

The Northern army snaked through the countryside like a great serpent of steel and leather, banners snapping in the wind. They had passed the Neck days ago, the dreary swamps giving way to the verdant fields of the Riverlands. The Twins loomed ahead, its twin towers a constant reminder of the toll they would soon need to pay, both in gold and pride, to cross.

Lord Eddard Stark rode at the head of the column, his bronze-and-leather armor catching the afternoon sun. Around him, his banner lords had gathered to hear tales of home and war. The GreatJon Umber's booming laugh could probably be heard all the way to Seagard.

"Tell it again, Ned!" the GreatJon called out, his massive frame shaking with mirth. "How your boy outsmarted those squids!"

Ned's usually stern face softened at the mention of Jon. "He's always been observant, even as a small child. Noticed the stranger in Winterfell right away - something about how the man walked, he said."

"And he's only seven?" Lord Karstark asked, clearly impressed. "My Harrion is twice that age and still gets lost in our own castle."

"Seven namedays," Ned confirmed. "He followed the man at a distance, noticed him studying Sansa's movements. When the library caught fire..." Ned's face darkened. "Well, Jon was ready. Had an arrow nocked before the man could even find her."

The GreatJon's laugh boomed again. "An arrow! Gods, Ned, what are you feeding the boy? Dragon's blood?"

A few of the lords chuckled nervously at that, but their laughter died when Lord Anden Flint's massive shadow fell over their group. The man was a giant even by Northern standards, standing three meters tall, his great axe strapped across his back. His presence alone commanded silence.

"The boy has wolf's blood," Anden's deep voice rumbled like distant thunder. "And now he has Flint name too."

Lord Manderly, his white mustache quivering, ventured the question many had been thinking. "Speaking of that, Lord Flint... it's rather unusual to name a natural-born son as heir, even one as... exceptional as young Jon."

Anden's eyes, grey as winter storms, fixed on Manderly. "You questioning my choice, Wyman?"

"Not at all, merely curious about-"

"I name who I want as heir to Breakstone Hill," Anden cut him off. "The boy climbed my castle's highest tower without rope or rest. Killed a bear at six. Planned an ambush that captured Maron

Greyjoy." He gestured to the bound figure riding under heavy guard nearby. "Show me another child of seven who's done half as much."

"No one questions the boy's abilities," Lord Dustin interjected smoothly. "But surely, Lord Stark, you must have some feelings about another house claiming your son?"

All eyes turned to Ned, who met their gazes calmly. "Jon is my blood, yes. But Lord Anden has been more of a father to him these past years than I have. And the name Flint will serve him better than Snow ever could."

"Aye," the GreatJon nodded. "Better a Flint than a Snow. Though I still say any boy who can outfox the Ironborn deserves a place at the high table, name be damned."

Maron Greyjoy, who had been pretending not to listen, spat on the ground. "Outfoxed by a child. My father will have my head for this shame."

"Your father," Ned said coldly, "will be lucky if King Robert leaves him his head. Burning Lannisport was foolish enough. Trying to kidnap my daughter..." He left the threat hanging.

"Speaking of Robert," the GreatJon said, clearly trying to lighten the mood, "what do you think he'll say when he sees you, Ned? Seven years is a long time."

A rare smile crossed Ned's face. "Knowing Robert, he'll call me a frozen-faced bastard, crush my ribs in a hug, and demand we drink until we can't stand."

"The Demon of the Trident," Anden rumbled. "I fought beside him at the Battle of the Bells. Never seen a man so alive in battle."

"Robert was born for war," Ned agreed, his smile fading slightly. "Though I had hoped those days were behind us."

Lord Karstark spurred his horse closer. "These Greyjoys won't last long against the combined might of the Seven Kingdoms. Not with Robert leading us and the Lannisters out for blood after Lannisport."

"No love lost there," muttered Lord Dustin. "But aye, the Lions will want revenge."

