Dunk grabbed his side with a shy hand.

Lyonel folded him in without hesitation. "I've got you." Whiskers brushed his temple, lips followed. "I've got you."

This time Dunk managed to cry without sound. Ser Arlan had drilled the habit into him with cuffs and stern words. Dunk had never doubted he earned every one.

Ugly tears dripped onto the lord's shoulder. Lyonel didn't even flinch. When the storm eased to rare hiccups, Lyonel kissed his damp hair and stroked his back.

"There. Breathe, lad. I'm proud of you."

What *nonsense*. How could anyone be proud of another man's *tears*? Lyonel wasn't his father, obliged to wipe his nose. Dunk pulled away, suddenly aware. After all, the lord had asked him to stay for pleasure—not to play nursemaid to a weeping fool.

"*Fuck*," he muttered, voice raw, and wiped his face. "Sorry. Don't know what came over me."

Lyonel let him go; now only their knees touched beneath the water. He studied Dunk—not expectant, simply observing.

"How long did you know him?"

"Only a day." The lord tensed beside him. "Oh—Ser Arlan? A good dozen years."

Lyonel drew back slightly.

"I see."

Dunk peeked sideways. Lyonel's lips were pressed bloodless, face frozen in anger. Then the storm passed as quickly as it came. The lord had clearly decided not to escalate.

For a moment, Dunk wanted to bolt. Or to curl up at his feet. This wasn't Lyonel's first time with grief. When his mother died, he had probably comforted his little brother like this. Their pain was so much larger than his. Dunk suddenly felt like an intruder.

"Lyonel— I know we agreed to meet because we wanted to—" *To fuck*, as the lord would put it. *To tumble.* Dunk sniffled one last time and gathered himself. "Tell me what you need. I'll fix this."

Lyonel recoiled, looking almost wounded. "You think that's all I want from you?" He cupped Dunk's face. "I *like* talking with you! I like spending *time* with you. We can sit here until our arses go numb. Or go to bed and simply hold each other, nothing else."

"Wha–?" Dunk lost all words. A shy joy bloomed beneath his ribs. "Why–"

"I *love* fucking, don't mistake me," Lyonel said, thumb stroking Dunk's cheek. "But that's not the main thing. I wanted to *see you*. That's all."

Instead of his weary mind, Dunk's body made the decision for him. It believed Lyonel without question—those steady hands, his calm voice, his eyes. Before thought could catch up, he had Lyonel's face in his hands and crashed their mouths. Lyonel made a startled sound into the kiss, but hooked an arm around his neck, opening willingly. *His body trusts me too.*

Dunk slid off the ledge without breaking the kiss and pressed Lyonel back against the stone. He had to stand on his knees for it; the lord's strong thighs parted beneath the water. The sweet mouth pulled away—Dunk chased it with a desperate sound, but found only the curve of a half-smile.

"Dunk, what are you—?"

"Sorry," Dunk breathed. The fire roaring through him had no explanations, any more than the tears had. He was simply *so glad*—so *impossibly glad*—that Lyonel still wanted him near, even without the rest. "I— I don't know, I wanted to kiss you so bad."

"…Ah." Lyonel huffed, taken aback. "Alright. Kiss me, then."

A whirlwind tore through Dunk's chest. He claimed Lyonel's mouth again, sudden and fierce. The need for the man burned so sharp it ached worse than the wolf bite on his arm.

Dunk hooked an arm under the lord's thigh, pulling him onto his lap, and wrapped the other around his back. Lyonel locked his legs around him, not even trying to direct. Usually he steered—showed Dunk where he wanted to be kissed—but now he was simply *yielding*.

Dunk's head spun. He nearly groaned aloud. *What the hell is wrong with me?* He had been so relieved Lyonel wouldn't force him that this made him want it even more.

*Fuck*. He was a mess. So he tore away and begged, "Just say the word and I'll stop—please tell me if you don't want this."

Lyonel blinked, lips kiss-swollen. "Dunk, have you lost your *mind*? I've been dreaming of you—in this bath, in my bed. For an entire *year*—"

Dunk had heard it before, but only now did the words sink in. His heart thundered. This man waited so long. *Still* wanted him.

"I want you all the time," his stupid tongue blurted before he could stop. Dunk flushed crimson but kept on, "I want you so much it's *indecent*."

"*Indecent*," Lyonel repeated, smiling. Under the water his hips rolled, dragging his half-hard cock against Dunk's belly. "I like how that sounds. Let's get indecent, then."

The urge to spill everything nearly drowned him—his feelings, the lie about being a true knight, the road here, scraps of his childhood, more feelings, all the things he wanted to do to Lyonel, feelings, feelings, feelings.

Terror seized him: so much more could pour out. He tried to flee—when he rose sharply, the weight dragged at him, water cascading. Lyonel cursed and clung tighter. Dunk kissed him—wet, fever-hot—and forgot how to breathe. The room spun. Lyonel moaned and rocked against him; Dunk's cock slid between his cheeks. It made them both groan, hips colliding, water splashing wildly. The world narrowed to the pounding of blood in his ears.

Lyonel gasped into the kiss, "Bed—now," then sealed his lips desperately when Dunk licked into his mouth. They half-fought, half-caressed each other's tongues until sheer willpower dragged Lyonel back. "Too slippery here. *Bed*, Dunk. Fuck me so raw I can't *walk* tomorrow."

Dunk's mind was still catching up when his hands took over. He gathered the precious weight and carried Lyonel up the stone steps. Along the way he pinned him against every wall, door, cabinet—mouths devouring, bodies grinding like beasts in rut. On the final stretch Dunk lunged for the bed. His wounded arm throbbed as he dropped Lyonel onto the covers and followed him down.

Water streamed from them both. Dunk covered the lean body with his own, hips moving, their cocks sliding hot and impossibly hard between slick bellies.

He bit and kissed and devoured until his mouth ached. But the burn in his shoulders eventually dragged him back to himself. The bed was soaked and Lyonel—despite his fierce demands—could not truly take roughness yet.

"I can't fuck you," Dunk said, releasing those kiss-swollen lips. "You're still healing. You said so yourself."

Lyonel only growled. His hands grabbed his face, eyes blazing with raw hunger. "You *won't break me*. I trust you, Dunk. If I say stop, you stop. But don't you *dare* decide for me what I can handle."

Apologies crowded his tongue, but Lyonel pressed a thumb to his lips—"Hush". Then stroked gently. "I know you're trying to be careful. But you need to *trust* me sometimes."

Dunk burned—he hadn't realized how Lyonel saw it. Of *course* he trusted him! Mostly. Even when he still hunted for traps in the lord's words, he knew Lyonel wasn't lying. Not on purpose, anyway. Just— dropping guard always felt dangerous.

*That's distrust, you idiot.* Shame flooded him. Dunk dropped his head to Lyonel's shoulder, and the lord—ever welcoming—drew him in, fingers soothing through his hair.

"I keep thinking you only do things out of politeness," Dunk confessed. "So I stop myself. Try not to… burden you."

Lyonel gave a sharp, amused snort. "So in your head I'm bending over purely from good manners, am I?"

Their eyes met, and Lyonel burst out laughing. Dunk followed a heartbeat later, realizing how absurd he was. The tension dissolved. He had never known laughter could live so easily in bed. It felt *good*—sharing not only passion but foolishness and talk and— *ordinary* things. Before, he had thought making love changed a man—some for worse, others for better. But he and Lyonel only became more themselves: two overgrown boys playing.

"I'll fetch the oil," Dunk said at last, kissing a damp shoulder. "And towels. Otherwise you'll sleep in a puddle."

"My hero," Lyonel sighed, stretching lazily, and clearly did not plan to move.

All the way to the bathing room and back, Dunk tried to think. His fingers were *huge*—opening Lyonel without pain would take care. Maybe start with a pinky? But he quickly gave up overthinking. There were undeniable advantages to bedding a man with so much experience.

When he returned he tossed his own things onto a chair and handed Lyonel a towel and a vial of oil.

"How does one prepare without it hurting?" Dunk asked while toweling off at the edge of the bed.

Lyonel, who was dragging the towel across his skin, met his eyes with sudden interest and rose onto an elbow.

"How do you feel about eating ass?"

Dunk saw the look in Lyonel's eyes, and when the meaning finally landed, an entirely new kind of panic flared inside him. He didn't know people *actually*— he heard crude jokes, yes—but to offer *a tongue in his arse*?—

"I'm not—" It was *filthy* no matter how much you washed—but Lyonel wanted it, so… Dunk felt cornered, heart hammering. "I *bathed*, so— if you— if you want—"

Lyonel had the audacity to look *puzzled*.

"What does that have to do with—" His eyes widened. He sat up and reached for Dunk's hand. "Dunk, *dear*. You thought I was offering *you*—"

In a burst of laughter he collapsed forward and bear-hugged Dunk, dragging him down onto the damp sheets like a felled tree. They had wrestled today on the training field, and the pavilion was somewhat a test of strength, but Dunk had never expected a fight in bed.

"You're *adorable*." Lyonel peppered his face with kisses. "We'll definitely come back to that, love—but not tonight. I meant *your* tongue in *my* arse."

"…My *what*?"

Heat flared low in Dunk's belly—shameful, dark, dizzying. His *mouth*—on the very place he had *taken so eagerly* the night before? He almost curled in on himself, hiding behind his palm, a helpless groan escaping as a feverish tremor rolled through.

"Lyonel—you want me to lick you *there*? That's… that's—"

"Indecent," Lyonel purred into his ear, teeth grazing the shell. "Well? *Wouldn't be your first time*, is it? Never mind. Do me this favour, dear. Just once."

Persistent as ever, Lyonel wormed his fingers under Dunk's shielding hand and peeled it away. Dunk suddenly wanted to swat him—couldn't think why, couldn't think at all.

"You don't have to ask," he rasped, looking anywhere but Lyonel's face. "I'll do anything. Whatever you want."

