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Edited by Bub3loka

24th Day of the 7th Moon, 303 AC

The Mad Maid, Oldtown

The looming oily darkness pressed into her dreams and seeped into the recesses of her mind, and Malora Hightower awoke in a bed of cold sweat with a silent scream on her lips. Her heart was racing, and her thin limbs felt sorer than usual. Her heart hammered against her ribs, and it would not calm.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Many called her the Witch of Hightower or the Mad Maid. They were not wrong. She was born with a rare talent unseen for centuries in her House.

The Sight.

Like most gifts of magic, this was a sword without a hilt, twice as dangerous to a Hightower as anyone else.

The price of youthful folly was high, for she had almost shattered her mind by tapping into the Hightower in her childhood dreams.

Her grandfather summoned the finest healers from the Citadel to treat her, even the silver-masked archmaester. They had salvaged her mind, but the cost was grave. Malora's wits were not irrevocably scrambled as her father had feared, but something else was broken, something that stumped even the archmaester. Since that day, Malora would tire faster than others; even the smallest tasks left her drained, demanding hours of rest. It had started small at first, but exhaustion saw her linger abed longer each moon. She had not thought of it much, believing that ample rest and hearty meals would see her body's strength restored. Yet her body never recovered, and her sleep grew longer and deeper as the years went by.

Now, she could hardly move without nineteen hours of sleep.

A day soon would come when Malora would go abed, never to wake again. It was a daunting fate for one who had scarcely lived, but one she had come to accept.

Her father called it a precious talent, but to Malora, it was a curse that doomed her to die as an old maid. All talks of her hand and marriage were promptly rebuffed, no matter how generous. Her scarce waking time was spent studying the vast collection in the Hightower library, second only to what the Citadel boasted.

Magic, alchemy, medicine—all knowledge, no matter how forbidden, was allowed to her. She had put it to good use, delving into the many facets of the Higher Mysteries and concocting a remedy that staved off her impending demise... for a time. But as large as the tallest building built by man was, the Hightower was nothing more than a cage for her.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Her heart had finally calmed, though she felt no better for it.

With a long, weary sigh, Malora pulled upon the silken cord. The bell rang out, and footsteps scurried in the hall beyond. Helicent came first, plump and pink-faced, followed by timid little Alyne and pale Jeyne with her downcast eyes. All three had been taken from Oldtown's orphanages as girls, and even now—nearly grown—they scarcely dared meet their lady's gaze.

"Dress me," Malora said. Her voice was a soft wheeze, but it gave them the courage to move.

Helicent's fingers were deft despite their fatness, weaving Malora's long hair into the traditional fishtail braid for the lower Reach, lacing it with a net of heart-shaped diamonds. Alyne brushed her body clean with a warm, wet towel, then helped Jeyne with Malora's slender gown, white velvet with glyphs and runes flowing down her skirts, wrought in silver thread.

The curse had sapped her strength, but not the charm the gods had blessed her with—Malora still had the lush, womanly body with rich hips and a full bosom that had once seen her called the Maiden in the flesh. With the eyes of molten gold and a pouty face free of blemishes, the bards should have sung songs of her great beauty. They sang of her madness and love for dusty scrolls instead.

All that beauty was hollow and useless, mocking her each time Malora peered into the mirror. Her father had forbidden her the touch of any man. The only men she might look upon were guardsmen hidden beneath suits of lobstered steel and viosered helmets, her solemn brothers, and the sire who kept her close as a jewel in his vault. For good or ill, she had not been born to House Targaryen, to warm the beds of her kinsmen and call it custom.

Long ago, Malora had dreamt of some bright, bold knight or brave lordling to climb her tower and steal her away. A girl's dream. Knights came often to the Hightower, as did lords, but they came for her sisters.

Though that had not been enough to snuff out those dreams. Birth had seen her lady mother scream for three days before death took her, and Leyton's second wife fared no better. The third bled out on the birthing bed, and Malora's hopes died with her. Marriage was just another shackle, though one dressed with white lace and soft promises; she had learned that lesson well.

Her sisters had not. Lovely Lynesse had fled across the sea on the arm of her gallant Northern fool, and now lay curled in some magister's bed, one pretty face amongst a dozen concubines, no different than a silk-wrapped toy. Layla had fared no better, seduced into a marriage by the dashing smile of Ser Jon Cupps, a tourney knight who owned no more than the steel on his back and the sword on his hip. Soon enough, she came crawling to their father for a pittance to put silks on her back and food in her belly. And sweet Alerie... she had taken her own life after the grisly demise of her ambitious husband and daughter.

"Love," Garth had told her once, with a crooked smile, "is but a sweet poison. The sweetest of them all."

Malora had laughed then, but now...

Breathe in. Breathe out.

For a body as weak as hers, no challenge was greater than the grand marble stairs that led to her father's solar. Yet today, she braved it regardless, no matter how much it made her joints ache, and her limbs leaden. Perhaps it was a lord's pride, but her father—now an old man with wizened old hair of

seventy—never came to her, even though his body was stronger. A maid could have been sent on the errand instead, but in the end, even if her sire wanted to speak, Malora would be summoned and struggle up the stairs regardless.

By the time she reached that solar, Malora was huffing and puffing like a thirsty ox, her face swimming with sweat.

A pair of cold eyes glanced at her from behind the helmet, and the guardsman looked away and announced her name.

The solar beyond smelled of old parchment and peach, courtesy of the burning incense from Yi Ti that could soothe even her own mind. But today it did little to ease her nerves. As usual, her father stood behind the desk, absorbed in the riveting matter of reading the yellow pages of old ledgers and records. A tapestry loomed behind him—a rainbow flame blazing from the Hightower's crown, each tongue of fire shaping the star of seven points.