"The Ironborn forget," Anden's deep voice carried across the group, "that the mainland houses have long memories. My grandfather told me tales of their reaving. Said every time they rise up, they fall harder."

The conversation was interrupted by a scout riding hard toward their group. The man reined up sharply before Ned.

"My lord! Riders approaching under the Tully banner!"

Ned straightened in his saddle. "How many?"

"A small party, led by Ser Brynden Blackfish himself."

The news sent a ripple through the lords. The Blackfish was a legend in his own right, and his presence suggested this was more than a simple greeting party.

"The Blackfish," the GreatJon grinned. "Now there's a man who can drink! Remember that feast at Riverrun, Ned? During the rebellion?"

"I remember you trying to arm wrestle him and nearly breaking the table," Ned replied dryly.

Anden's deep laugh surprised them all. "The table? I heard it was three tables and a serving girl's virtue at stake."

The GreatJon roared with laughter. "It was two tables, you overgrown oak tree! And the serving girl had already given her virtue to half the Riverlands by then!"

As the lords laughed and traded old war stories, Ned's mind wandered back to Winterfell. To his children - Robb and Jon training in the yard, Sansa with her needlework, little Arya toddling after her siblings. To Catelyn, whom he prayed would find peace with Jon's new status. To his mother Lyarra, who watched over them all with eyes that saw too much.

"My lord?" The scout's voice brought him back to the present. "Shall I ride back and tell Ser Brynden we await him?"

Ned nodded, then turned to his lords. "We'll make camp here for the night. No doubt the Blackfish brings news we'll want to hear with clear heads."

As the orders went out and the massive Northern host began setting up camp, Anden Flint moved his massive horse alongside Ned's.

As the sun began to set, casting long shadows across the Riverlands, the Northern army settled in for the night. Tomorrow would bring the Blackfish's news, and after that, war. But for now, they shared tales of a seven-year-old boy who had outsmarted the Ironborn, and wondered what other surprises the young Jon Flint might have in store for the realm.

"We should rest," Ned announced, rising. "Tomorrow we cross at the Twins, and Lord Frey will expect his toll."

"Miserable old weasel," GreatJon grumbled. "Sitting in his towers while better men fight and die."

"He's loyal to the crown," Ned reminded them. "That's what matters now."

Lord Galbart Glover turned to where Benjen Stark was, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Tell us, Benjen, how does married life suit you? Many of us remember when you were dead set on taking the black."

A small smile played across Benjen's features, softer than his brother's stern countenance. "Aye, I was. Had my mind all made up too."

"Your lady mother changed that, didn't she?" Lord Karstark prodded, though his tone was gentle.

Benjen chuckled. "Mother can be... persuasive when she wants to be. Though I thank her for it now. Marriage to Barbrey has given me more than I ever thought possible."

"And how fares young Arthur?" Lady Maege Mormont asked. "My Dacey says she saw him running about Winterfell before we marched."

"Wild as a winter storm," Benjen's eyes lit up at the mention of his son. "Five years old and already trying to swing a sword bigger than himself. Takes after his mother's sharp tongue too."

The gathered lords chuckled at that, well aware of Barbrey Dustin's notorious wit.

Lady Maege turned her attention to Lord Anden. "Speaking of young ones, Lord Flint, a boy like Jon would do well on Bear Island. We could make a proper warrior of him."

Anden's thunderous laugh echoed across the column. "The boy's not yet eight, Maege. A bit young for fostering, wouldn't you say?"

"What say you, Ned?" Maege called out. "Have you given any thought to fostering the boy?"

Ned's face remained carefully neutral, but something flickered in his eyes. The question had caught him off guard, making him realize how little he truly knew of Jon's wishes or nature. Three months since the boy's return from Breakstone Hill, and Ned had barely spent more time with him than he had before. The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Perhaps we should discuss fostering after the rebellion," Ned said diplomatically. "I would much rather have this conversation after I'm sure I will survive this rebellion."