Lyonel gave a delighted bark and kissed him hard—no yielding now, all teeth and rough beard and demanding tongue.

When his crushing weight finally shifted, Dunk sat up and dragged in a breath.

"So… on your back or your belly?"

"Belly." Lyonel snatched a pillow and shoved it under himself onto a drier spot. "Easier for you."

He settled facedown. His thighs spread. In the candlelight Dunk saw the place he had known only by tight, scorching heat the night before. Dark hair, folded skin, a tight ring of muscle. His face *burned*. He must have frozen, because Lyonel glanced back over his shoulder.

"Well, ser? I thought you wanted to be useful." His knees slid wider. "So *be useful.*"

A long, unsteady breath left Dunk's chest. He remembered how Lyonel had taken him there the night before—so tender, holding him so lovingly. He lowered himself between those spread legs, close enough to— *Seven save me!* The thought of his mouth between those buttocks felt filthy beyond measure.

Big hands settled on the lord's arse, gently parting, and Dunk finally dared and *licked*. The little folds clenched shyly beneath his tongue. He tried again, sweeping bolder, starting from just above the sac. Lyonel sighed deeply into the pillow.

It smelled of soap. Tasted of clean skin. Dunk could think of nothing cleverer besides licking, but it felt *good*, so he closed his eyes and gave himself to it.

"Dunk," Lyonel called, voice already rough. "Stop being careful. Get to *work*."

Yes. Of course. If Lyonel had taken fingers and cock there, surely a tongue— Dunk pressed closer, circling more firmly. Lyonel pushed back against his face.

"That's it. Good, good lad. Ah…" A strange, breathless laugh. "You think too much. Always about the wrong things."

Dunk slowed, confused. For once his mind had been almost quiet. Was that wrong?

"What do you—?"

"I said never mind." Lyonel reached back blindly, found his wrist, *squeezed*. "Push *inside*, Dunk. Just—use the tip, like *kissing*. But—there. It's— it's softer than fingers. Won't hurt."

Something clicked. Kissing he knew. So he set to it—started treating Lyonel's hole exactly as he would his mouth. Circling, pressing deeper. He even sealed his lips around the tight ring and sucked gently. Lyonel moaned loud and broken; his hand gripped tight. *Means I'm doing it right, then.* Dunk turned his hand to hold Lyonel's in return. The lord's breathing grew ragged, hips rocking, rubbing against his face.

"All of it, Dunk. *I can take it.* Just— put your whole tongue inside."

So he pressed forward. Muscle yielded—his tongue slid in so easily it almost frightened him. Dunk startled back with a stunned breath—"*Gods*"—then dove in again, working the slick folds.

His head swam with strange tenderness. Of all the wicked things he had done, this felt like the most caring: kissing what he had forced open the night before, soothing with his mouth where he had been so fierce.

His tongue tired quickly—never meant for such work—but he kept going. When he paused to nuzzle and lick softly, he saw the rim had softened, relaxed. Just a little. But noticeably.

Lyonel had no patience for pauses. He pulled his hand free, set it on Dunk's head, and pushed him *deeper*—nose buried, breathing difficult. Lyonel ground back with low moans—Dunk simply offered his face, tongue out. Another storm, he thought dimly. With Lyonel there was no fighting them—only riding them out.

Then the world folded over him like a thick, heavy blanket. Sound grew distant. He floated in a lulling rhythm of strong thighs rocking against his cheeks. Later he might think it was the lack of air; it wasn't. He had fallen into the same deep place he had found the first time he took Lyonel in his mouth—it was *deeper* now, closing over his head.

There was *peace* there. A nervous man like him rarely found peace.

From that quiet place he watched Lyonel gasp, "Close," push him away, and roll onto his back. Suddenly, Dunk was on top of him. When the lord offered his mouth, he kissed it with the same hungry rhythm he had used below.

Lyonel stroked his face, held him, and it was so *good—Thank the gods he wasn't angry*. Dunk hadn't even realized he'd been braced for anger. Relief flooded him. Better that Lyonel never grow angry at all.

"Thank you," Dunk mumbled when their lips parted. "Thank you, Lyonel, thank you."

Lyonel brushed a thumb across his mouth, pulling it back when Dunk tried to catch it with his needy mouth.

"What for?"

"For…" Thoughts moved like molasses. "For letting me lick you—and…"

"*And*?" Lyonel's hand closed around his cock. Dunk nearly cried out. Pleasure spiked, a sweet spasm rolling through him. "What else have you forgotten to thank me for?"

Dunk squeezed his eyes shut. His tongue felt thick and clumsy. Everything blurred—only desperate need and crushing gratitude remained, so fierce it stung his eyes.

"For— being so tight and hot and—letting me take your— your—"

"Well?"

Dunk, never eloquent, had almost no wits left. Scarlet-faced, he sobbed:

"*Your hole*—thank you for—*your hole*—thank you, *thank you*."

Lyonel made a strange sound—half laugh? Dunk cracked his eyes open but saw only a blur.

"Thank me for touching you." The hand kept slowly caressing his shaft, an exquisite torture.

"Thank you— for not being— *disgusted* with me— your hands—"

"Dunk, you could *never* disgust me," Lyonel chided gently, and his soft scolding made Dunk's cock twitch *hard*. "Though I did more than use my hands. I took you in my *mouth* too. You're not small, you know. Took some effort to fit you."

Tears pricked harder. It felt so *right*. He should be grateful to his grave, begging for every scrap. How lucky he was that Lyonel wanted him—wanted to touch his clumsy body—

The fist became a tight ring, so fucking tight it hurt. Dunk nearly whined, hips chasing it.

"Thank you, thank you! For sucking me—you must have been choking—I'm too big, forgive me for being so big—"

Lyonel clicked his tongue and squeezed the base almost painfully.

"Ser Duncan the Tall, you're shirking your duties," he said, stern and clearly delighted. "Always trying to fuck me, huh? I'll let you, I promise—but not until you've thanked me properly for everything I've done for you. I was a gracious host, wasn't I? Let you fill me with seed. Breed me like a bitch in heat."

"Thank you," Dunk gasped, but the words lost their meaning, they simply poured out whether he willed them or not. "Thank you for letting me—put it inside, like my wife—I know you can't give me children but I—I wish you did, I wish it so much—"

"Oh, *Dunk*," Lyonel breathed, voice cracking into something softer, heated. "The *things* you are doing to me—"

The world flipped. Dunk's back met the damp sheets. Weight settled over his hips, delicious and heavy. The grip on his cock never faltered—tight, slow, maddening. He choked on a breath, caught between pain and desperate need.

"Please—let me come—I need to come so badly—swear I'll die if you don't—"

"Too soon, my sweet boy. There was something else, remember?" Lyonel leaned down, lips brushing his ear. "You latched onto my cock yesterday like you'd never let go. Honest to gods, I thought you were about to cuckold me with my own prick."

"Thank you," Dunk cried out, eyes stinging. "Thank you for letting me—for letting me satisfy my *indecent needs*—"

"…Dunk. You're crying."

"I'm sorry—it feels *so good* with you—I just—I want you to feel good too."

"Seven bugger me," Lyonel breathed, half-wrecked—and his hand disappeared.

When it returned, it was slick with oil. He guided Dunk's cock, pressing the head against wet, yielding heat. Then Dunk was pushing inside, sinking back into that perfect grip. Lyonel sank down slowly, taking every thick inch with a low, broken moan that sent sparks racing up Dunk's spine.

His hands found Lyonel's knees, clutching hard as the lord began to move. Time collapsed like a tower of sand. Lyonel said things, demanded he keep their eyes locked. Dunk could only babble his sorries and thankyous. The lord's hands wandered freely—stroking his chest, pinching his nipples—and Dunk let him, mind blissfully blank. The lord was *using him*, taking his pleasure, and nothing had ever felt better than being used like *this*. For once Dunk was useful. For once he was *good*.

He needed so little—just those hands, that tight heat, and already he was writhing beneath the man, gasping, making weak little thrusts up into the clinging grip. Wet heat pulsed around him. Lyonel's head fell back with a hoarse groan; one hand flew between his own legs to stroke.

It didn't end quickly. The lord shifted, bracing one hand on Dunk's knee behind him, changing the angle until the fit grew tighter. Dunk's softening cock became unbearably sensitive, every slide dragging across raw nerves. He groaned through clenched teeth, eyes screwed shut, and Lyonel let out a long, high, trembling cry. Warmth splattered across Dunk's belly.

A few more strong rolls of Lyonel's hips, and the weight finally settled. The lord breathed like a destrier after a brutal tilt in the lists—deep, ragged, victorious. Dunk

stroked his knee with a clumsy hand. Lyonel pushed up, leaned forward, and his curly head filled Dunk's vision.

Dunk wrapped both arms around him, palms gliding over sweat-slick skin. Lyonel collapsed onto his chest, right into all the mess he made. Their mouths found each other. They kissed for long, lazy minutes—slow strokes of tongue, shared breath, hearts gradually calming from their wild gallop.

Dunk felt like he was crawling out of a den, surfacing from a dream. In that hazy borderland between sleep and waking, only truth lived. When their lips finally parted, the confession slipped out of him, soft and relieved:

"I've never had anyone. Before you. No one at all."

Lyonel went rigid on top of him. The fingers that had been gently stroking his jaw froze in place.

"No one at all," he repeated, voice strangely flat. Then he pulled back, and Dunk saw a horrified look on his face. "Dunk… your first time was *with me*? In *your bed*?"

His hands framed Dunk's face, but he was too distracted with all that squirming—they were still joined, soft heat still holding him, warmth trickling onto his mound.

"Why didn't you *tell me*?" Lyonel hissed, almost desperate. "I would—I would have been *gentler*—I would've given you the whole evening, done anything you wanted, I—"

Dunk was too dazed to form clear thoughts. He only frowned, trying to make sense of the tragedy in the lord's voice; but Lyonel was often a mystery.