"Father." Her voice rasped low, dry from a sleepless night. It always did when her sleep was lacking.

Leyton Hightower raised his head from a yellowed folio, pale eyes narrowing as they fixed upon her. "Malora. Up so soon? That is unlike you."

"I felt him again." She drifted to the hearth and sank into the chair nearest the blaze, though even the fire could not chase the chill from her bones. The table beside her was laden with bowls of fruit, honeyed cakes, and venison pies, yet the sight of food turned her stomach. "*He* draws near, closer and closer by the day. I stole a glimpse, and all I saw was a terrible shadow crawling through the waves, writhing and twisted like a great kraken hewn out of pure darkness. Mad and cruel and full of wrongness, and strong, Father. Terribly strong in a way I have not seen before. Soon, he will strike."

Her father slumped into his velvet chair, a restless hand reaching out to rub his weary brow. "As you foretold." A long, tired sigh escaped from his throat. "Word from Ser Amon or my fleet has yet to arrive. I fear they have lost if the Crow's Eye draws closer. The realm has never lacked for fools and madmen, but never had it suffered a man so dangerous, so ambitious..."

"Many fools are mad," she said bitterly as she pulled a honeycake toward her, only to leave it untouched. "But few have the courage to wed madness with darker power."

"I know not what black arts the Crow's Eye commands," Leyton said, voice grown taut, "but you must climb the beacon and bar his way. Your brothers shall lead my banners and meet the reavers, yet steel alone will not suffice. We shall not share the fate of the Redwynes, Malora. *We light the way.*"

This was not a request by her father, but an order of the Lord of the Hightower.

"I... I'm not certain I can best him," Malora whispered. "Even with the Hightower."

Leyton Hightower closed his eyes as if refusing to look upon her. "You shall try."

Her breath hitched. So this was it. He had asked of her what no father should ask. And Malora had no choice but to obey. She had never been the most deft in the Higher Mysteries, for her talent lay with the Sight. And the Hightower. The Hightower itself, that ancient stone wonder hewn by the Builder himself, was more than a keep of stone—it was a conduit, a beacon, an aqueduct of old magic. Through it, she

could reach farther, see deeper, and wield power beyond mortal ken. Yet such great power came with a greater price.

Even as a child, brushing against that Hightower had nearly shattered her wits. To take it willingly now...

She wanted to lie to herself, to believe otherwise, but it would kill her, as sure as a headsman's axe. It was the unshakable feeling in the back of her mind, the knot coiled cold in her belly, the sixth sense those dabbling with magic often developed.

Tonight was the night she would die.

"I will do my duty." Her voice was steady, but the words felt like ash upon her tongue. She bent her head so he would not see the tears that threatened to spill. The feast sprawled before her might as well have been poison and rot. What need had the dead for honey and meat and spice?

At least... at least her suffering would soon end.

"Good." Leyton's voice cracked like a jagged shard of glass. "Then light our way, daughter mine." He rose, stiff and tall, his shadow twisting upon the wall with each flicker of the lamp. "Tonight, the fate of the Hightower shall rest upon your shoulders."

Yet her shoulders were small, weak, and as fragile as glass.

Leyton Hightower set a small ironwood box upon the desk, his hand sliding into a glove before turning the gilded key in a lock of dark dragonsteel. Malora felt it before she saw it, the faint ripple in the air, a prickle along her spine, and then the lid rose with a sigh, and there it was. A glass candle as dark as coal.

The moment it touched the air, the wick shimmered. Milk-white flame licked along its twisted length, washing the solar in a wan glow that made the shadows writhe and slither.

Malora rose without a word, drawn to the candle. When her fingers closed round the spiral stem, the glass bit deep. Blood welled where the ridges cut her, feeding the candle. It drank greedily. She felt the sweet tug upon her mind, upon her very soul, and a weaker woman might have given in. A weaker woman would have been forever lost in the glass candle until their very essence had been seared through.

It was a sword without a hilt, and even those trained who looked for too long were lost. The unskilled went blind, their eyes burned from their skulls. Malora knew that well. The last time she dared to look was when a fiery pulse came from the North, and she felt something stirring even in her deep sleep.

In her folly, she had peered towards the Wall.

WE ARE THE SHIELD THAT GUARDS THE REALM OF MEN!

She had been rebuffed as a thousand voices had roared out together in her head, each filled with blood and steel. Even now, she could hear the words ring in her mind when she closed her eyes, albeit distant. The echo had haunted her sleep for half a moon, throbbing in her skull no matter how many potions she drank or hours she slept. Had she looked with a sliver of malice, her mind would have been shattered like an egg smashed on a boulder.

Glancing northward with caution, seeking what had changed gave her no result. The North itself was a vast, old land, where the Old Ways still held strong, and those who looked too hard, too often, could fall into the eerie barrows of the First Men, never to leave again.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

"I'll be going now," she said, voice quivering despite herself.

"Malora—" Her father's hand rose to her face, but she turned around, unwilling to linger.

Slipping out of the solar, she braved the final stairs to the beacon atop the Hightower, her shadow twisting behind her in the candle's eerie light.

At the tower's crown, the wind came swiftly. Autumn's kiss, she had seen some maesters call it, but it felt like a sharp knife, stabbing through the velvet of her gown. Cold shivers ran down her skin, but she welcomed them all the same. Pain made her feel more alive than ever, a proof of her existence. She was alive. She was awake. Perhaps, it would be the last thing she would feel.

The sun was drowned beyond the western sea, its last embers fading from the clouds, crimson leaching into black. The beacon burned with flickering green flames, but they did nothing to relieve her from the chill. Her limbs felt gratefully numb. Perhaps she would have fallen ill for it. But what would a dead woman care for disease?

