

THE WINDS OF WINTER – AERON I (FULL)

THE FORSAKEN

It was always midnight in the belly of the beast. The mutes had robbed him of his robe and cloak. He wore hair and chains and scabs. Salt water sloshed about his legs whenever the tide came in, rising as high as his genitals, only to ebb again when the tide receded. His feet had grown huge and soft and puffy, shapeless things as big as hams. He knew that he was in some dungeon but not where or for how long. There had been another dungeon before this one, and in between there had been the ship, The Silence. The night they had moved him, he'd seen the moon floating on a black wine sea, with a leering face that reminded him of Euron. Rats in the darkness, swimming through the water, they would bite him as he slept and drove him to shouts and thrashings. Aeron's beard and scalp crawled with lice and worms. He could feel them moving through his hair and the bites itched him intolerably. His chains were so short that he could not reach to scratch. The shackles that held him to the wall were old and rusted and cut into his feet and wrists. When the tide rushed in to kiss them, the salt got into the wounds and made him gasp.

When he slept, the darkness would rise up and swallow him, and then the dream would come, and Urri, and the scream of a rusted hinge. The only light in his wet world came from the lanterns visitors brought with them, and it came so seldom that it began to hurt his eyes. A nameless, sourfaced man brought his food. Some beef, as hard as wooden shingles, bread crawling with weevils, slimy, stinking fish. Aeron Damphair gobbled it down and hoped for more, thought oft as not he'd retch the meal up after. The man who brought him food was dark, dour, mute. His tongue was gone Aeron did not doubt. That was Euron's way. The light would leave when the mute did, and once again his world would become a damp darkness, smelling of brine and mold and feces.

Sometimes Euron would come himself. Aeron would wake from some dream to find his brother, standing over him, lantern in hand. Once, aboard The Silence, he hung the lantern from a post and poured them cups of wine.

“Drink with me, brother,” he said.

That night he wore a shirt of iron scales and a cloak of blood red silk. His eyepatch was red leather, his lips blue.

“Why am I here,” Aeron croaked at him. His lips were crusty with scabs, his voice hard. “Where are we sailing?”

“South. For conquest. Plunder. Dragons. Men.”

“My place is on the islands.”

“Your place is where I want you. I am your king.”

“What do you want of me?”

“What can you offer me that I have not had before?” Euron smiled. “I left the islands in the hand of Old Erik Ironmaker and sealed his loyalty with the hand of our sweet Asha. I would not have you preaching against my rule, so I took you with us.”

“Release me. The god commands it.”

“Drink with me. The king commands it.”

Euron grabbed a handful of the priest’s tangled black hair, pulled his head back, and lifted his wine cup to his lips, but what flowed into his mouth was not wine. It was thick and viscous, with a taste that seemed to change with every swallow. Now bitter, now sour, now sweet. When Aeron tried to spit it out, his brother tightened his grip and forced more down his throat.

“That’s it, priest. Go on. Drink it down. The wine of the warlocks. Sweeter than your seawater, and more truth in it than all the gods of earth.”

“Curse you,” Aeron said when the cup was empty. Liquid dripped down his chin and onto his long, black beard.

“If I had the tongue of every man who cursed me, I could make a coat of them.”

Aeron hawked and spat. The spittle struck his brother's cheek and hung there blue-black, glistening. Euron flicked it off his face with a forefinger, then licked the finger clean.

"Your god will forgive you tonight. Some god, at least."

And then the Damphair slept, sagging in his chains. He heard the creak of a rusted hinge.

"Urri," he cried.

There was no hinge there, no door, no Urri. His brother Urrigon was long dead, yet there he stood. One arm was black and swollen, stinking with maggots, but he was still Urri. Still a boy. No older than the day he'd died.

"Do you know what waits below the sea, brother?"

"The Drowned God," Aeron said. "In watery halls."

Urri shook his head. "Worms. Worms await you, Aeron."

When he laughed, his face sloughed off, and the priest saw that it was not Urri, but Euron's smiling eye, hidden. He showed the world his blood eye now. Dark and terrible. Clad head to heel in scale as dark as onyx. He sat upon a mound of blackened skulls, as dwarves capered round his feet and a forest burned behind him.