"You *were* gentle," he murmured. "You are the most gentle person I know."

"No, Dunk." Lyonel's face twisted as though the words pained him. "I'm *not*."

He lifted off. Their bodies separated with a wet sound, seed dripping on Dunk's belly. Lyonel rolled aside and flopped onto his back among the pillows with a heavy sigh. He didn't reach for Dunk, so Dunk turned toward him, simply watching—still unable to feel anything but confusion.

"I *took it out* on you," Lyonel said thickly, dragging a hand down his face. Even through his haze, Dunk could see the shame gnawing at him. The lord was *devastated*.

"When? Outside the stables?"

"*Gods*, Dunk—not the *stables*. Now! I took it out on you *just now*." Lyonel looked over at him, eyes dark and solemn. "I shouldn't have been so— *harsh* with you."

Dunk tried to think. He hadn't been thrown out. Or struck. Lyonel wasn't that sort of man. He was a true knight.

"I kept thinking about your prince," Lyonel admitted, voice choked. "How you turned me down even after everything I— Fuck, I was so angry, Dunk. So I took it out. You truly didn't notice?"

Of course he had noticed the anger. But it hadn't hurt him. Nothing could, while Lyonel was letting him this close.

"But it was—" Dunk hunted for words. "It was—"

The sorrow vanished from Lyonel's face at once, replaced by pure astonishment. Then a frown: "Dunk, did you *like* it?"

"Well…" He had only one way to tell. "I *finished*, didn't I?"

Lyonel let out a long, shaky breath, as if an enormous weight had slid off his shoulders. He reached for Dunk at last and pulled him close. Dunk settled his cheek on the lord's thigh; gentle fingers carded through his damp hair.

"Dunk, I keep forgetting how young you are." Lyonel's fingers trembled against his ear. "All that height is deceptive. You may be a giant of a man, but… Well. Even the strongest, most beautiful lads have a first time."

Dunk grumbled in protest. He was no beauty—just a big, awkward oaf who had outgrown every doorway in the Seven Kingdoms by sixteen. Even his *cock*— Lyonel said so himself—

"I'm not beautiful," he insisted, looking up. "*You* are."

The simple truth seemed to unravel Lyonel completely. He bent over Dunk, a trembling hand sliding over his face. Dunk leaned into the touch, curling an arm around the lord's neck. They couldn't manage a proper kiss at that angle, but Lyonel pressed his lips to Dunk's temple and let out a soft, overwhelmed sound.

After a moment Dunk thought he should hold the lord properly. So he shifted until they laid side by side. They came together without words—arms and legs tangling. Lyonel pillowed his cheek on Dunk's shoulder, Dunk cradled that wild mass of curls against him.

Lyonel's mouth brushed his throat. Then he drew back just enough to meet Dunk's eyes. Smoothed a warm palm against his nape.

"How old are you actually, my lovely boy?"

"Twenty-and-something." Dunk didn't know exactly; no one had ever told him his exact birthday.

"Twenty-and-something," Lyonel echoed with a quiet sigh. "I'm forty-and-something, but I often think you're wiser than me in all the ways that matter."

Dunk snorted. "Liar. Dunk the lunk—thick as a brick and dark as a cellar."

Lyonel's hand stilled in his hair. "And where did that charming piece of folklore come from?"

"The old man came up with it."

"Huh. Loved you terribly, didn't he."

"Didn't hit me without cause, so… yes. Suppose he did."

Lyonel was quiet for a while. Then asked, gently:

"How did you two meet, anyway?"

Rafe flashed before his eyes—blood pumping from her throat. Dunk jolted fully awake. *Shit*—whenever she rose in his mind, his thoughts eventually dragged him straight to the end.

With Rafe came the familiar tension Dunk lived in by default—that feeling of being a giant crammed into too-small skin, terrified any sudden movement would tear the seams and reveal the fraud. He felt uneasy. It made him slide his leg off Lyonel's thigh and roll onto his back, although he left the lord his shoulder.

Lyonel lifted his head from it, watching with quiet confusion.

"It's a sad story, of sorts," Dunk said, rubbing his eyes. "Don't want to sour the night."

"I told you about my mother," Lyonel reminded him. "And the evening feels right for it, so—go on. Tell me."

Dunk sighed. Life was *absurd*. One moment heart-stopping, soul-shaking pleasure, the next speaking of death. It had been like that with Lyonel since yesterday: burying the she-wolf, talking of Lady Baratheon, and all Dunk could think of was how badly he wanted to hold the man exactly the way he had in bed.

Now he could. He pulled Lyonel closer against his side.

Some stories simply were not worth it.

"Next time," Dunk decided. "We better wash up."

* * *

Though Lyonel tried every clever trick to make him stay, Dunk returned to his own chambers that night. And from the next morning onward, life turned on its heel once more.

They met by accident. Dunk was carrying apples to the stables where Egg waited; the lord was storming across the yard. A short maester and the portly castellan hurried after him. They were arguing heatedly—Dunk caught something about swords—but the moment Lyonel spotted him, he lit up and veered sharply toward him.

"Ah! My good friend!" He caught Dunk by the nape and pulled him down into two loud, theatrical kisses on both cheeks—right in front of the respectable men. Dunk, with no defense against such surprises, flushed beet-red. "Tell me, how are you enjoying Storm's End?"

The lord was performing, of course. Lyonel was a man of grand gestures and an even grander heart; anything less would have raised eyebrows. Still, the warm hand on Dunk's neck and the kisses were witnessed by half the castle. Discomfort prickled down Dunk's spine, but he played along. It cost him nothing.

"Off to visit the horses, m'lord." Dunk showed him the basket with apples. "Thought we'd take them for a ride while the rain holds off."

"Sounds *wonderful*," Lyonel sighed. "I wish I could join you. Where are you headed? The shore?"

"The woods, m'lord. I don't know the way to the coast. But Egg wants to look for shipwrecks."

"I'll show you the path. Simple enough—just turn right at the fork instead of left, then…"

The way the lord lingered made it clear he was stalling. Important matters pressed, yet here he stood. Dunk looked closer: Lyonel's eyes were sunken, hollowed. This was no pleasant weariness after a night of talk and pleasure. This was a man that barely slept.

"Is everything all right?" Dunk asked quietly.

Lyonel waved it off. "All is well, Ser Duncan. Nothing to fret over." Then came the blow: "If we must postpone today's plans, will you be terribly angry?"

Dunk clenched his jaw. Swallowed the hurt. He should have expected it. An uprising was brewing; a lord's duties bowed to no one's tender feelings.

"We didn't have any fixed plans anyway," he said.

Lyonel's smile carried a shadow. "I did."

Dunk had no answer. Truth was, he had woken that morning already looking forward to the day's end like a boy awaiting a feast. It was foolish to mourn something that wasn't even spoken of, yet the loss still left a bitter taste.

"Don't worry, ser. I'll make it up to you tenfold." Lyonel laid a hand on Dunk's arm still holding the basket. The touch felt too intimate for the open yard. "It's just… the times, you understand."

"The times, aye." Dunk nearly admitted he would miss him. Cleared his throat. "I'll go find Egg, then. Thank you, Lyonel. I mean—m'lord."

Lyonel laughed and clapped his elbow. Dunk escaped gratefully from both those ever-present hands and the watching eyes.

* * *

With Egg he saddled the horses, but the longer the preparations took, the heavier Dunk's mood became. Memories of demanding kisses lingered in the stables. And the last forest ride had ended well for everyone except the she-wolf whose grave he still visited daily. Apparently that's what he was—a fool who felt the sting of everything, no matter how small.

There would be no hands, no kisses, no quiet talk. At least, not today. He glanced at Egg. Usually he could share whatever addled him with the boy, but this was his alone to bear. No one should know.

"What are they saying in the kitchens?" Dunk asked, seeking distraction. "Anything about that Gowen fellow?"

"Plenty of nasty nicknames," Egg chuckled, tightening Chestnut's girth. "They say he left three moons ago. The castle folk are glad—he ruled more than Lord Lyonel ever did. They say breathing feels easier now."

"Too much freedom for servants isn't always good," Dunk mused. "They might start slacking."

The boy slid a mounting block beside Chestnut and thought for a moment.

"Is it so wrong when the servants are happy?"

Dunk led both horses out once Egg was mounted. "Good for them, Egg. Not always so good for the coffers."

* * *

They hadn't met—neither that day nor the ones that followed. There were no stolen touches in hidden corners, though Lyonel had promised to show him every one. Then one afternoon Iola appeared at the door: Lord Baratheon invited him and his squire for a ride across the shore, away from prying eyes. Dunk dressed so quickly he felt embarrassed by his own eagerness.

Their horses clopped along the stone-paved road toward the sea. Lyonel rode his black destrier, Dunk on Thunder, Egg on Chestnut. A couple of servants and a groom trailed behind.

Any foolish resentment Dunk still nursed dissolved the moment he saw Lyonel in daylight. Sunken eyes red-rimmed from sleepless nights were joined by a haggard pallor. The usual storm of energy had dulled to a tired breeze. Even his smiles had lost their lightning.

Something was clearly wrong.

On the way to the coast, Lyonel told Egg about the bay, sounding weary but polite. He seemed to be taking some pleasure in it. That was the only reason Dunk didn't silence his squire. He himself listened with half an ear, gazing at the sea where grey sky bled seamlessly into grey water, as if the horizon had been bitten clean. Thick black clouds crawled toward them from the northeast.

"How long until the rain?" Dunk asked.

Lyonel needed only a glance. "Two hours with this wind." He nodded at the servants. "We have cloaks, so we won't get soaked."

The path descended to the shore. Waves rolled in like slow, steady heartbeats. Egg rode Chestnut too close; the mare shied at a breaker and winnied, dancing sideways.

"Ser Duncan!" Egg yanked the reins, scared. Dunk nudged Thunder closer and caught the mare's bridle, murmuring low, soothing nonsense until the horse calmed.