'Sorrow and joy walk hand in hand,' her mother used to say. *'You only need to know where to look.'*

A low thrill rose through her spine, as anticipation swirled in her mind. Dead woman walking she might be, but tonight, Malora Hightower would be the most powerful she had ever been.

That thought emboldened her more than anything else.

Her gaze fell to the city sprawling across the mouth of the Honeywine. The Hightower stood where the river's mouth widened, and for those who could climb to its top, the whole of Oldtown was laid bare.

It was peaceful. By her father's design, the bannermen had come without fanfare, streaming in by groups of a hundred. The green beacon had put some on edge, but the city trusted its old, wise lord. *'Perhaps too much,'* Malora thought. *'Would they still trust him if they knew?'*

Still, her father had prepared well enough. With all the bannermen here, seven thousand seasoned soldiers now lay ready, spread across walls and barracks, a third of them knights. The city watch had swelled to twice its strength beneath stern Ser Moryn Tyrell. Wrapped in green cloaks, the clanking of their bronze boots could be heard in every alley and street. Their presence eased whatever unease might have swelled, and not a hint of panic could be seen across the cobbled streets.

Perhaps, the fool thought themselves safe, for the beacon meant the city was well-defended. Or perhaps it was some other scheme her father had concocted, using the citizens' trust in his honourable name.

'A misplaced trust,' she mused, *'for these walls and streets would soon see darkness and blood.'*

Her gaze fell upon the candle cradled in her hands—black glass aglow with milk-white flame. There was no warmth in it, only that cold, insistent tug upon her soul. It no longer drank her blood, yet Malora felt it biting deeper, hungrier, pulling at her mind with a will of its own.

She drew a breath, long and shuddering, and let herself fall into the very stones beneath her feet.

The world pulsed and exploded as a cacophony rang in her ears. Her senses stretched and twisted as if ten thousand voices rang in her ear, a hundred new eyes opened, and countless fingers stretched in every direction at once. Her skull throbbed beneath the weight of it. That was all she could feel from her body, as her mind had gone far, far away.

The flame in the candle burned stronger and brighter, and she could feel it eat into her mind, soul, and very being. It hurt. But that pain kept her lucid, awake and still whole—as whole as someone like her could be—under the onslaught assaulting her wits.

Slowly, painfully, she bent the flood of sensation to her will. Not wholly, but just enough. It was like reading a dozen books whilst gazing through a dozen sets of eyes, each line blurring into the next. She burned brighter and faster for it, like a falling star.

If some higher art existed to master the glass candle or the Hightower without harm, it had long been lost.

A few stolen glimpses here and there were of little consequence, but using both together...

Oldtown spread out below her mind's eye, all walls and wharves and winding streets, and the men and women strolling across. The Sunset Sea... she dared not cast her gaze far there. Even without the Crow's Eye, it crawled with faceless horrors beneath the waves. Peering too far would stretch her mind regardless, threatening to shatter into a thousand pieces.

Darkness gathered as the last light bled from the sky and the citizens drained away from the alleys and squares. The city gates were sealed, doors were barred, and shutters shut. Green cloaks scoured the streets below, eager to catch any fool daring enough to break the curfew. Those caught would pay a bitter fine or spend long nights in the dungeons.

Now, the watchmen were better armed than they had been last year. Half-helmets protected their heads, each green cloak boasting a padded jack or a ringmail. Some had both. A dirk and a warpick lay on their hips, and a long, tapering shield was strapped to their backs. In a battle line, more than enough to deal with errant reavers—according to her brothers.

Beyond the walls, the fog came creeping in from the Whispering Sound. A wisp at first, then it grew into a ribbon until it became a curtain as thick as wool. It swallowed torch and starlight alike, like a funeral veil trying to strangle all light. Malora trembled as it coiled about the city, and she felt something damp and chill coiling around her soul. Even her thoughts moved slower now, heavy as lead.

Peering closer, the fog was fouler than mist had any right to be.

Malora's mind shivered as she felt it—something wrong, something rotten, a breath of darkness that clung to the mist. Within moments, the city was smothered in its eerie silence. She tried pushing away, but her senses only caught smoke and the stench of decay.

The green cloaks hunched deeper into their cloaks of wool and leather, yet no cloak could keep out that chill. It was not the coldness of night, but something older, hungrier, gnawing at the bones. Up at the Hightower, Malora grew numb as her body stood upright like a statue. Even the throb in her head was

gone, the last thread to her flesh wavering, while her spirit bled into the candle's flame. A tenth of her being was gone already, burned away by that milky fire.

The tension in the air thickened. Then the cold silence broke. First came a flicker of hungry flame, quickly roaring into a blaze over a shack in the Thieves' Market. Another shack was set ablaze, a fire red and hot and hungry, blooming through the foggy night. Then came a third, and a fourth, and a fifth. Soon, seven more fires raged across the slums, three by the docks, and five that licked at the very walls of the Citadel.

Malora forced her senses to pierce the veil and found the culprits. Cloaked shapes, prowling through the darkness like wraiths. This was no mishap, but a deliberate act.

But why? Why would the reavers sneak inside the city proper to light a few shacks on fire?

It achieved nothing, and the fires would be easy to put out. Even now, hundreds of green cloaks flocked to the place, and captains levied the citizens to help—

Dread pooled in her mind.

This was a distraction. And Malora could do nought but sit back and watch. Perhaps, she could wield the Hightower and snuff out those fires, but that exertion would only see her burn out within minutes. Perhaps something could have been done if she had known more, delved deeper into the secrets of the arcane...

The taste of helplessness was bitter on her tongue. Even now, at her most powerful, she was weak and nearly useless.

To her dismay, the distraction worked.

Below, the watchmen rushed across the dark fog, some hounding for the culprits while most were busy with the fire.

As the flames began to spread, she sensed *them* at the edge of her awareness.