Much later, after much of the camp was sleeping. Anden found Ned alone by his tent. The giant of a man ducked to enter, his presence filling the space.

"Maege wasn't just asking about fostering," Anden said without preamble, his voice low. "She's thinking of her Dacey."

Ned looked up sharply. "Dacey? But she's... what, thirteen now?"

"Aye," Anden nodded. "Six years between them. Not really much of a difference between two kids." He studied his grandson's face. "Have you given any thought to betrothals? For any of your children?"

Ned's mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. No words came out.

Anden's laugh was softer this time, almost gentle despite its rumble. "That's what I thought. You're a good man, Ned, and a good lord. But sometimes you're so focused on doing what's right that you forget to plan for what's ahead."

The tent fell silent save for the distant sounds of the camp. Finally, Ned spoke, his voice quiet. "I've been a poor father to Jon, haven't I?"

"No," Anden said firmly. "You've been an honorable father. Kept him safe, gave him a home. But perhaps..." he paused, choosing his words carefully, "perhaps it's time to be more than honorable. To be present."

As the night deepened around them, the two men continued to talk, of futures and families, of choices made and choices yet to come.

Tomorrow

The towers of the Twins rose like grey teeth from the Green Fork, their weathered stone drinking in the morning mist. Banners bearing the twin towers of House Frey hung limp in the humid air, their blue and grey barely distinguishable against the clouded sky. The Northern army approached with deliberate slowness, their own banners - direwolves and bears, moose and mailed fists, a flayed man - snapping more proudly in the breeze that swept down from the North.

Lord Walder Frey, wizened and spiteful as ever, sat in his high chair within the east tower's great hall. His beady eyes darted between Lord Stark and the giant form of Lord Anden Flint, who had to stoop to enter the hall, his massive frame making the Frey guards look like children in comparison. The Lord of the Crossing wore a doublet of blue and grey silk that did little to hide his frail frame, while around him, what seemed like dozens of his offspring crowded the hall in various states of finery.

"A toll must be paid," Walder wheezed, his fingers drumming on his chair's armrest. "As is tradition. Though perhaps..." his eyes glinted with cunning, "we might discuss a more... permanent arrangement? Your heir, Lord Stark, and one of my lovely daughters..."

Before Ned could respond, Lord Anden shifted his weight, the floorboards creaking ominously beneath him. The movement caused his great axe to catch the light streaming through the narrow windows. Walder Frey's words died in his throat.

"The toll," the ancient lord amended quickly, "in gold will suffice."

The crossing took the better part of two days, the narrow bridge allowing only a few horses abreast at a time. When they finally emerged on the southern bank, they found the armies of the Riverlands and the Vale awaiting them, their camps spreading across the rolling hills like patches of steel and leather on green velvet.

Edmure Tully cut a gallant figure in his scaled armor of blue and red, the leaping trout of his house emblazoned on his chest. His auburn hair, so like his sister's, caught the afternoon sun as he rode out to meet them. Beside him, Ser Brynden the Blackfish sat his horse with the easy grace of a born warrior, his black fish sigil stark against his dark armor.

"Brother!" Edmure called out to Ned, though they were brothers only by marriage. His smile was warm, if a touch uncertain. "The North comes at last!"

"Lord Edmure," Ned replied formally, though he clasped the offered arm warmly enough. "Ser Brynden. You've kept good watch over these lands."

"Come," the Blackfish said, his voice gruff but not unkind. "Bronze Yohn has been champing at the bit to discuss strategy, and you'll want to hear the latest from Seagard." His eyes, sharp as ever, noted the bound figure among the Northern host. "Though it seems you bring news of your own."

They gathered in the Tully command tent, a pavilion of red and blue silk that billowed gently in the evening breeze. Maps covered the central table, weighted down with cups of Riverlands red that Edmure had poured generously. The Blackfish chose to stand, his back to one of the tent poles, while Lord Royce's bronze armor gleamed in the lamplight.