"The water's fast and cold," he told Egg, guiding Thunder away from the surf. Chestnut followed obediently. "Let her get used to it."

"You're a bloody snake charmer," Lyonel laughed. Dunk handed the reins back to the boy—Egg nudged Chestnut and set her galloping along the beach. "Every creature comes running to your voice."

*Even stags, it seems.*

A little farther on, figures appeared from behind a rock. Dunk narrowed his eyes. The closer they came, the stranger the sight: something small in the middle, flanked by tall, moving shapes. People?

"Someone waiting for us?" Dunk asked. Lyonel only gave a proud little snort.

"You could say that."

As they drew closer, Dunk saw servants had set up a low table with two folding chairs on the sand. Platters of cheese and ripe Dornish fruit gleamed beside a sweating jug of wine.

"We've arrived," Lyonel announced, swinging down, and handed his reins to a servant. "Make yourself comfortable, friend."

Dunk followed him, still confused, and glanced at Egg. The boy was playing at being a knight in the lists, shouting tourney boasts he had picked up at Ashford. He was safely distant and loud enough—Dunk wouldn't lose track. The servants worried him more.

"You said we'd be without prying eyes."

Lyonel looked at the servants. "You heard him? You're prying eyes. Off with you, shoo." He waved at them, and they bowed and led the horses away.

"*Lyonel*!" Dunk flared, not wanting the lord to sour the servants on him.

The man only shrugged.

"What? *Now* it's a proper date."

Thunder and Lyonel's stallion joined the party waiting in the distance. Dunk calmed down only when he was sure his horse would be looked after. He stole a piece of cheese from a plate. Only after he chewed did the word truly land.

"A… what?" He stared at the lord settling into his chair.

"A *date*, Dunk. The one I owed you from the beginning." Lyonel looked up, squinting against the grey sky. The sea breeze tugged at his curls, the muted light turning every strand silver. "A man only loses his maidenhead once."

Dunk's face burned. It seemed the power of speech went along with his maidenhead.

"*Stop that,*" he finally managed, "I'm not some maiden you need to court."

Lyonel chuckled and reached for the wine. "Could've fooled me."

Dunk stared at the carefully laid table, at the wine Lyonel was pouring, and felt equal parts shame and anger. Why had he ever confessed? The knowledge had changed how Lyonel treated him. He wasn't sure he could bear such tender care when his own heart was already in turmoil.

"It wasn't worth the fuss," he grumbled, sitting down, and took his chalice. "But… Thank you. You're generous."

"Dunk, look at me."

Lyonel's voice sounded tired—that was why Dunk glanced up. The lord held his eyes for a long moment, then offered a worn, kind smile.

"You are worth *everything*."

The wave that crashed through Dunk was so powerful he couldn't hold the gaze. He downed half his cup just to buy time and come up with something to say. Lyonel didn't press. He simply leaned back and sighed, resting an elbow on the table.

"Fine day," he murmured. "Rare in these parts."

He watched the sea as though it could heal some wordless ache inside him. Dunk thought of the old tales—Durran wedding the daughter of wind. Her blood now flowed in the Baratheons, too. Dunk wondered whether the sea called to them the way the sky called to birds and the earth to moles.

*His date isn't only with me.* The thought brought both relief and a compassionate sorrow. Lyonel had lived a full life, yet happiness still seemed to slip away.

Dunk picked at the grapes. "Do you miss it?"

"More than you can *fucking imagine*. I'd give anything for Tyrosh and its spiced eel." Lyonel pointed southeast, towards the foreign lands. "Nowhere is a man freer than at sea. Sail where you like, do what you like—"

"Aren't you doing whatever you like now?"

Lyonel gave him a queer look as if he had said something foolish. "Where would I find the time, Dunk! A hedge knight has more freedom than the smallest lord. When I was a boy I dreamed of wandering the world just like you."

Dunk nearly choked on his wine. "You wanted to be a *hedge knight*?"

"Who doesn't at nine? Especially in the midst of parental nagging." Lyonel chuckled wearily. "I even threatened I'd renounce my inheritance. That's probably why they hurried up and made a spare."

Dunk smiled. "In Flea Bottom we all dreamed of becoming lords and ladies."

"Such is our human kind—always greedy for more."

After that they simply sat together. Watching Egg try to teach the decidedly un-warlike mare tourney maneuvers. Waves rolled endlessly onto the sand. Dunk wanted to dip, but the weather didn't invite it. And he didn't like the clouds pulling from the horizon.

A heavy feeling settled in Dunk's chest—he had no gift of *dreaming* like that Daeron lad, but something just *stirred* in him—an omen of unkind days ahead. He set the grapes aside, appetite gone.

"How is your brother?" he asked at last.

Lyonel shot him an unfriendly glance. "Back to that?"

"I can see something's wrong."

"Such as?"

"You look—"

"Like *shit*?"

"I *wasn't* going to say that." Dunk met his eyes. "You look *tired*."

Lyonel rubbed his face as if trying to scrub the exhaustion away. But his weariness only became more obvious.

"We're alone," Dunk said gently, leaning across the table. "You can tell me whatever's on your mind."

"Winds," Lyonel answered dully. His fingers started tracing the patterned rim of a plate. "Winds are on my mind, Dunk. Dark winds, dark words."

"I thought it was wings."

"Uh huh, and what do wings ride upon?"

Dunk didn't argue. He simply waited, letting the silence stretch. The trick worked on Egg every time: ask once, then sit quietly until the boy cracked. Lyonel was made of sterner stuff, yet he hated quiet even more than his squire did.

The lord sighed, finally. "I've known my brother for nearly thirty years. He's known me his whole life. I taught him to sail; put a sword in his hand. But if I have to choose between him and duty…"

Unease prickled down Dunk's spine. This was dangerous ground. "Why would you have to choose?" he asked quietly.

Lyonel looked at him with vast patience, offering no rebuke. Prince Maekar could have used some of it with his sons.

"Two thousand swords is already an army, Dunk. Small, but still an army. Unless Gowen has no supporters across my lands—which he *does*. And their numbers will swell the moment he declares his intentions."

He's expecting war, Dunk realised. Not against the peasants. Against his own *brother*.

His fist clenched of its own accord; he heard the knuckles crack. All year Dunk thought of the lord like a force of nature—untouchable, full of life. Now before him sat a man worn down by fear.

The urge to touch him rose sharp and sudden. Here, on this empty shore far from watching eyes, they could finally do so openly. Dunk reached across the table and

folded Lyonel's ringed hand in his own large one. For a heartbeat he feared the old gods and the new might strike them down—but Lyonel simply turned his palm and laced their fingers in quiet answer.

"Why do you think he'll betray you?" Dunk asked when his breathing restored. "He needs those swords to deal with the peasants too."

"Dunk, listen. I've waited a long time for this. It's finally here. That's it." Lyonel grimaced and reached for the jug with his free hand. It trembled; wine spilled over the rim of the cup, and the lord cursed under his breath. "He's sunk his tentacles into everything I do like some fucking *kraken*. He knows what's in my coffers, what I drink, who steals from my kitchens…"

"He's your heir, right?" Dunk remembered. "Until you have children of your own?"

"*Exactly*. Anything happens to me and the entire Stormlands fall into his lap."

"That would be *kinslaying*. The worst crime there is."

"You think I don't know that?" Lyonel barked. "But if a full rebellion breaks out, I won't be able to let him off *either*."

Dunk had no words left. He simply stroked his thumb across the back of Lyonel's hand. For days now the Lord of Storm's End had been living in a world where this betrayal had already taken root. Seeing daggers in every shadow the same way Lady Baratheon heard voices in the wind. Perhaps it was only sleeplessness. Or perhaps the hurt he inherited from his mother ran deeper than anyone knew. Either way, it was hard to argue: Lord Baratheon was in a vulnerable position. Thin ice.

The suspicions could be groundless, of course. But Dunk didn't know his brother, so he couldn't tell.

"I could ride with those two thousand," Dunk reminded carefully. "Find out what Gowen is really doing there."

Lyonel snatched his hand back and fixed him with a fierce glare. "So he can *kill* you? Or take you *hostage*?"

"He doesn't know why I came to the Stormlands. We could say we're looking for a contract, me and Egg."

"Out of the question." Lyonel rose sharply, anger flashing. Strangely, no fear came with it. Dunk realized he no longer truly feared the lord's wrath. "If anything happened to you, I'd lose a true friend—and blame myself until my last breath."

Dunk leaned back in his chair, lips pressed tight. It was unbearable to sit idle. After all the kindness Lyonel had shown him, not being able to offer anything in return felt like torture.

"I want to *help*," he said, voice tight. The pain in it surprised even him. Lyonel had never turned him away before. After so much acceptance, it landed like a slap.

"Then swear fealty." Lyonel turned, eyes burning. "Prove you mean it. *Stay*."

Only pure chance kept Dunk from dropping to his knee and giving his oath beneath that stormy sky. Horses winnied in the distance. Dunk and Lyonel both startled. The servants scattered—a lone rider broke through them and was now galloping along the beach, cloak flapping like a sail, hooves kicking up sand.

Lyonel muttered, "Who in the seven hells…?"

Dunk stood up, quietly shifting closer. Painfully remembered he had left his sword-belt with Thunder. As the rider drew near, he recognized the House Mertyns sigil on the plain doublet.

The horse skidded to a halt, lathered and wild-eyed, but couldn't stop moving, still dancing in place. The saddle was white with foam; the girth had rubbed the poor beast raw. The rider swung down, flung back his hood, and black curls spilled across his angry face.

"Glad you are in good health, *brother*," Gowen Baratheon said in a tone that set Dunk's teeth on edge. "For a man who *doesn't answer my fucking letters* you seem awfully *shocked* to see me."

Dunk remembered him at once—from the feast pavilion, quiet and watchful, preferring conversation at the high table to revelry. Gowen had vanished once the dancing began; must have retreated to his tent.