"The bleeding star stoaked the end," he said to Aeron. "These are the last days, when the world shall be broken and remade, and a new god shall be born from the graves and charnel pits."

Then Euron lifted a great horn to his lips and blew, and dragons, and krakens, and sphinxes came at his command and bowed before him.

"Kneel, brother," the Crow's Eye commanded. "I am your king. I am your god. Worship me, and I will raise you up to be my priest."

"Never. No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair."

"Why would I want that hard, black rock? Brother, look again and see where I am seated."

Aeron Damphair looked. The mound of skulls was gone. Now it was metal underneath the Crow's Eye. A great, tall seat of razor-sharp iron of barbs and blades and broken swords, all dripping blood. Impaled upon the longer spikes were the bodies of the gods. The Maiden was there, and the Father, and the Mother and the Warrior and Crone and Smith, even the Stranger. They hung side by side with all manner of queer, foreign gods, The Great Shephard and the Black Goat, Three Headed Trios and the Pale Child Bakkalon, the Lord of Light, and the Butterfly God of Naath, and there swollen in green heft devoured by crabs, the Drowned God festered with the Red Sea Horse, still dripping from its hair.

Then Euron Crow's Eye laughed again and the priest woke screaming in the bowels of Silence as piss ran down his leg.

It was only a dream, a vision, born of foul, black wine.

The Kingsmoot was the last thing Damphair remembered clearly.

As the captains lifted Euron onto their shoulders to take him as their king, the priest had slipped off to find their brother Victarion.

"Euron's blasphemies will bring down the Drowned God's wrath upon us all," he warned.

But Victarion insisted stubbornly that their god had raised their brother up and the gods would cast him down.

He will not act, the priest had realized then. It must be me.

The Kingsmoot had chosen Euron Crow's Eye, but the Kingsmoot was made of men, and men were weak and foolish things too easily swayed by gold and lies.

“I summoned them here, to Nagga’s Bones, to the Grey King’s Hall, I called them all together to choose a righteous king, but in their drunken folly they have sinned.”

It was up to him to undo what they had done.

“The captains and the kings raised Euron up, but the common folk shall tear him down,” he promised Victarion. “I shall go to Great Wyk, to Harlaw, Oakmont, to Pyke itself. In every town and village shall my words be heard. No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair.”

After parting from his brother he’d sought solace in the sea. A few of his drowned men made to follow him, but Aeron sent them off with a few sharp words. He wanted no company but god. Down where long ships had been beached upon the stoney sand he found the black salt waves surging in foamy white where they broke upon a snarled rock half-buried in the sand. The water had been icy cold as he waded in, yet Aeron did not flinch from his god’s caress. Waves smashed against his chest one after another, staggering him, but he pushed on deeper, and deeper until the water wall was breaking over his head. The taste of salt upon his lips was sweeter than any wine. As he moved a distant roar of the song of celebration was coming up from the beach. He heard the faint creak of longships settling upon the strand. He heard the keening of the wind in their lines and heard the pound of the waves, the hammer of his gods calling him into battle.

And there and then the Drowned God had called him once more, his voice welling up from the depths of the sea, “Aeron, my good and faithful servant, you must tell the Ironborn that the Crow’s Eye is no true king. That the Seastone Chair by rights belongs to...to...to...”

Not Victarion. Victarion had offered himself up to the captains and they had spurned him. Not Asha. In his heart, Aeron had always loved her best of all his brother Balon's children. The Drowned God had blessed her with the warrior spirit, but he had cursed her with a woman's body, too. No woman had ever ruled the Iron Islands. She should never have made a claim, should have spoken for Victarion, added her own strength to his.

It was not too late, Aeron had decided as he shriveled in the sea. If Victarion took Asha for his wife, they could yet rule together, king and queen. In ancient days, each isle had its salt king and its rock king. Let the old way return.

Aeron Damphair had struggled back to shore full of fierce resolve. He would bring down Euron, not with sword or axe but with the power of his faith. Padding lightly across the stones as his hair pressed black and damp across his cheeks he pushed it back out his eyes, and that is when they took him. The mutes who had been watching him, waiting for him, stalking him through strand and spray. A hand clamped down across his mouth, and something hard cracked across the back of his skull.