A ship came through the dark, then another, and before she knew it, a silent fleet emerged from the Whispering Sound. The fog was so thick it swallowed all light, and the sentries saw nothing.

Desperate, Malora brushed against their minds, but they did not move. The Ironborn were already past the water-gates, longships gliding to the main docks. She put weight into it, driving the point home. The defenders finally stirred as burning pain lanced through her soul. That had driven her one step closer to death.

The clangour of the bells split the night, and the great chain rose through the dark water. By then, it was too late—hundreds of ships and longboats had slithered in, the chain barring only a few score boats lagging behind. Half of those never slowed, smashing themselves to splinters against the iron links, while others rammed into one another while trying to turn, sinking and capsizing more than one ship.

For a long moment, Malora studied a drowning knight clad in lobstered steel with a silver scythe quartered with a peacock on cream upon his surcoat. She felt it then, no matter how faint it was in the fog—a throb of power from the blade at his hip, kin to Vigilance itself. Then the dark waters closed over him, and another Valyrian steel treasure was lost to the deeps.

Reavers spilt on the wharves and docks like hungry locusts of steel. Her brothers, Baelor and Gunthor, met them with their knights on the northern bank, swiftly forming a firm line to halt the tide of Ironmen. To the far side of the Honeywine at the southern harbour, the green cloaks surged from their barracks to meet the coming foes.

For a heartbeat, her senses were overwhelmed with the clangour of steel on steel. Blood soon ran free down the cobblestones and seeped into the Honeywine. And with every death, the fog seemed to pulse and swell, like some ethereal beast growing fat on slaughter.

Yet Malora's sight was soon drawn to the eye of the darkness, where the fog was thickest.

The sinister red ship sliced through the waters of the Honeywine, leading a dozen more, golden kraken twisting on all their black sails.

Euron Greyjoy came striding from the gloom of the crimson deck. His armour drank the lantern light, every scale black as sin and etched with twisting glyphs that seemed to writhe when her gaze lingered. It sang the way Valyrian steel would, as did the sword on his hip.

A cruel smile curled about his lips as his laughing eye fixed on her then, and her soul crawled. Yet she didn't dare look away. The eye darkened into black, shining with malice.

Upon the ship's prow, a woman hung tied in cruel display, as naked as the day she had been born, her belly swollen near to bursting. Her mouth opened to weep, but only moans slipped out—her tongue had been taken. Her hair fell in a red curtain down her face and breasts, tangled and wet with tears, and only soft, strangled grunts came from her mouth as she writhed against her bonds. It was in vain. Those cords bit deep into her flesh, refusing to yield and drawing blood for it.

The sheen of sweat covering her bare body looked like wet ink in the fog.

Then the swelling began. The maiden's flesh withered as her stomach churned and writhed as if her womb was about to burst. The sound she made when it happened was not a cry but a gurgle, low and wet, and it would haunt Malora beyond death.

Black came first, seeping thick between her thighs like water, and then her belly burst open.

What crawled free was not a thing of this world. Ten limbs, long and slick and writhing as if boneless, each blacker than pitch, dripping rot and blood and things that stank of death. It had no eyes, no mouth, and what torso it had shifted and swelled with each moment as it slipped into the waters below.

The fright alone sent her spiralling back into her body. Malora's scream ripped from her throat, jagged like shards of shattered glass. She clutched the glass candle like it was a shield, but the darkness came for her all the same, lashing at her mind and sending her reeling.

When next she glimpsed it, the thing had come ashore on Battle Island, at the foot of the Hightower itself. Shuddering and gasping like a newborn calf, yet filled with malice for all things living. Worse, she felt the fog throb with each death, each soul lost, the horror's stride grew surer and size swelled. So foul was it that its steps left marks upon the rock, where darkness and rot pooled behind. It had grown a twisted mockery of a head, mouthless and with a single evil red eye, casting an eerie glow through the dark fog.

Malora tasted ash on her tongue. She cursed Euron Greyjoy then, cursed his black heart and his madness, and tried to muster something against the rising foulness. Her knees struck cold stone, and the candle's milky flame wavered. Gods, she could scarcely feel her own limbs now, only the slow, steady pull as the glass drank her life away.

A raspy chant of High Valyrian tore from her throat, but the Hightower refused to obey her. Was it the stone that defied her, or had all her strength fled?

The thing was at the docks just beneath by then. Malora saw its limbs lash out, slick with some vile ichor. One stroke punched clean through a guardsman's chest, mail and all, lifting him screaming from his feet. The cry cut sharply through the din before ending in a wet gurgle. It drew men in, brave men, who rushed the thing with swords and spears and died bravely for it. The horror's limbs whirled and lashed like a whip, tearing flesh from bone, breaking men like twigs.

She saw a bold knight circle behind, his sword thrusting into the writhing dark—and glanced away as though striking stone. The thing turned, a tentacle coiled across the knight's throat faster than he could react and wrenched him up. Greaves were kicking in the air and arms clawing at the limb, but a black hand big as a warhammer closed on his head and ripped it from his shoulders with a wet crunch.

The sight broke the coming guardsmen. They ran stumbling and cursing up the wide stone steps to the Blackstone Fortress. She might have run, too, had she had legs to run with. The monster was in swift pursuit, driving its limbs like spears into rocks and earth to hurl itself along. Malora watched it scuttle up the steps, black limbs hammering at the men. Each strike left a broken corpse behind, not halting the thing even for a heartbeat.

It was the great ironwood gate at the Blackstone Fortress that gave the horror pause, though not for the lack of trying. It smashed itself against the door in a frenzy, blow after blow so mighty that the ground itself shook, but the gate was as thick as a maiden was tall and refused to budge. Then it stilled, and those writhing limbs shot to the side, clawing at the hinges. The dark iron screamed as it tore, and then the gate fell with a crash that shook the ground.