Lyonel stood frozen for half a second before irritation carved deep lines into his face. Dunk knew that look; Prince Maekar had worn it with Baelor.

"What the *fuck* are you doing here, Gowen?" Lyonel demanded, following his brother toward the table. "You should be in the Misty Wood, not— You've come without even a *guard*!"

"Yes, *my lord*." Gowen poured wine into *Dunk's cup* and helped himself to a piece of cheese from the platter. "But since you *ignored* my last plea to send out *reinforcement*, I feared something terrible had happened at home. Rode day and night, changing horses and hiding my face."

Egg had frozen in the distance, holding Chestnut's reins, not daring to approach. *Wise boy*. Dunk felt the whole beach against his skin like a living thing. And when Gowen's blue eyes fell on him, it struck like a whip across his bare back.

"*Him* again?" The man glanced at the two chairs, two cups. "*Enjoying yourselves*, I see?"

"Brother, meet my good friend Ser Duncan the Tall," Lyonel said stiffly. Then to Dunk: "Ser, my dear brother—Gowen Baratheon."

"An honor, m'lord," Dunk rasped.

And realised he was *furious*. Impossibly so. How could anyone *ignore letters* when trouble was brewing?

"I remember you from the Trial of the Seven," Gowen said, pointing with *his* cup. "Your victory stirred up quite a storm, ser. People felt the gods had smiled on them—even Prince Baelor gave his life for one of theirs."

Discomfort crawled under Dunk's skin. Of course Gowen, having spent months trying to calm the lands, would see him as the root of the trouble. And who could truly blame him? He wasn't alone in grieving the prince. The whole realm felt orphaned after the trial.

"I defended my honor," Dunk answered carefully. Gowen wasn't Lyonel; rudeness could earn a beating. "The truth was on my side. I'm sorry this brought trouble to your lands."

"Oh, you're *informed*?" Gowen's fingers tightened white around the cup. "Do tell me more about my lands. I'm *fascinated*."

*Fool*. Dunk wasn't supposed to know about the peasants. Wasn't fitting for a hedge knight to be privy to such matters.

Fortunately Lyonel spared him from answering.

"Brother, this is pointless. Our business is for private ears. Let Ser Duncan go—we were nearly finished anyway."

Gowen flung himself into *Dunk's chair*, drained the wine from *Dunk's cup*. Blood was boiling by the time Lyonel touched his sleeve.

"Thank you for the company, ser." Lyonel searched his eyes, gaze intense. "I'll send for you when you're needed. Agreed?"

Dunk's jaw clenched so hard it ached. He pulled his arm free. He was *sick* of those public kisses and touches. Lyonel had already crowned him in front of the whole pavilion—no need to repeat himself.

"*When I'm needed*," he said, voice thick with smothered fury.

And then called to Egg and headed back toward the servants.

By the time they collected Thunder and mounted, a cold rain had begun to fall. Dunk hadn't even noticed the clouds swallowed Storm's End. The horses plodded along the path as the ancient black tower rose ahead, stabbing into an even blacker sky.

The brothers' raised voices chased them on the wind, but Dunk couldn't make out the words. He didn't want to.

"What happened back there, ser?" Egg asked, curiosity winning. After hearing the story, he frowned. "It's not right to delay correspondence when there's trouble like this."

"Exactly!" Dunk's own vehemence startled him. "That's no way for a knight. What good is bravery on the tourney field if you are dodging duties in your own home?"

"In one man, there are many men, ser."

Dunk nearly groaned. The last thing he needed was his own squire quoting Lyonel at him. Especially when he wanted nothing more than to forget the man for the rest of the day.

"Where did you pick that up?"

"From you, ser. You told me that once."

The rest of the ride passed in heavy silence.

Turned out there were first times for disappointments, too.

## Chapter 8

The weirwood's blood-red leaves hissed in the wind, its ancient, terrible face staring blind at a dull sky. Dunk kept his distance. The rain had stopped hours ago, yet the grass still shone wet, so he'd found himself a seat on the oak roots instead, well clear of the old gods.

"Ser Gowen *clearly* wasn't spanked enough as a boy," Dunk grumbled, honing Ser Arlan's sword; the scrape of whetstone steadied his mind. "Sits in my chair. Drinks my wine. And we were on a *bloody date*."

The word left his mouth and he felt a proper fool. Dates were for lovers, not for– whatever this was. Lyonel had likely felt guilty over it and tried patching things however he could. Would've cost the man nothing to say it plain: *Listen here, Ser Duncan, I've got a rebellion breathing down my neck, so don't take it hard if we don't kiss for a few days. Business, is all.*

Only Lyonel had been dodging *business the* same way he'd been dodging Dunk lately. He hadn't even put quill to the letter—the one thing he was *supposed* to do as Lord of the Stormlands! What sort of man was bold enough for battlefield yet too spineless to face his own duties? "j"

"I don't think he's a reliable sort of man," Dunk said, glancing sideways. The she-wolf's grave kept its silence, same as it always did. The rain had settled it some;

the hill looked smaller now, though a man could still pick it out easily from the path. "Not that it surprises me. It was obvious even then at Ashford—he wanted the lists, the wine, and the… well, *other* pleasures. Ruling was the last thing on his mind."

And Dunk, no doubt, was only another pretty face to drive off boredom—or, since he was no beauty, rather a strong useful body for whatever the night required. Lyonel could swear a hundred times that Dunk deserved the world—it meant nothing when the man refused to let him share anything beyond the bed. *Stay here and warm me. Amuse me. But don't ask to carry anything heavier than that, it's not for a mind as plain as yours.*

"There's friends for the good times," Dunk grumbled, thoroughly miserable now, "and friends for all times. Clear enough which sort he thinks I am—if he thinks me a friend at all. Half the time he treats me like—I don't know. Like I'm livestock."

Lyonel loved pawing at him where the whole honest world could see. First the pavilion, then broad daylight in front of half the household. How many had already worked out what passed between them? How many at that Ashford feast had watched Dunk crowned in antlers and thought, *there goes our Lyonel, found himself another sistraction.*

"Maybe that's all I am to him." Dunk scraped the stone so hard he left a scratch he hadn't meant to leave. "A big dumb ox. Point me where and I'll go. Set me down and I'll wait. Suppose that's the only way lords know to treat the likes of me."

And Dunk, fool that he was, started believing there was something proper between them. Ser Arlan's voice rose in his mind: same as paying a whore and then believing she cares. Dunk was not vain enough to hope for love from a great lord. But he had believed, at the very least, that Lyonel saw him as more than a useful thing or a night's sport—that they shared a real friendship, if nothing else.

The brush stirred to his right. Quicker than he could react, a dark shape in a cloak loomed over.

"You again?" Gowen's voice was sharp, his face bloodless. His blade came free and levelled at Dunk's heart. Where in the seven hells had he come from? Dunk never heard a step or a broken stick. "What business have you on this sacred ground, ser? Speak. Now."

Gowen held the sword with far less confidence than his brother, yet the intent was plain. Dunk had never provoked such anger by doing so little. He hesitated. If he rose with Ser Arlan's sword in his hand he would seem a true danger; men always tensed at his height. But putting the sword aside would leave him open, and he had no wish for that under the man's hostile glare.

"Ser Gowen." Dunk simply stayed seated—ill-mannered, maybe, but better rude than bleeding. "I come here to think, is all."

"A heathen, then, Ser Duncan? Praying to trees like some godless northman?"

"Uh… Not at all? Why would you—"

Gowen glanced past his shoulder, and it all made sense at once. A dozen paces off, cradled in the weirwood's thousand-year roots, lay Lady Meera Baratheon.

"Meant no disrespect to your lady mother's rest, ser." Dunk looked to the grave. "Never once thought to disturb her."

"Oh, so you know about that too, do you." Gowen's arm dropped, though more from tiring than any change of heart. "It seems my dear brother's tongue wags free as the Smith's hammer."

Dunk cursed himself silently. He'd grown too easy around Lyonel, forgot when to keep quiet.

"We were hunting a she-wolf," he started, heat crawling up his neck. "I killed her by accident. Lord Lyonel let me decide what to do with her after. I, eh, asked to bury her in the woods, but the weather was foul, so we—"

"Hold—you said *accident*?"

Gowen stared as if he was a pure lunatic. Dunk set his jaw but met the look steadily.

"Strangled her, ser. Snapped her neck, more like. She got a piece of me too." He set the sword down among the roots and pushed back his sleeve to show the bandage. "Buried her right here. I come by sometimes because—well, she's a long way from home."

Gowen slid the sword home without another word. Then crossed to the disturbed earth on soft feet, regarding the grave with bleak distaste. The wind in the branches nearly drowned the sound of his boots.

"And you don't call that a desecration, Ser Duncan? Burying a beast on holy ground?"

"Lyonel offered it himself, m'lord. I wouldn't have done it without his leave."

Something shifted in Gowen's face, and Dunk's gut twisted. *Said too much again, haven't you.*

"Of course he allowed it," Gowen said, dangerously quiet. "It wasn't him who buried our mother. Wasn't him who's kept her grave tended, all these years. Couldn't tell you the last time his boots even touched this wood, not since—"

The man trailed off, and Dunk did not press. Everything about the conversation sat wrong. Lyonel had stood with them in the rain after the kill, wineskin in hand, while Dunk dug the grave. Was that so rare, then? The lord had been deep in his cups that night—had he needed the drink just to set foot in the godswood?

What Dunk understood even less was how freely Gowen spoke of his own brother's failings to a hedge knight he'd crossed paths with all of three times. Was he angling for something? Seven save him, *one* Baratheon was already more than a man could manage, and Dunk now had two!

"Have you taken service with my brother, Ser Duncan?" Gowen asked, sudden.

A chill went down Dunk's back. He could not decide which was worse: speak the truth and admit he had sworn no oath, or lie and paint himself close to Lyonel. Either way felt like drawing a target on his own chest.