The next time he opened his eyes, the Damphair found himself fettered in the darkness. Then came the fever, and the taste of blood in his mouth as he twisted in the chains deep in the bowels of Silence. A weaker man might have wept, but Aeron Damphair prayed. Waking, sleeping, even in his fever dreams, he prayed. My god is testing me. I must be strong. I must be true.

Once, in the dungeon before this one, a woman brought his food in place of Euron's mute. A young thing, buxom and pretty. She dressed in the finery of a greenland lady. In the lantern light, she was the loveliest thing Aeron had ever seen.

"Woman," he said. "I am a man of god. I command you. Set me free."

“Oh, I couldn’t do that,” she said. “But I have food for you. Porridge and honey.”

She set it beside him on a stool and spooned it into his mouth for him.

“What is this place,” he asked between spoonfills.

“My lord father’s castle on Oakenshield.”

The Shield Islands. A thousand leagues from home.

“And who are you, child?”

“Falia Flowers.”

“Are you his natural daughter?”

“I am to be King Euron’s saltwife. You and I are to be kinmen.”

Aeron Damphair raised his eyes to hers, his scabbed lips crusted with wet porridge.

“Woman,” his chains clinked when he moved. “Run. He will hurt you. He will kill you.”

She laughed. “Silly. He won’t. I’m his love, his lady. He gives me gifts. So many gifts. Silks and furs and jewels. Rags and rocks, he calls them.”

“The Crow’s Eye puts no value on such things.”

That was one of the things that drew men to his service. Most captains kept the lion’s share of their plunder, but Euron took almost nothing for himself.

“He gives me any gown I want,” the girl was crowing happily. “My sisters used to make me wait on them at the table, but Euron made them serve the whole hall naked. Why should he do that except for love of me?”

She put her hand on her belly and smoothed down the fabric of her gown. “I’m going to give him sons. So many sons.”

“He has sons. Baseborn boys and mongrels, Euron says.”

“My sons will come before them, he has sworn by your own Drowned God.”

Aeron wept for her. Tears of blood, he thought.

“You must bear a message to my brother. Not Euron but Victarion, Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet. Do you know the man I mean?”

Falia stepped back from him.

“Yes,” she said. “But I couldn’t bring him any messages, he’s gone.”

Gone. That was the cruelest blow of all. “Gone where?”

“East,” she said. “With all his ships. He’s to bring the dragons to Westeros. I’m to be Euron’s salt wife, but my love must have a rock wife, too, a queen to rule all Westeros by his side. They say she’s the most beautiful woman in the world, and she has dragons. The two of us would be as close as sisters.”

Aeron Damphair hardly heard her. Victarion is gone, half a world away, or dead. Surely the Drowned God was testing him. This was a lesson for him. I must not steel trust in men – only my faith can save me now.

That night when the tide came rushing back into the prison cell, he prayed it might rise all night enough to end his torment. I have been your true and leal servant, he prayed, listing in his chains. Now snatch me from my brother’s hands and take me down beneath the waves to be seated at your side.

But no deliverance came, only the mutes to undo his chains and drag him roughly up a long, stone stair to where the Silent floated on a cold, black sea. And a few days later as her foals shuddered in the grip of some storm, the Crow’s Eye came below again, lantern in hand. This time his other hand held a dagger.

“Still praying, priest? Your god has forsaken you.”

“You’re wrong.”

“It was me who taught you how to pray, little brother, have you forgotten? I would visit your bedchamber at night when I’d had too much to drink. You shared a room with Urrigon high up in the Seatower. I could hear you praying from

outside the door. I always wondered, were you praying that I would choose you, or that I would pass you by?"

Euron pressed the knife to Aeron's throat.

"Pray to me. Pray to me to end your torment, and I will."

"Not even you would dare," said the Damphair. "I am your brother. No man is more cursed than the kinslayer."

"And yet, I wear a crown, and you rot in chains. How is it that your Drowned God allows that, when I have killed three brothers?"

Aeron could only gape at him.

"Three?"