"Cat?" Edmure asked first, once they were settled. "And the children? We heard you had another daughter..."

"All well," Ned assured him. "Arya grows stronger each day, she is like a wolf, and she has taken after me, with dark hair and grey eyes. Sansa's taking to her lessons well, and Robb is growing stronger each day...Jon is growing strong, and he has done my House and House Tully quite a good deed..." He paused, considering how to broach the recent events.

"What could have the Bastard done?" Edmure questioned sharply, looking annoyed that Ned had brought up his bastard son.

The Blackfish shot his nephew a warning look, but Ned had already stiffened slightly. Even after all these years, the reactions to Jon still stirred something deep and protective in him.

"Jon Flint," he corrected mildly, though there was steel beneath the words. "There's much you should know about recent events in the North."

He told them then of the attempted kidnapping, of Jon's role in saving Sansa, of the capture of Maron Greyjoy. The Blackfish's eyebrows rose steadily as the tale unfolded, while Edmure's face grew increasingly flushed with wine and something else - perhaps discomfort at hearing praise for his sister's source of shame.

"Tell us more about this rescue," Bronze Yohn leaned forward. "How does a boy of seven manage such a feat?"

Ned took a measured sip of wine. "Jon had noticed the man hours before - said something about how he walked didn't seem right. Like he was trying too hard to look like he belonged."

"Observant lad," the Blackfish commented, his tone carefully neutral.

"He followed him," Ned continued. "Kept his distance, watched. Noticed how the man's eyes followed Sansa during meals. Then when the library caught fire..."

"A distraction they planned," Edmure interjected.

Ned nodded. "Jon had positioned himself on the covered bridge between the armory and the Great Keep. He'd noticed the man lingering there earlier that day. When the kidnapper made his move..." Ned's fingers tightened around his cup. "Jon put an arrow through his leg. Clean shot."

"Seven hells," Bronze Yohn rumbled. "The boy's got wolf's blood indeed."

"And Flint's blood now," the Blackfish noted shrewdly. "Your good-grandfather claimed him properly?"

"Aye," Ned confirmed. "Named him heir to Breakstone Hill."

Edmure nearly choked on his wine. "A bastard, heir to-" He caught himself at Ned's expression. "Forgive me, goodbrother. The news is... unexpected."

"And the Greyjoy camp?" Lord Royce pressed. "How did the boy find it?"

"He'd been tracking game since he was five," Ned explained. "He..." It was a little difficult to say this part without making it sound like Jon was not well in the head, so instead he said. "Lord Anden taught him well. He found signs in the wolfswood - broken branches too high for animals, scraps of salt fish that no Northern house would eat. Followed the trails, mapped their movements."

Edmure's face had grown increasingly red. "Clever work," he admitted grudgingly. "Though it sits ill with me that a ba- that Jon Snow now stands to inherit before true-born nobles."

"I never agreed with your choice to raise him alongside your true-born children, Ned. But..." Blackfish paused, choosing his words carefully. "Had he not been there, had he not been trained as he was, we might be hunting for Sansa now instead of Greyjoys."

"My sister must be... troubled," Edmure said, not knowing what else to say.

"The boy saved her daughter's life," the Blackfish said firmly. "Whatever else he may be, he's proved his worth to House Stark. And now he's a Flint, recognized by law and king." He fixed his nephew with a stern look. "Best you remember that, Edmure."

"It seems a lot of things have happened in the North, Lord Stark." Lord Royce said, looking a little impressed by what he had just heard.

"Indeed," Ned said. "But tell me of Seagard. What word from Robert?" Ned said, a smile growing on his face. He could almost see Robert's face. Seven years might have passed, he might be a King now, but Ned doubted the man had changed much, if at all.