"We arrived a week ago," he said, careful. "Egg and I were on the road through the Stormlands and thought to visit. Lord Lyonel invited us himself at the Ashford tourney."

"Mmm. A guest visit, then." Gowen's eyes went toward the tower, though the old growth hid it from view. "Collecting strays and chasing lost causes always did matter more to my brother than his own blood."

There was an exhaustion under his bitterness—the particular kind that comes from loving someone who'll never change no matter how hard a man wishes it. Before Dunk could untangle it, Gowen fixed him with a queer look and asked:

"You met Ser Ronnel yet?"

"Aye, ser." What did *that* one have to do with anything? "I spoke with him some. Handles a sabre well enough."

"He was a common sailor with neither name nor hearth. Now he's a sworn knight of the house. The oath, at least, had never faltered." Gowen paused, watching as though the point should have landed. It did not. "I hope you will swear to our family soon as well. Ser."

Even if Dunk had found his tongue, he would have had no chance to use it: one last glance at his mother's grave and Gowen was gone. Only hunters moved that quietly through a wood. It seemed while one brother had chosen the glory of the lists, the other preferred the trail of game.

The godswood fell quiet again. Dunk picked the sword back up, though his mind was already elsewhere. Something was leading him by the nose. A half-formed guess teased the edge of his thoughts, flashing like a coin dropped in deep water—always slipping through his fingers. Gowen, Lyonel, Ronnel—some tangled history sat between the three of them, but nobody looked likely to hand him the thread.

* * *

Next day after breakfast Iola told him the lord wanted him again—alone this time. Dunk's guard went straight up. The sting of yesterday's quarrel hadn't faded yet, and he braced himself for another one just in case.

The maid led him past the private chambers, past even the Sailors' Hall where the lord usually worked, to some small room tucked up one of the tower floors. A tailor's dummy stood centre of it, servants fussing around. Beyond sat a great triple mirror; tables stood stacked in cloth. At the window, facing away, Lyonel waited with hands clasped at his back. The soft scrape of the door turned him, and his face lit up in an instant.

"My dear friend!"

He crossed the room with such purpose the servants scattered like startled birds from a thrown stone. Two heavy hands landed on Dunk's shoulders and gave him an affectionate shake.

"Good to see you, good to see you—come on in, don't just stand there gawping at the door."

Lyonel steered him with a palm between the shoulder blades, herding him the same as a man might a stubborn mule; Dunk went along, distracted, hunting the lord's face for last night's weariness. It was still there under the surface—eyes sunken, fine features drawn—but something restless had come to join it. It made him seem more vivid than usual, vibrating with that brittle, feverish high Dunk remembered from sleepless nights: the unnatural cheer that walks the edge of hysteria.

"I promised you something, as you might recall." Lyonel steered him toward the dummy. A doublet of heavy blue brocade hung there, gold thread catching the light; he fussed a puffed sleeve back into shape. "Blue, like we agreed."

"Agreed—" Dunk's eyes went wide. "We never *agreed*, Lyonel!"

"I told you I'd have one made. Man of my word, aren't I." Lyonel waved the servants forward, and they set to unpinning and unbuttoning, making quick work of it. "On you go. Let's see it fit."

They lifted the doublet off the dummy and closed in like trappers with a net, and Dunk wanted badly to step back, but the hand at his spine did not allow retreat. Staring with rising unease, he could only stammer out:

"Must've cost you a small fortune! You've already given us— Lyonel, I never asked—"

"Duncan, listen to me." A warm, dry palm cupped his jaw, turning his face, and Lyonel's black eyes were suddenly very close—Dunk lost the rest of the sentence outright. "I know you. You'd live happy on salt beef and under open sky the whole rest of your days. But a man's allowed to spoil himself once in a while. Come on, just let me—don't fight me on this one."

His insistent, expecting voice left Dunk without a single word of protest. Memories came unbidden—that man's hands cupping his face, his mouth fierce against Dunk's, the scrape of his moustache, the softness underneath. Suddenly struggling to form any thought, Dunk reached for his own laces.

"No, no, keep the breeches on." Lyonel caught his hands and quickly guided them back up. "Just the jacket."

*Fucking hells.* He might as well have dropped to his knees the moment the lord beckoned. Dunk glanced sheepishly at the servants. They waited with carefully blank faces, yet somehow still managed to look as if they were judging both his slowness and the unworthy thoughts rattling around in his skull. No doubt they'd already guessed plenty from the way Lyonel's palm had lingered on his face.

Fingers clumsy, Dunk worked his own collar loose. Then hauled the jacket over his head—too fast; it got his elbows tangled. A servant girl barely taller than Egg fetched a stool, climbed it, and between the two of them finally stripped him down to his shirt.

"Mind his arm, that's still healing!" Lyonel commanded over the servants' heads. "Touch it wrong and you'll wish you hadn't."

Dunk barely had a breath to spare before they stuffed him into the doublet. The cloth slid over him softer than anything he'd worn. He looked down at his chest: a pattern of stars wound across the gleaming brocade, stitched by some master hand. There were stars and there were sprigs of leaves—close enough to the sigil Tanselle had once painted. And over the heart, two stags—not locked antler to antler like the ones on Lyonel's own cloak, but facing one another, each with a foreleg bent, as if they were bowing into a dance.

"Fits you like it was poured on," Lyonel grinned while the servants muttered over seams and measurements. "Go on, have a look."

Hands on his shoulders spun him to face the triple mirror. Three Dunks stared back. Above the truly royal doublet sat his red peasant's face, so out of place amid the splendour that he honestly wanted the floor to swallow him.

He had never liked mirrors; there was nothing in them worth seeing. Now he saw he'd gone shaggy on the road, hair falling into his eyes, and that morning's shave had missed a patch along his jaw. Yet he could not look away. In the doublet his shoulders seemed broader, his soft gut somehow drawn in, and his eyes a blue he had never once seen on himself.

"There. Now you look like yourself." In all three mirrors Lyonel appeared at his side and slung an arm round him, easy as a brother might. For a heartbeat the glass held a dream: no rebellion, no kings, only the two of them and whatever quiet thing lived between them. It was good and warm and utterly out of reach—like a septon dreaming of children.

"What do you mean, like myself?" Dunk managed.

"Like a knight worth a song or two."

Already red, he watched himself go redder. The flattery was ridiculous, but Lyonel's voice carried no doubt at all. Something inside Dunk gave way, soft as butter left too near the fire. Shamefully, he found himself wanting to believe.

"No one's ever going to write songs about me."

"I would."

That alone dragged Dunk's eyes off his own reflection. Was the man in earnest? Lyonel held his gaze steady through the glass.

"You can write songs?"

"Course I can! I can do a great many things, my lovely knight—only some of them spectacularly badly."

Right then Dunk wanted, most lamentably, to kiss him. All the carefully nursed anger—over the failed beach outing, over Gowen, over the letter—simply would not hold. But kissing in front of the servants was out of question, and flattery left him too tongue-tied to find any graceful answer. So he squared up and said, "Can we speak alone?"

Lyonel looked at him funny, then waved the servants out. The second the door shut, he took Dunk's hand without warning and started folding back the cuff at his wrist.

"You've no idea how fine you look," he murmured, intent on the work. "Especially since you stopped hunching. The Tyroshi say any stone can be cut into something,

given the proper hand. What's that face for? Thought I hadn't noticed? Of course I noticed. Thought at first you'd grown another inch on me."

He had a courtier's gift for pretty words. Dunk's own tongue stayed a clumsy log no matter how he twisted it. So he stood there blinking while Lyonel smoothed a crease from his sleeve with more care than the task deserved.

Fussing over him again. And Lyonel was near dropping from exhaustion. Hard not to hate Gowen a little, for the hold he had over his brother.

"You slept at all?" Dunk asked.

"Back to that again?" Lyonel's smile went thin, and he let Dunk's hand drop. "I didn't call you here for another sermon."

Dunk's mouth ran ahead of him: "Well, at least the letter's off the table…"

"Oh, so you're cross with me as well?" Lyonel's eyes sharpened at once. "Stay cross, then. I'll say my piece."

He closed the gap between them and set his palms flat to Dunk's chest, easy as anything, cracking whatever thin ice had grown from their quarrel. His hands were broad and unhurried; the doublet's cloth warmed fast under them, and when that warmth sank clean through to skin, something new stirred under Dunk's ribs—something shy and fluttering.

"Our date went poorly," Lyonel said. "Still regret it, if you want the truth. Let me make it right. Will you?"

"Wh—"

"What I mean is, let us start over clean. You'll recall I meant to court you, but then we went and tripped straight into each other's arms instead." Lyonel's grin turned pleased, and he patted the doublet like it proved some point. "I'd trip into you again a hundred times over, don't doubt that. But there was sense in my original plan. Don't you think?"

His thumbs began slow circles over the embroidered stags. Dunk was fully clothed and still felt every touch like bare skin. Heat gathered low in his belly. Seven *bloody* hells—whatever fight he'd had in him drained away, replaced by wants that were rather unhelpful.

"Sense? As in—"

"As in doing things the right way," Lyonel said. "We're already past the courting, sure, and I fully intend to keep fucking like stags in rut—but that is no reason for me to grow lazy about the rest."

Dunk suspected the lord's clever mind had once again tangled something up his own head could not follow. Far as he knew, folk circled each other *first* and only *later* got to the part—not the other way around.

"You want to *court* me," he said slowly, like the words might make more sense that way. "After we've already gone and—what, five times now?"

"Oh, you were counting?"

"Who in my place would not?" Dunk blurted, and went straight to being angry at himself for it.

He *had* counted. At night he took each memory out like a coin from a locked box and turned it over in his mind. Before Lyonel there had been no one else—no other nights, no other hands. Those five times were the whole of his treasure, and gods, was he poor.

Rather than risk another look that would undo him again, Dunk stared stubbornly at the wall—it felt safer than the lord's bewitching eyes.