"Well, if you count half-brothers. Do you remember little Robin? Wretched creature. Do you remember that big head of his, how soft it was? All he could do was mewl and shit. He was my second. Harlon was my first. All I had to do was pinch his nose shut. The greyscale had turned his mouth to stone, so he could not cry out. His eyes grew frantic as he died. They named me. When the life went out of him, I went out and pissed into the sea and prayed to the god to strike me down. None did. Oh, and Balon was the third, but you knew that. I could not do the deed myself, but it was my hand that pushed him off the bridge."

The Crow's Eye pushed the dagger in a little deeper, and Aeron felt blood trickling down his neck.

“If your Drowned God did not smite me for killing three brothers, why should he bestir himself for the fourth? Because you are his priest?”

He stepped back and sheathed his dagger.

“No. I’m not killing you tonight, a holy man with holy blood. I may have need of that blood later. For now, you are condemned to live.”

Holy man with holy blood, Aeron thought while his brother climbed back up on deck. He mocks me and he mocks the god. Kinslayer. Blasphemer. Demon in human skin. That night he prayed for his brother’s death.

It was in the second dungeon that the other holy men began to appear, to share his torment. Three wore the robes of septons of the greenlands, and one, the red garment of a priest of R’Hllor. The last was hardly recognizable as a man. Both his hands had been burned down to the bone and his face was a charred and blackend horror where two blind eyes moved sightlessly above the cracked cheeks, dripping puss. He was dead within hours of being shackled to the wall, but the mutes left his body there to ripen for three days afterwards. Last, were two warlocks of the East, with flesh as white as mushrooms and lips the purplish-blue of a bad bruise, both so gaunt and starved that only skin and bones remained. One had lost his legs. The mutes had hung him from a rafter.

“Pree,” he cried as he swung back and forth. “Pree, pree.” Perhaps that was the name of the demon that he worshipped.

The Drowned God protects me, the priest told himself. He is stronger than the other gods that they worshipped, stronger than their black sorceries. The Drowned God will set me free. In his saner moments, Aeron questioned why the

Crow's Eye was collecting priests, but he did not think that he would like the answer.

Victarion was gone, and with him, hope. Aeron's drowned men likely thought the Damphair was hiding on Old Wyk, or Great Wyk, or Pyke, and wondered when he would emerge to speak against this godless king. Urrigon haunted his fever dreams.

You're dead now, Urri, Aeron thought. Sleep now, child, and trouble me no more. Soon I shall come to join you. Whenever Aeron prayed, the legless warlock made queer noises, and his companion babbled wildly in his queer Eastern tongue, though whether they were cursing or pleading, the priest could not say. The septons made soft noises from time to time as well, but not in words that he could understand. Aeron suspected that their tongues had been cut out.

When Euron came again, his hair was swept straight back from his brow, and his lips were so blue that they were almost black. He had put aside his driftwood crown. In its place he wore an iron crown whose points were made from the teeth of sharks.

"That which is dead cannot die," said Aeron fiercely. "For he has tasted death once that he never fear again. He was drowned but he came forth once more with steel and fire."

"Will you do the same, brother?" Euron asked. "I think not. I think if I drowned you, you will stay drowned. All gods are lies, but yours is laughable. A pale, white thing in the likeness of a man, his limbs bloated and swollen, his hair floating in the water while fish nibble at his face – what fool would worship that?"

“He’s your god as well,” insisted the Damphair. “And when you die, he’ll judge you harshly, Crow’s Eye. You will spend eternity as a sea slug, crawling on your belly eating shit. If you do not fear to kill your own blood, slit my throat and be done with me. I’m weary of your mad boastings.”

“Kill my own little brother, blood of my blood, born of the loins of Quellon Greyjoy? Then who would share my triumphs? It tastes sweeter with a loved one by your side.”

“Your victories are hollow. You cannot hold the Shields.”

“Why should I want to hold them?” His brother’s smiling eye glittered in the lantern light, blue and bold and full of malice. “The Shields have served my purpose. I took them with one hand, and gave them away with the other. A great king is open-handed, brother. It is up to their new lords to hold them now. The glory of winning those rocks will be mine forever. When they are lost, the defeat will belong to the four fools who so eagerly accepted my gifts.” He moved closer. “Our longships are raiding up the Mander, even to the Arbor and the Redwyne Straits. The old way, brother.”

“Madness. Release me,” Aeron Damphair commanded in his sternest voice. “Or risk the wroth of god.”