Another portcullis barred the way, but what were bars of iron to such a thing? They bent like straw. Soon, the inner and far thinner gate splintered, and the monster hurled through the darkness into the fortress's entrance hall.

There, Ser Garth awaited it, clad in polished silver from head to toe with a grey silk cloak flowing from his shoulders. And gods, he looked dashing then, standing gallant amongst the two hundred of the finest soldiers Hightower could boast, swords all drawn.

Black rage took her then. Not fear, not despair—rage, hot enough to burn through the numbness that had claimed her flesh. Rage at the thought of that thing rending her brother apart, limb by limb. Rage at Euron Greyjoy, at his smiling eye and his foul glyph-carved mail. Rage at herself for weakness.

Each shred of reluctance, of regret, was forgotten. Malora drove her mind down into the Hightower with everything she had. High Valyrian tore from her throat louder and louder until it grew into a rasping shriek, and iron was all she could taste on her tongue. The stone finally yielded.

When the thing heaved itself into the vaulted chamber, a low hum rippled through the air. Its jerky movements grew slow, and its limbs turned sluggish, now no longer a blur. Black limbs lashed at the air as it flung itself forward, deathly silent but no less furious for it, straight into the line of men.

Malora felt the power burn through her, and with it came blinding pain. Her head swam as if the sky itself were pressing down, and the very world tried to grind her to dust. The strain ripped her open—blood wept from her eyes and ears, ran warm down her lips, dripped scarlet from her chin. Still she held, chanting faster as the horror staggered.

It was slower now, but still strong. Too strong. The knights were quick to encircle and attack it. But halberds and swords struck the darkness and recoiled without doing harm. The limbs of darkness lashed out, stretching like rubber, and men screamed. The ring of shields shattered like a rotten toy, and the dark thing burst free, flinging men apart. Wood and bone and ringmail were like straw before its might, and castle-forged steel only halted it for a short moment.

Dead and dying broken men fell across the cold floor.

Her brother lunged forward then, Vigilance in hand. The smoky, rippled steel sank into the writhing mass of rot and darkness like a hot knife through butter.

An ungodly shriek tore through the air, dazing the Hightower men. The pain must have been great to force the thing to birth itself a twisted imitation of a maw.

Garth swung again, and again, Vigilance cleaving at the horror. Each stroke sheared through the deformed limbs, leaving gaping wounds oozing with reddish rot. A writhing limb fell lifeless on the ground, turning into dust, and then a second followed.

The abomination shook itself from its stupor, then. New tentacles of shadow shot out from its twisted torso, lashing over her brother.

Garth hewed through a clutch of writhing limbs with Vigilance, but the limbs were too quick, too many. Two slick arms coiled about his wrists, dragging his arms apart. Another pair slithered for his helm.

Malora poured everything she had left into the Hightower, desperate to save her brother.

The men-at-arms at last shook free of their terror, hacking and thrusting, but steel glanced off the wriggling darkness. Garth staggered, helm screeching as it buckled inward. His head would burst like a melon under a cart's wheel—

—until a torch struck the abomination full in the flank. Fire bit deep, and the thing recoiled, releasing her brother with a heart-rending shriek.

“Flame!” a guardsman bellowed, voice raw with desperation. “Burn it!”

They came on then, grasping at fire like drowning men at driftwood, snatching torches, ripping braziers from their stands with blistered hands. Flames leapt and sputtered, kissed shadowflesh, and the horror shrank smaller, thrashing, killing and wailing still. Each heartbeat claimed another life.

The hall stank of blood and char, and the floor ran slick with gore. Bodies lay in heaps, broken and blackened, yet the shadow-thing dwindled at last, shrivelling onto the cold floor until it slumped still.

“Brother—” Malora tried to speak, but only a whisper died on her lips as the last of her self had sizzled out. Her body fell onto the ground, bloody hands still clutching the glass candle.

The Ascendant

He strode first down the gangway, a smile wide on his face. His mutes and reavers were eager to follow, lusty for a good fight, but were met with disappointment and a quiet dock choked with broken corpses. He flexed his right hand, but it still felt dull and tender, and his smile soured. Those spectral fangs had left wounds that no healer could mend, still festering upon his very soul.

The white mutt’s time would soon come, and he would make it slow and painful—that knowledge was like a balm upon his frustrated heart.

Euron turned to glance at Falla’s now-mummified husk hanging from the prow like a strip of raw leather, drained of all lifejuice. She had been his finest salt wife yet, birthing his strongest son.

His eyes flicked to the coast beyond the fog, where the dim light of the raging fire was spreading and the song of battle still rang loud. Each death—reaver and greenlander alike—sang in his mind, feeding his hunger and stoking his desire for more.

Pulling his sword free with his left hand, he made up the stairway, leading a bloodthirsty wave of eager men.

Euron licked the black fog and smiled. It tasted of death and despair. Victory or defeat of battle mattered no longer; the spilt lifeblood would see him to greatness. It delighted him to no end. Ascendancy was near, made possible by the sheer arrogance of the White Tower’s kin, believing their tower infallible because it had never fallen before. What greater folly was there than to own the greatest power underneath heaven yet to fail to see its worth for millenia?

The climb was short. A crooning chuckle escaped his lips as the Crow’s Eye strolled through the sundered gates, leading a flood of Ironmen into the Blackstone fortress.

A carpet of corpses lay before him, sprawled across the vast antechamber. Blood pooled in the hollows of the stone floor, dark and glistening, while the air hung thick with the stink of copper and fear. Here and there, a knight yet clung to life, their breath rasping through shattered helms, their hands twitching weakly toward broken swords. At the chamber’s heart smouldered an inky blot of foulness, still smoking where it had fallen, its form leaking away like shadow at dawn.