"Be honest—how much did this doublet cost? And the rest—the food, the chambers, everything? I'm not blind—I know every bit of it comes from your pocket."

"Dunk," Lyonel started, but Dunk wasn't finished yet.

"I try not to take on debt I can't repay. And I've nothing to give you in return—I'n just a hedge knight. Yet you keep adding to the pile, one after another, gods honest truth, as if you mean to bury me in it—"

The man's hands left his chest, and the warmth went with them. The room suddenly felt infinitely more miserable.

"So that's how you see me." Something had gone flat in Lyonel's voice. "You think I'm the sort who fucks a man and still keeps the ledger open?"

"No!" It was so ridiculous Dunk looked up at once; the stubborn heat in his chest collapsed into shame. "That's not what I meant. Just—rather you gave me something useful to do, is all."

"There it is again!" Lyonel groaned up at the rafters, and the long column of his throat showed pale above his collar. Dunk's mouth flooded remembering just how good it had felt, biting and kissing at it. "Bring up the bloody rebellion again and I swear I'll thrash you!"

Just a jest. He was jesting, surely—same as he'd joked a year back in the pavilion, threatening to drown Dunk or burn him up as some offering to the Red God. Dunk let

his shoulders drop; the man's temper could rise like a summer storm, but it never turned cruel.

"I see," Lyonel said before Dunk could answer, fatigue settling back into the lines of his face. "Let's count it plain, then, on our fingers if we must. You want to do something for me. Yes? But I want to do something for you, too. And you won't have it. So who is in the right here?"

Dunk stood there, floored. Simple as an axle, the thought, yet it hit him hard. He had never once thought to stand in Lyonel's boots. They had both been stubborn: when Dunk refused Lyonel's affections, it must have frustrated the man just as much as when Lyonel shut him out of his troubles.

"If only the gifts were earned by honest work—" Dunk began, but Lyonel cut him off.

"That'd take an oath, and you'll never give me one. Don't argue—I know you've your own vow to keep. Matters of state and all that. Good. Good! If every knight swapped oaths the way men swap gloves, this fucking realm would already be ash."

Dunk had sworn nothing to Prince Maekar, not properly, but correcting the point was more trouble than it was worth. And Lyonel would've sooner chewed off his own hand than said a kind word about dragons—and since he'd held back this once, it unsettled Dunk more than anything.

"Well—then let it be thanks, at least?" The last scrap of compromise he could find. "For helping around the castle."

Lyonel's brows shot up like the Crone herself had spoken some ancient wisdom through Dunk's mouth.

"So you *will* accept gifts after all? So long as they're earned with service?"

"I *can* manage without gifts," Dunk added quickly, alarmed. "I don't need—"

"Shh, Dunk, hold on. Answer me this—if you fuck me until my legs go soft, does that deserve something in return, or does it not?"

"But I gain as much as I give!" Dunk protested, afraid Lyonel would think the gifts were the only reason he came to bed. "Every time with you is— it's already—"

Lyonel watched him stammer a moment longer, then took his face in both hands and kissed him hard. Moustache scraped, beard scraped; then his soft mouth parted and his tongue slid warm past Dunk's lips. Dunk made some startled sound into it. Then, the kiss ended as sudden as it began. Lyonel drew back and looked him steady in the eye.

"Right, then," he said, still holding him. "You'll chop wood for me. Can you chop wood?"

"...I already do."

"Good. Then chop enough for the whole bloody winter."

"Is there more?" Dunk risked asking.

Lyonel let out a long, patient sigh. "Ronnel's taking stock of the armoury. Help him with it. And if *that* still fails to satisfy your honour, you can break my new stallion—brute's so wild the stablemaster's given up on him." He narrowed his eyes. "Well? Does *that* earn a man's gratitude?"

"I would have done any of it anyway—"

"Hush. Quiet. Settled, then. But the doublet stays on while you work."

By the time Dunk stepped back into the corridor, the last of his anger was gone. His head was full of nothing but *wood, enough for winter, in the doublet*. He still for the life of him could not work out how the man managed, every single time, to pull down the walls Dunk built.

Mother have mercy, and how was he meant to help take stock of an armoury? He could scarcely tell a three from a seven!

* * *

The servants found him a cart for the timber and a horse well used to the work. Dunk harnessed the beast but led it on foot regardless—the road out to the woods was still soft from the rain; a wrong step there could send a man straight down the cliffs.

Egg walked ahead, poking at the mud with a stick like some proper woodsman. Most days the boy could talk a man's ear clean off, but he kept quiet the whole way. Dunk watched him a while before he finally asked, "How's things with Vyola?"

"Fine," Egg said, short. "She showed me the ravens the other day."

"Ravens?" Dunk thought at once of Lyonel—the man loved the birds when he was a boy.

"Aye. They live right under the roof. A servant called Walder tends them."

"I thought that was Maester Irwyn's work."

"Walder helps him with it. Lives in the room next over, minds the birds. When a letter comes, he takes it straight to the maester."

"Maester's not worried this Walder might read them first?"

Folk always said it was maesters who ran the realm, not lords nor kings. Every letter passed through their hands, so they knew every scrap of news before anybody. Although Dunk worried on a different account entirely: if Lyonel's instinct about a rising rebellion was right, any servant might be a spy—especially one who handled the letters.

Egg only giggled at that.

"Irwyn's got nothing to fear there, ser. Walder can't read or speak properly. He only makes sounds."

They fell quiet again; only the cart complained. Thoughts of Lyonel dragged the quarrel back up, and Dunk turned his own stubbornness over in his mind. Perhaps he had been too quick to condemn. Facing a brother's treachery took more courage than most men possessed. And delaying the letters might've been the clever play all along—if Gowen really was raising men, Lyonel had been starving the enemy of aid.

Still. Delaying wasn't the same as never answering at all. In the end the trouble had come knocking at Storm's End's own door, if there was any trouble in the first place. Dunk had grown up with no family of his own, but he'd wager Gowen was behaving exactly how any disappointed younger brother might.

A heavy breath went out of him. Lyonel had said, once, that he'd sought his peace up in the rookery, hiding out from whatever duty came calling. Dunk could use a bit of that peace himself, just then. An hour where he didn't have to fret over castle politics might do him some good.

"Egg," he said, "show me those ravens."

Once the wood was dropped in the yard, they climbed the tower stairs. It carried them past the levels Dunk knew. He shuddered without meaning to. A cold ripple ran through him; try as he might, he kept measuring the windows and wondering which one had been Lady Meera's.

An arch led onto a corridor. They passed two shut doors before Egg pushed the third one wide. Dunk ducked his head under the low frame into a half-round attic room. Drafts wandered freely here, leaving the air damp. Three windows looked out over the sea, only one standing open, its shutter creaking on the swing. The place smelled of birds and wet straw. The ravens sat scattered through cages, along perches, a few up on the ceiling beams. They blinked at the visitors with bead-bright eyes, showing no alarm. Only one, fluffed on its perch, gave a solemn croak.

"Look, ser—this one is the oldest." Egg stopped at a far cage. The bird inside was enormous, plumage dull, feathers missing in patches, one cloudy eye peering out.

"Vyola says his name's Stormclaw. Lord Lyonel named him himself, when he was a boy."

Dunk snorted. Sounded like the sort of name some Flea Bottom orphan would give a pigeon he was hoping might grow up into a proper hunting falcon.

"When he was a boy, you say? How old's the bird now, then?"

"As old as Lyonel himself. Well, maybe a bit younger, actually."

"Ravens live that long?"

Dunk's hand was already reaching for it. Stormclaw twisted his neck, nipped at his finger and announced, clear as anything:

"Slug-sucking whoreson!"

"I bet Lyonel taught him that one," Egg giggled, amused.

They wandered the cages a good ten minutes more. Egg, it turned out, had stuffed his pockets with millet from the kitchens. Dunk gave him a half-hearted scolding, but held out his own palm when the boy offered a share.

Eventually, he stopped at the open window the birds came and went from. The grey sea churned restless below. The headland curved away in a rocky ridge, foam licking the stones.

Long way down, that. A long way to fall.

"Lord Lyonel used to come up here, you know," Dunk said, half to himself. "When the nagging wore thin, he'd run up here and hide out."

"Truly, ser?" The floorboards behind him went quiet; Egg's voice, when it came again, had gone thoughtful. "I would do the same, ser. If I could."

Dunk glanced back at him. These two had more in common than either of them realised. Lyonel's spirit had never settled into the somber shape of a grown man; Egg's was already old beyond his years. One a lord, the other a prince—yet both hated everything that came with their stations.

*Maybe someday Lyonel would grow fond of the lad. See that the dragons were not born wicked—only made so. Maybe then that dream from the mirror could edge a little closer toward real.*

The door creaked. A grey-bearded man came in, a lantern trembling in one hand for no reason Dunk could see—it was unlit, and the attic was bright enough. His eyes

were red-rimmed and wild; he made some low, wordless sound and shuffled toward the window.

"G-good day to you, ser." Dunk edged closer to Egg in case the fellow tried anything funny. "Only come to see the birds. We'll be off shortly."

"That's Walder," Egg whispered while the old man set his lantern on the sill and reached for the shutters. "They say he sailed with the old lord's heir, but the ship went down. He was the only man aboard who lived, and he's been mad ever since."

"Sailed with the heir? But Lyonel's—"

"Lord Baratheon had a third son, ser. The first, actually—Maron was his name, I think. He drowned."

Understanding hit Dunk clean as a struck bell. The whole shape of it fell into place all at once. Storm's End should've gone to another man entirely, the firstborn raised up to rule. The second son had been free as a wind—and when the grieving parents turned all that weight onto him instead, he'd answered with all the defiance of a sea.

*No wonder the man dreamt of the hedges, after a blow like that.*

"Never once spoke of it," Dunk murmured.