The Blackfish pushed off from his tent pole, moving to the maps. "Seagard stands firm. Jason Mallister threw back the first Ironborn assault, and now the Royal fleet has the Iron Islands' ships bottled up. Robert's there now, with the Lannisters."

"Tywin Lannister?" Ned asked with a sudden sour taste in his mouth.

"Yes, I am afraid. He is leading the Lannister forces, along with the Kingslayer and the Imp."

Ned's eyebrows rose at that last bit of news. "Tywin sent his dwarf son to war?"

"More likely hoping the war sends his dwarf son to the Stranger," the Blackfish said dryly. "Though I hear the Kingslayer's been hovering over him like a mother hen."

"How many men between us?" Ned asked, studying the maps.

"Twenty thousand from the Riverlands," Edmure supplied proudly. "Though many guard our western shores against further raids."

"Fifteen thousand from the Vale," Bronze Yohn added. "And your Northmen make us nearly sixty thousand strong."

The Blackfish grunted. "More than enough to crush this rebellion, if Robert hasn't finished it before we arrive."

Outside the tent, the combined camps came alive with evening activity. The smell of cookfires filled the air, mixing with the scents of horses, leather, and river water. Songs began to rise - "The Bear and the Maiden Fair" from the Northmen, "On a Misty Morn" from the Vale knights, and "The Trout that Swam Upstream" from the Riverlanders. Three armies, soon to be four, gathering like storm clouds over the Ironborn's ambitions.

"We march at first light," Ned decided, rising. "The sooner we reach Seagard, the sooner this rebellion ends."

The night deepened around them, stars emerging like scattered silver coins on black velvet. Tomorrow they would march to war, but for now, the armies of three kingdoms rested, sang, and prepared. And somewhere in the darkness, Maron Greyjoy sat in chains, wondering if his father's crown was worth the price they would all soon pay.

In his own tent, Ned found Lord Anden waiting, the giant having to sit on the ground to avoid pushing his head through the canvas ceiling.

"You didn't tell them everything," the massive lord observed.

"No," Ned agreed, thinking of purple eyes and a mother's final words. "Some things are best kept in the North."

Anden nodded slowly. "Aye. Though secrets have a way of riding south, sooner or later."

"Later," Ned said firmly. "Let it be later."

The giant lord rose, ducking to avoid the tent poles. "As you say, grandson. As you say." He paused at the tent's entrance. "Though I wonder - when **later** comes, will you be ready?"

Ned had no answer for that, and Anden didn't wait for one. Outside, the songs continued, different melodies weaving together like streams joining a river. Soon, that river would become a flood, washing over the Iron Islands with fire and steel. But for now, it gathered, waited, and grew stronger with each passing hour.

Seagard

The sprawling encampment around Seagard stretched like a patchwork quilt across the landscape, each section marked by different banners - the golden lion of Lannister, the crowned stag of Baratheon, the golden rose of Tyrell, and dozens of minor house sigils. Torchlight flickered between the tents, casting dancing shadows that made ten dark figures seem like mere tricks of the light as they moved silently through the camp.

The Norvoshi soldiers, their distinctive forked beards hidden beneath scarves, paused in the shadow of a supply wagon. Their leader, Khozan, raised his hand in a silent signal. Ahead lay their target - a small cluster of tents set slightly apart from the main Lannister camp, flying the crimson banner but lacking the polished appearance of the highborn quarters.

"There," Khozan whispered in Norvoshi, his accent barely detectable. "Listen."

From the nearest tent came the sound of young voices, speaking the Common Tongue with the distinctive accents of the Westerlands.

"Once we beat these Ironborn, the Lannisters'll have to notice us," one voice said. "Might even get knighted, like Ser Benedict did after the Rebellion."

"Knights need horses," another voice scoffed. "You can barely ride a mule, Derrick."

"Better than you, Willem! At least I-"

"Both of you shut it," a third voice cut in, older and more weary. "Some of us are trying to sleep. Got to save coin for Mari's medicine, not waste energy on fool dreams."