A scant handful of brave men remained standing, panting on uneasy feet. The reavers fell upon them with axes, felling them in moments.

Euron watched, and Euron smiled.

The Crow’s Eye swept forward, long dark blade in hand, lashing out at the kneeling Garth Greysteel. To his displeasure, Bonerender bit into the lower edge of the helm, and Euron had to yank the blade and strike again, finally relieving the Hightower knight of his head.

“By salt and iron!” Euron plunged the blood-soaked sword into the air. “Take all that’s left to take!”

The hall thundered with their answering roar. Ironborn rushed into the Hightower like a tide of hungry wolves, eager for blood and plunder.

The King of Salt and Iron turned his steps toward the grand marble stair; his mutes swarmed ahead to clear the path. A dozen brave sentries barred the stair midclimb, each clad with rustling ringmail and caps of steel.

They halted his men... for a time. His mutes threw themselves with desperation, fearless of the gleaming swords.

Euron did not slow down as he stepped over the bloodied corpses of his own men. Three had fallen for every sentry, but he had more to spare.

He climbed higher and higher, conquering the Hightower one step at a time, until the wind howled above and he tasted the fog of despair upon his tongue and felt its kiss upon his skin. The great green beacon flickered and guttered into the night, its meagre warmth slowly choked out from the air.

The mutes sagged behind him, puffing and huffing, their faces slick with sweat and armour battered, yet he stood tall and tireless, his scalemail unmarked but for the dark spatters drying on his sleeves.

He found her near the beacon.

A figure crumpled in a pool of her own blood, limbs slack, pale hair flowing like molten silver across the cold granite. She might have been a maid of eighteen or a crone thrice that. Crimson streamed from her eyes and mouth, staining that porcelain skin red.

Euron knelt and rolled her over.

"Pretty," he said softly, as he dipped a gloved finger in the red and dragged it slowly across his tongue. Salt and copper bit the back of his throat. A low chuckle slipped from his blue lips. "And foolish."

He had felt her feeble gaze on his ship, but felt the fright in those eyes. She might have been dangerous if she had the courage. But nobody did. Nobody dared to take that final step, to grab the world by its horns. They all whispered into their candles of glass, stole frightful glances, but when the time came to leap, they all faltered. Always. All but Euron.

The Crow's Eye smiled down at what remained. A pity she had burned herself to ash. Perhaps, Euron would have taken that broken but pretty husk for what little use it had, but now... now the world was his for the taking. Smacking his lips, he kicked her, but she made no sound. Frowning at the dull thud of his greaves, he kicked her again, and again, until she slid over the edge, falling into the darkness below.

The last four mutes came puffing, straining under the weight of a great black horn bound in bands of red gold and dark, smoky steel, runes etched across writhing in the dark. "Make sure I remain undisturbed." Euron dismissed them with a wave as they eagerly receded down the stone tower. Always silent and keen to serve... a pity their worth had ended here.

Had his fool of a brother lived, the Dragon Queen and her beasts would be his by now. No matter. Tonight, the whole world would dance at the palm of his hand, and Daenerys Targaryen and her dragons would be no different.

He cast off the eyepatch, gazing upon the world with both eyes.

Uncorking the flask on his belt, the Crow's Eye drained it all in one breath and shuddered as the gates of his mind were shattered and his soul erupted. His blue tongue watered as he felt the dark fog throb with each life culled in the bitter battle below.

It tasted sweet, sweeter than the finest of wine or the ripest of fruit, and Euron could never tire of the rush of power.

Victory.

He had done it. From Asshai to the Arbour, everything would be his toy to play with. He peeled off his gloves, tugging Bonerender free, just enough to run his palm on the rippled steel, all the way to the bone.

Kisses of pain had his throat keen with joy as he slammed his wounded limb into the stone below and forced himself into the Hightower.

A tide of power threatened to wash his very self away, near unravelling his existence as his mind and soul were strained and began to crack.

Euron welcomed it all—the old had to be cast away to give way to the new. He drew the dark fog into himself, filling what was being broken.

Raspy wheezes escaped his chest as beads of sweat and blood dribbled down, seeping into the thirsty stone.

Behind him, the beacon crackled back to life, burning with twisted black flames that drank every hint of light from the world.

It was done.

He could feel the pulse of the sky, the throb of the earth, and the sway of the sea. All things were possible for Euron now; no gate stood closed before him. All the world lay spread before him, waiting, wanting. He only needed to reach out his hand and take.

Euron laughed—a low, jagged rasp that slithered through the fog. He drank on the death below, each reaver and greenlander fallen swelling his strength. He feasted on despair as the hungry flames spread, women and children barred into their homes into ash and bones.

Darkness coiled through his veins, newfound power rippling through the mortal flesh as shadows in his eyes deepened.

It seared his flesh even as it filled him, until his skin buckled, stretching and twisting as it struggled to hold his power.

The fighting below grew fiercer, and the men more desperate in the dark as Euron urged them all to their deaths. A handful of souls became a dozen. A dozen swelled to half a hundred. Half a hundred to hundreds more. He plucked them from the fog, sending them straight into his gullet. Euron drank it all in as his skin burst, and still he laughed. It was not blood that leaked through the cracked flesh but ichor of pure darkness.

His body peeled away in smoking scraps, yet he was not naked. The dragonsteel armour still held him, and a cloak of shadows veiled across his form, threads of darkness and nightmare binding it all together.

No mouth or lips were left to him, but his laughter still howled like some funeral dirge, like a dying gasp in some vaulted crypt, creeping across the dark fog and beyond.

Curious, Euron reached out with his being below, at an old septon, praying on the altar of the Starry Sept. He bit into his soul, plucking it out of the body that crumpled on the marble.

So this was how gods felt.

It was... wonderful.