The shutter clicked shut, cutting off the sound of the waves, and the attic fell silent. Walder picked up the lantern and turned toward them with small, unsteady steps. There was something haunted in his look—like some part of him was still trapped on that ship, watching the sea break the hull open fresh every single day. How many had he watched die that day? Dunk's skin crawled. And *that godsdamned* window—

"Come on, Egg." Dunk steered his squire toward the door by the shoulder. "Good evening to you, ser."

All the way down to the yard his thoughts stayed fixed on Maron. Lyonel had had a whole family once, and now only Gowen remained of it. No wonder the man pushed so hard for an oath. He'd never once struck Dunk as lonely—courtiers swarmed him thick as flies—but Dunk was starting to suspect a lord's loneliness was of a different sort. It wasn't measured in empty halls or quiet corridors—more like, in having to test every word that comes your way same as a man tests a gold coin with his teeth.

Family, Dunk had always thought, were the ones who told you the truth without masks. Lyonel could not even trust his brother that far. Around him, no one remained from whom he expected no hidden motives—save maybe—

A cold shiver climbed straight up Dunk's spine.

"You know, Egg, that explains a fair bit about the man," he muttered. "That Maron lad, I mean."

"Does it, ser? It struck me the other way around." Egg frowned, working it over. "If my brother Daeron died, I'd mourn him for the rest of my days. Yet Lyonel throws feasts, and he seems cheerful."

Dunk sighed.

"Sometimes that's what grief looks like—when a man does not wallow but runs from it instead."

* * *

By nightfall the rain had started up again, though not hard enough to drive a man under a roof. Once the wood was seen to, Dunk and Egg hauled the last of it down to the kitchen hearth. Dunk pressed a penny into the cook's palm.

"Squire helped himself to millet without asking leave. My apologies for it. I'll see he learns better manners."

She was somehow so pleased she filled a basket for them—cheese, warm loaves, tiny tomatoes, butter, and figs, all covered with a neat white towel. Even Dunk's hunger would not empty it in one sitting.

"Coming to supper?" he asked Egg, glancing up from the basket. The boy had his neck craned, scanning the kitchen for somebody in particular.

"Ser, might I be excused?"

"Excused? Thin as you are—"

"I'll eat in the kitchen, ser." Egg's face went pleading. "Vyola's working tonight. I said something about her eyebrows yesterday, and she took offence. I ought to make it right."

Seemed the whole castle had gone and chosen the same day for quarrels.

"That's well done," Dunk said, and meant it. Any man could make a mess, but only the decent ones cleaned it up.

Egg darted off deeper into the kitchen. One of the cooks hollered after him about muddy boots and took a swipe with a towel that he ducked easy, well used to the game. The boy was in good hands.

Dunk left him to it, his own thoughts already turning down a different road. Everything suddenly seemed to fit—the supper, the ravens, the hour growing late.

Their last date had gone sideways, but maybe there was room to try again. He had been hard on Lyonel these past days—too hard, perhaps. Perhaps the moment had come to make amends.

* * *

Dunk tucked the basket away in the rookery, deep in the farthest drawer the birds couldn't reach. Even so, he nearly turned back three times on the way down the stairs. They'd sniff it out and pick it clean before he ever got up there! But he knew no better hiding place for food, and the hour was slipping fast.

At Lyonel's door, the familiar voice answered his knock. The lord sat alone at the writing table, bent hard over some letter. Candles in the branched holder burned down to fat, root-thick trails of wax.

"Come in, dear." Lyonel set his quill aside and stretched back in his chair with a tired growl. "Still up, are you?"

"Same as you."

Lyonel held his gaze a moment too long, and whatever nerve Dunk had carried up the stairs fled him at once. The whole visit suddenly felt foolish—but before he could invent an excuse and bolt, Lyonel tipped his head back and barked a sudden hoarse laugh.

"Well, someone has to keep the sea from swallowing the place whole!" His knees cracked as he rose to his feet. "Come here, then."

Dunk started working his wet cloak loose but couldn't settle on where to put it. Lyonel solved the problem for him—took the cloth straight from his hands, crossed to the hearth, and draped it over a chairback so the fire could dry it. Something rose behind Dunk's ribs, at once warm and full of guilt. There it was again—Lyonel fussing over him. Dunk was nobody, a hedge knight with nothing to his name, and the Lord of Storm's End tended him like the lowest servant in the household.

Coming back, Lyonel took him by the shoulders and ran both palms down the sleeves of that gifted doublet, plainly pleased. Dunk had worn it the whole day through, just like he'd promised, shedding it only when the wood-splitting turned him too warm to bear it.

"Fine sight, this. You know how to please a man, don't you." Lyonel's voice dropped to a pleased rumble. "Don't tell me you froze your arse off in that rain."

Since he was touching so freely, it seemed only fair to touch back. Dunk's own clumsy hands found the man's sides, though he dared nothing further than that. Was

this allowed again, or did the quarrel still lie between them? Or was the lord too occupied to welcome the distraction?

"Are you working?" Dunk glanced at the half-written page. "Care for a break, perhaps?"

"Care for one? I'd kill for one. You think I enjoy this endless scratching?" Lyonel gave his shoulders one final clap, then perched himself on the edge of the table. His long legs stretched out near enough to brush Dunk's boots. "Why, something on your mind?"

He said it with a sharp, knowing smile, but the hint of it sailed clean past Dunk. Some odd, sudden awkwardness seized him—he was a welcome guest in this room, and still couldn't work out where to put himself, hovering near the door like a stranger who forgot how to be at ease.

*Seven above, I've slept with him,* Dunk raged at himself silently. *In this very room, more than once. Touched him. Kissed him. Whispered things to him I've never told anyone.*

"Thought I might steal you away, for a bit," he managed finally. "If you're willing."

"Oh, am I willing indeed." Suddenly a cup and a bottle were in Lyonel's grip—had they been on the table all along, keeping him company? Dark, heavy wine poured slow from the tilted neck.

"No, wait—" Dunk stepped close and caught the bottle, gently righting it back up to stop the flow. "There's somewhere I want to take you."

Lyonel blinked at him.

"Dunk, you've already mapped every interesting inch of me. Unless—"

"I mean in the castle."

"…Ah." He snorted. "You think there's something I haven't seen in *my own castle?*"

"I think there's something you might have forgotten."

He did not know what had loosened his tongue, only that the old ease of speaking his mind had come back for a moment. Whatever had wound itself tight in his chest started slowly letting go. He glanced at the bottle still in Lyonel's hand and added, a little more boldly:

"And we'll bring the wine, too."

They went down the corridors near creeping like a pair of thieves, dodging guards that weren't even looking their way. Lyonel had none of his brother's grace—his boots scuffed loud on the old stone. The candle Dunk carried off the table shivered in the draught, dancing harder once they hit the stairwell. Their long crooked shadows leapt and bowed across the walls with every gust from the arrow-slits.

When they were passing the floor where the old armour stood on silent watch, the footsteps behind him slowed.

"Nearly there," Dunk urged, already fretting whether the ravens had found the basket yet. Little beasts could smell food from the yard below.

"I'm in no hurry," Lyonel answered, oddly muffled.

They climbed another flight together. Dunk ducked under the arch into the narrow corridor leading toward the rookery—and the footsteps behind him stopped dead. Lyonel had frozen solid.

"Duncan." His voice was ringing like steel. "Are you fucking serious?"

Dunk turned. The lord stood five paces back, lips gone bloodless in the low light, knuckles white around the bottle's neck. He was staring past Dunk like some old nightmare waited in the dark ahead, teeth bared.

"...What d'you mean?"

"You brought me here." Lyonel pinned him with a look stripped of all temper. His expression, if anything, held a deep betrayal—the bone-deep exhaustion of a man who realized he had been walked straight to his own grave.

A cold wave broke over him—Dunk went rigid, his mind scrambling in sudden fright. Was this *the* floor, then? Seven fucking hells— The food, the wine, ravens the man had once loved as a boy—all of it curdled in Dunk's mind into some foolish child's notion. He regretted, with sudden violence, every limb the Trial of Seven had left him. Without them, he would never have wandered other men's keeps, trespassing on their private griefs.

Words failed him so complete that all he could manage was pointing the candle toward the rookery and forcing out:

"Th–the ravens.

"The *ravens*?"

"You said yourself you liked them, once. So I figured—"

Lyonel blinked, glanced toward the corridor, then back at Dunk, thoroughly bewildered. Exhaustion in his face loosened into something else—there were times the man looked so undefended it seemed nothing at all stood between the world and his raw beating heart. It was as if Dunk could reach out right then and scoop the whole restless thing up in his own hand, if only he trusted his clumsy paws not to crush something so delicate.

"The ravens, then," Lyonel muttered, and a short, shaky laugh escaped him. He came forward anyway, heavy-footed, like he was dragging each boot up out of the stone itself.

For the second time that day he took hold of Dunk's face and pressed a kiss to his mouth that was utterly undeserved. Relief hit him like a blow, so fierce Dunk wrapped his free arm around the man and crushed him against his chest.

"You asked me on a *date*," Lyonel murmured against his mouth when he finally drew back. Folk rarely looked at Dunk with anything like tenderness, so he couldn't rightly swear that was the word for it—but the anger, at least, had gone clean out of the man, leaving something softer in its place. "You remembered what I told you, and you went and asked me on a fucking date."

"A man who's got nothing still has his memory," Dunk said, then felt his own ears go hot. "Ser Arlan used to say that."

Truth be told he'd stopped caring about the date entirely, even though hunger still knotted his gut. It all seemed like foolish concern now that he had—through pure ignorance—just dragged Lyonel into the nightmare of his past.

"We don't have to," Dunk added, tightening his arm around Lyonel while keeping the candle safely away. "Let's go back, drink that wine the way you meant to."

Lyonel looked at him like he'd just proposed quitting a battle at its very hinge.

"Are you *mad*? Nobody's asked me on a date in *years*, Dunk. Come on now." He nodded toward the low door, a ghost of the old reckless grin returning. "Show me my own bloody ravens."