The Norvoshi waited in the shadows as the voices gradually quieted, replaced by the ambient sounds of the massive camp - distant horses, the calls of sentries, the crackle of fires. They watched as the torches were extinguished one by one in their target tent.

Khozan lifted a waterskin to his lips, but instead of drinking, he whispered into it so the sound would be muffled. "Remember - for Princess Elia and her children. The North must pay its part in blood."

The others nodded, their eyes hard in the darkness. They had trained for a month for this mission, learning the accents and customs of the Westerlands, memorizing the proper ways to wear Lannister armor. Now it would all serve Prince Doran's greater plan.

They moved in perfect silence, their soft boots making no sound on the trampled grass. The tent's entrance was secured with simple ties - these were common soldiers, not lords behind guarded pavilions. Inside, four shapes lay on bedrolls, their breathing deep and regular.

The Norvoshi moved as one, each selecting a target. Khozan positioned himself by the oldest soldier, the one who had spoken of a sick wife. In the darkness, he could make out the man's features - weather-worn, but peaceful in sleep.

His hand tightened on his blade.

One... two... three...

"For Elia," they mouthed in unison, blades slashing across exposed throats.

The boys' eyes flew open in terror and confusion, but large hands clamped over their mouths, muffling any cries. For endless heartbeats, the tent was filled with nothing but the wet sounds of struggle and the metallic scent of blood.

Finally, the thrashing stopped. The Norvoshi held their positions a moment longer, ensuring their work was complete. Then, moving with practiced coordination, they began to strip the bodies.

"Careful," Syrio hissed. "Not a drop of blood on the armor. It must look untouched."

They worked methodically, removing the Lannister plate and chain with meticulous care. The dead boys were left in their smallclothes, pale and vulnerable in death.

Moving the bodies was the most delicate part of their plan. They couldn't simply leave them here - the deaths needed to be discovered in the right place, at the right time, by the right people. Each corpse was carefully wrapped in a cloak, carried through the shadows like a soldier helping a drunk friend back to his tent.

The bodies were arranged precisely, their wounds displayed in ways that would point to specific suspects.

Four of the Norvoshi donned the stolen armor while their companions concealed the rest of the evidence. Dawn would find them among the Lannister ranks, just more western soldiers eager for glory. They would wait, watch, and when the moment came, ensure that a carefully planted seed of suspicion bloomed into the flower of chaos.

"Back to positions," Khozan ordered softly. "Dawn patrol changes soon."

As his men dispersed, Khozan paused for a moment, looking toward the northern horizon where the Stark army would soon appear. He touched the hilt of his blade, still warm from its work.

"For Elia," he whispered one final time.

Seven hours later the camp stirred to life around him. Soldiers emerged from their tents, complaining about the morning chill. Officers shouted orders. Somewhere, a smith began work at his forge.

And four Norvoshi assassins, now wearing Lannister crimson, began their wait for the arrival of Eddard Stark.

Iron Islands

He was falling through an endless void, the salt spray of the Iron Islands far above him. Euron reached out with grasping hands but caught only shadows.

"Open your eyes," came a voice, rough as iron scraping stone.

"They are open," Euron snarled back. He was no craven to fear the dark.

"Your true eyes, ironborn. See what lies beyond the veil of the world."

A crow emerged from the void, larger than any bird had right to be. Its third eye gleamed like a bloody star, fixed upon him with ancient knowing. Wings black as midnight spread wide enough to block out whatever dim light remained.

"You're no god I know," Euron said, his fall slowing as he studied the creature. "The Drowned God speaks through the waves, not through birds."

The crow's laughter was the sound of waves crushing ships against rocks. "Gods are as numerous as the stars, boy, and just as distant. But power - true power - that lies closer than you know." Its third eye pulsed, and suddenly Euron could see.