But... what to do first? *'Choice,'* Euron reflected, *'is a terrible thing.'* Too much was as bad as too little.

He quirked his shadowy head as uncertainty crept into his being.

Should he feast on the poor souls below?

No, they would perish in a delightfully bitter struggle to steel or fire, and cutting it short would be ill-done. Despair took time to ripen, and it would be cruel to deny himself such a sweet meal.

Reach out to the doom to master the horror prowling in the vents of the smoking sea?

No, Euron... was not strong enough, to his own dismay. Not yet. He would master the Doom with time, once he grew stronger still.

Yeen and Asshai whispered to him in the dark like a long-lost lover, calling for him. So did his sweet little dragon queen and her scaled sons.

Or perhaps the daughter of the storm, the song of her blood chiming across the wind, crackling like lightning at one moment and bursting like fire in the next. She too would be his toy to play with.

The phantom ache in his right limb rang out through his being at the thought. There was something old, something *feral* in it, that darkness and death struggled to drown it even now.

Yes. A wise god first doled out divine punishment to those who had slighted him the most, and none had done more than that shaggy white mutt.

Mind was made up; Euron's thoughts coalesced on the tower's edge, and he *jumped*.

The world spun as he flew.

His form had grown to ten feet now, barely able to contain the torrent of darkness within him. His mouth had returned to his face, though he no longer needed to breathe. If he wanted, Euron could move mountains, shatter stone, and tear through steel with his limbs, and the mundane could no longer harm him. He was a god in the great dream, too.

With every heartbeat, each new death, his power swelled further, turning his body darker and more solid.

Euron's mind soared northwards, leaving streaks of seeping darkness in his wake. His senses stretched further than they ever had. A cold, vicious presence pulsed behind the Wall in a way that almost gave him

pause. To the East, many **things** that slumbered before, some he had never even heard of before, were now half awake. And the gaping **wound** of the Doom pulled onto his mind stronger than ever.

Paying them no heed, he streaked over the eerie hills dotted with those gaping barrows until he saw the beating heart of the North. The ghostly mutt... it was prowling in the snow again, hiding out of sight. But no matter. He saw her instead.

Amidst the snow, a sleeping doe, the air above her shimmered while arcs of lightning crackled across her dappled skin.

She was stronger than before, an echo of an old, nigh forgotten power had awakened, and it delighted Euron to no end.

He could already taste the sweet innocence writhing at his throat as he tore at her soul, as he took it all for himself.

With a thought, the darkness rushed, drowning those pesky slumbering runes.

The doe opened her eyes, and they deliciously widened in fright, but it was too late—there was nowhere to run now, and darkness had seeped into the ground, chaining her hooves still.

Euron Greyjoy reached down, but his limb halted an inch from her stormy blue eyes. Frowning, he pushed, but his hand would not bulge, even when he put enough strength to topple a mountain and shatter castles.

Grim displeasure coiled in his mind, yet his eyes grew wide as they fell upon what lay below.

A hand had shot through the gloom, clamped around his colossal limb like a pincer of dragonsteel. Smaller it might be, it squeezed and squeezed, unyielding and unmovable, even to the corroding shroud that should have eaten it clean.

Beyond the offending hand loomed two torches of burning purple, shining so bright that even the darkness recoiled. Above them lay a band of some dark metal, plain but terrible as old runes ran across the length and throbbed, and with each throb the ground itself rose to cast away his shadow and slammed into Euron's mind like a ram. Something cold and fretful crept within his very being, making him feel like a small, snivelling child of five again. Fear.

A disdainful snort tore from the man, and the pulse died.

Anger rose like a great wave in Euron's mind. He was being mocked. Underestimated.

The other raised his free hand, and the dark shroud recoiled, as if afraid. Then came the weight—not from the circlet, but from the eyes, those blazing amethysts that shone with death, pressing inward from either side, crushing, grinding, until Euron felt himself dwindling, his great bulk shrinking into a mortal's likeness.

Euron summoned all his strength, enough to pull apart a castle whole, and wrenched against the grip that held him fast. It did not budge. He tried again, to no avail. The man before him might have been the vast earth itself, refusing to yield even an inch.

They strained in silence, save for the groan of stone splitting underfoot, cracks spidering across the stony ground. With each passing heartbeat, the fingers only tightened, rending into his godly flesh and the shadow that cloaked it as if it were butter, threatening to tear the limb apart.

Sucking in a ragged breath, the Crow's Eye drew deep upon the abyss within, the fires of darkness, despair, and death, and reached his mind out to snuff out the foe before him.

Yet the purple-eyed Northman stood steady, unshaken, as though Euron had flung an egg against a castle wall.

With a bellow, the Crow's Eye swung his other arm in a vicious arc, seeking the man's throat. A single hand rose and brushed it aside as one might swat a gnat from the air. It balled into a fist and shot out, swifter than Euron could react, crushing into the bridge of his nose. Stars flared across his eyes as he staggered.

Before Euron could draw a breath, iron fingers closed about his throat, cold and merciless, squeezing the life from him.

Amethyst petals of flame bloomed in the air, sending cold shivers down Euron's spine, as he clawed and struggled against the iron hand that held him. The shroud of darkness wavered.

The fire lunged like some hungry beast, eagerly searing through the shadows, releasing those tablets of power from the darkness.

The runes etched into the stone slowly lit up, their strength a thousandfold what it was before, trying to squash and strangle him like some vermin.

With the shroud of darkness torn away, the man stood before him in his wholeness, muscled body as strong as a hundred giants and tougher than dragonscale, hiding a sea of raw power underneath. Every instinct in the Crow's Eye shrieked a warning.

Around them, the fiery blossoms split, unfurling into shapes of terror—wolves of living flame and winged serpents wreathed in dancing amethyst, each turning to him, crouching as if preparing to leap.