He saw the glass candles of Valyria burning bright, their flames dancing with knowledge forbidden and sweet. He saw a horn wreathed in Valyrian glyphs.

But the visions didn't stop there. The crow's third eye blazed brighter, and the world opened before him like a bleeding wound.

In the Shadow Lands beyond Asshai, he saw hooded figures performing rituals that made his blood sing. Their whispers carried secrets of immortality, of binding men's souls to their will. In the smoking ruins of Old Valyria, he glimpsed books bound in human skin, their pages containing spells that could raise krakens from the depths and turn men's minds to water.

"More," Euron demanded, reaching for the visions with desperate hands. "Show me everything."

"First, you must learn to fly," the crow insisted.

"I will learn to fly," Euron laughed, wild and hungry. He tried to spread his arms like wings, but his movements were jerky, possessive. Where he should have floated, he only thrashed.

The crow circled him. "Not like that. Empty yourself. Become the wind itself."

In the City of Winged Men, he saw temples where priests swallowed living shadows to gain their power. In the ruins of Yeen, where even the jungle feared to grow.

Euron's attempts to fly grew more frenzied. He clawed at the air, trying to force it to bear his weight. "I command you," he snarled at the void. "I am ironborn. I take what I want!"

"You cannot take this power," the crow warned. "It must be earned through surrender."

"I'll never surrender," Euron spat, even as more visions assaulted him.

He saw a black stone city beneath the waves, where things that had once been human danced to pipes that played without sound. He saw a map drawn in blood that showed the way to islands that appeared only when the stars were right. He saw himself wearing a suit of Valyrian steel armor, seated upon a throne of skulls while dragons wheeled overhead.

"Let go," the crow commanded. "Forget yourself. Only then can you truly fly."

But Euron couldn't let go. Each vision only made him clutch tighter, his soul cramming itself with stolen glimpses of power until it creaked at the seams. He tried once more to fly, but his movements were like a puppet's, jerky and wrong. Where there should have been grace, there was only grasping need.

The crow's third eye flared. "No," it said, and there was disappointment in its ancient voice. "You seek to devour rather than become. The door must remain closed."

"No. Teach me."

"I'm afraid this was a mistake. The Door will remain closed for you."

"Then I'll break it down," Euron promised, his young face twisting with fury. "If you won't give me what I seek freely, I'll take it by force. I'll sail to every corner of this world, learn every secret, drink every potion, until I find the power you deny me. And then I'll rise higher than any crow can fly."

"You will try," the crow acknowledged. "You will never truly fly, Euron Greyjoy. You will only fall."

The void was closing in, but Euron's voice had taken on a quality that made even the ancient crow pause - soft as falling snow, yet somehow sharp enough to draw blood.

"When I return from these places you've shown me," he whispered, "when I've drunk deep of every dark secret and forbidden spell, I'll seek you out again. And on that day, I'll pluck out your third eye and make it mine. I'll wear it as you do, but I'll see further, reach deeper, fly higher than you ever dared. And every time you look upon me with your remaining eyes, you'll remember this moment."

The crow's wings spread wide, trying to banish him from the dream, but Euron's laughter followed it into the void. "Look for me in the nightmares of lesser men. And when you feel my hand close around your throat, remember - you made this. You created your own doom."

The void began to fill with water, salt burning his lungs. But even as he drowned, Euron's smile remained fierce and terrible. The crow had shown him possibilities he'd never imagined, paths to power that no ironborn had ever walked. If he couldn't fly, he would sail instead - to Asshai, to Valyria, to every dark corner where forbidden knowledge dwelt.

He woke in his bed, gasping and drenched in sweat. His right eye ached as if someone had tried to pluck it out. Outside his cabin window, a crow took flight across the pre-dawn sky.

Euron watched it go, his young face settling into lines. "My brother thinks becoming King of a few islands is being on top, but no, every King in the world, even the Targaryens with their dragons, had to answer someone higher than them. A God."