Euron dared not linger. With a snarl, he drew all that anchored him to the Hightower, raking up the blood and death and the screaming souls in the city, and wrenched himself away—just as the fire beasts lunged.

Euron crumpled onto the cold floor, rasping with pain as blood dribbled down his shattered face. His hands clawed at his caved-in neck. He shouldn't have needed air to breathe like some feeble mortal, so why... why was he choking?

The darkness seeped out, knitting the broken form back together as he twisted in pain.

The air shimmered hot through the dark fog, casting it aside. From it twisted dragons and wolves of purple flame, snapping at him with fervour.

He spat a curse as they sprang as one, lunging at him. His mind throbbed as he clawed at the shrieking souls below, grasping at the dark fog itself. Purple flame met pulsing shadow as a torrent of raw agony and darkness drowned the beasts before they reached.

Relief flooded him, together with the pain as Euron heaved over.

Yet in a single moment, the darkness split with fire. Purple burst through the black shroud. A fiery maw deep, rending shadow, swallowing darkness like meat.

Euron wheeled, wild-eyed, clawing for the Hellhorn that lay but a few yards distant. His hand never found it.

Pain flared hot as a beast bit into his leg, fangs of fire sinking through the greaves as if biting through straw. Agony so pure shot up his leg that he wanted to scream, but he had no mouth left to open. More beasts came, blazing wolves, burning serpents, dragons with eyes like suns, tearing the darkness from his frame, peeling him bare.

Even dragonsteel gave beneath their bite, and gods, they gnawed and tore eagerly, feasting on all the power he had drunk so greedily.

His soul howled in agony as the Crow's Eye was eaten alive within his own armour, burning from the bones out.

The ghostly fog that had clung to Oldtown like a shroud slowly grew thin, chased away by the beacon atop the Hightower, which now blazed with a violet light so bright it seemed to cast away the very night. By midday, the flame sputtered and died, leaving only smoke to curl into the sky.

The Battle for Oldtown, in the 303rd year after Aegon's Conquest, was a turning point for the Iron Isles.

The last King of Salt and Iron, the infamous Crow's Eye, Euron Greyjoy, sought to take the city under the cover of the evening fog drifting from the Whispering Sound. His treachery was not without effect, for many of his reavers slipped through the mouth of the Honeywine before the chains were raised to bar their passage.

Oldtown was prepared for the attack. Lord Leyton Hightower had foreseen the assault, and his heir, Baelor Brightsmile, with the Commander of the City Watch, Ser Moryn Tyrell, met the Ironmen upon both banks of the river. I myself bore witness to the clangour of steel and death echoing through the night without end. With the city watch struggling for their very lives, the fires that had begun to bloom in the alleys and warehouses went largely unheeded, fanning out through the houses and roofs of timber.

The struggle endured through the hours of darkness, unbroken until the first faint light of dawn. By then, Baelor Hightower had wrested command of the streets and routed the last bands of reavers. The Seven Above, it seemed, had taken pity on the Brightsmile, for a sudden deluge fell upon the city, smothering the infernos and leaving only a quarter of Oldtown charred.

As many had foreseen, victory was grasped by the Hightowers.

Of the thirteen thousand reavers who had followed the Crow's Eye, more than eleven thousand perished in the streets and upon the riverbanks. Those who yielded were granted no mercy, given no quarter and cut down even if they threw down their swords and knelt. Barely two thousand reavers fled to the sea. Hundreds of ironborn ships were captured and left as spoils in Oldtown's harbours. Moryn Tyrell himself

slew Denys Drumm with a bolt to the eye and claimed the infamous sword Red Rain from his cold hands, a grim trophy still drenched red with blood to mark the bitter victory.

Yet the price of victory was grievous.

Half of the city watch lay dead in the streets, the remainder battered, bloodied, or maimed. Over three hundred knights had fallen, and ten times as many men-at-arms, their bodies littering the cobblestones, mingled with the charred remains of timber and flame. The common folk were not spared; tens of thousands perished in the conflagration. Countless more were wounded. For a sennight, the maesters and their acolytes laboured to save what lives they could, but it took more than half a moon merely to tally the dead and missing. At last, it was reckoned that some fifty thousand souls had been claimed in a single, merciless night.

The Hightowers' losses extended far beyond the streets. Gunthor Hightower, Baelor's third brother, had fallen in the fighting. Euron Greyjoy had struck at the Battle Isle and breached the Hightower itself. Baelor had been forced to fight through his ancestral home, purging its halls of the invaders. The body of his sister, Malora the Mad Maid, was discovered upon the rocks below, shattered and twisted, only recognised by the silver hair and net of diamonds braided into those locks. Humfrey and Garth were found beheaded, their bodies left as grim trophies of the Ironmen's savagery. Even Lord Leyton Hightower had been slain in his bedchambers, defending his fourth wife, Rhea Florent, who had bitten through her tongue rather than suffer dishonour. Yet her still-warm body had been dishonoured regardless.

Not a soul remained untouched inside the white tower—neither maesters, children, nor serving women.

At the sight of his slaughtered kin, the new Lord of the Hightower wept until only blood came from his eyes, swearing bitter vows of vengeance, vowing to hunt every last reaver to the end of the seas, no matter the cost.

Yet the chief culprit of this death and misery, the reaver king, was nowhere to be found. Upon the summit of the Hightower, where the beacon had burned bright purple, they found traces of struggle. There remained two frozen pools of twisted, unbreakable slag. It took ten days to scrape them away. The maesters declared that nearly all of it was Valyrian steel, though they could give no explanation for it, none that made sense.

Word spread that the Crow's Eye had attempted some dark sorcery atop the tower, only to be undone by its own curse...

Excerpt of 'History of Salt and Iron' by Maester Armen