Euron produce a soaked skin and a winecup. “You have a thirsty look about you,” he said as he poured. “You need a drink. A taste of evening shade.

“No.” Aeron turned his face away. “No, I said.”

“And I said yes.” Euron pulled his head back by the hair and forced the vile licquor into his mouth again. Though Aeron clamped his mouth shut, by twisting his head from side to side, in the end he had to choke or swallow.

The dreams were even worse the second time. He saw the longships of the Ironborn adrift and burning on a boiling, bloodred sea. He saw his brother on the Iron Throne again, but Euron was no longer human. He seemed more squid than man, a monster fathered by a kraken of the deep, his face a mass of writhing tentacles. Beside him stood a shadow in woman’s form, long and tall and terrible, her hands alive with pale white fire. Dwarves capered for their amusement, male and female, locked in carnal, biting and tearing at each other as Euron and his mate laughed and laughed and laughed.

Aeron dreamed of drowning, too. What was the bliss that surely followed down in the Drowned God’s watery halls, it was the terror that even the faithful feel as the water fills their mouth and nose and lungs they cannot draw breath.

Three times the Damphair woke, and three times it proved to be no true waking, only another chapter in the dream.

But at last there came a day when the door of the dungeon swung open and a mute came crashing through with no food in his hands, instead he had a ring of keys in one hand and a lantern in the other. The light was too bright to look upon, and Aeron was afraid of what it meant. Bright and terrible. Something has changed. Something has happened.

“Bring them,” said a half-familiar voice in the hapless gloom. “Be quick about it, you know how he gets.

Oh, I do. I’ve known since I was a boy.

One septon made a frightening noise as he undid his chains, some half-choked sound that might have been some attempt at speech. The legless warlock hanging stared down at the black water, his lips moving silently in prayer. When the mute came for Aeron, he tried to struggle, but the strength had gone from his limbs, and one blow was all it took to quiet him. His wrist was unshackled and the other free from itself. When he tried to take a step, his ancient legs folded out from under him. Not one of the prisoners was fit enough to walk. In the end, the mutes had to summon more of their kind. Two of them grasped Aeron by the arm and dragged him up the spiral stair. His feet banged against the steps as he ascended, sending stabbing pains up his leg. He bit his lips to keep from crying out. The priest could hear the warlocks babbling just behind them. The septon brought up the rear, sobbing and gasping. With every turn of the stair, the steps grew brighter until finally a window appeared in the lefthand wall. It was only a slit in the stone, no bare hands ripped across, but that was wide enough to emit a shaft of sunlight.

So golden, the Damphair thought. So beautiful.

When they pulled him up the steps into the light he felt a warmth upon his face and tears rolled down his cheeks.

The sea. I can smell the sea. The Drowned God has not abandoned me. The sea will make me whole again. That which is dead can never die, but rises again, harder and stronger.

“Take me to the water,” he commanded as if he was still back on the Iron Islands surrounded by his drowned men, but the mutes were his brothers creatures so they paid him no heed.

They dragged him down another set of stone steps through a torch-lit gallery and into a bleak stone hall where a dozen bodies were hanging from the rafters, turning and swaying. A dozen of Euron's captives were gathered in the hall, drinking wine beneath the corpses. Left-Hand Lucas Codd sat in the place of honor, wearing a heavy silken tapestry as a cloak. Beside him was the Red Oarsman, and further down Pitchface John Meyer, Stonehand, and Ruggin Saltbeard.

"Who are these dead," Aeron demanded. His tongue was so thick, the words came out in a rusty whisper, faint as a mouse breaking wind.

"They are those who helped the lord hold this castle, his kin," the voice belonged to Torwald Browntooth one of his brother's captives, a creature near as vile as the Crow's Eye himself.

"Pigs," said another vile creature, the one they called the Red Oarsman. "This was their isle. A rock, just off the Arbor. They dared oink threats at us. Redwyne, oink. Hightower, oink. Tyrell, oink oink oink. So, he sent them squealing down to Hell.

The Arbor. Not since the Drowned God had blessed him with a second life had Aeron Damphair ventured so far from the Iron Islands.

This is not my place. I do not belong here. I should be among my drowned men, preaching against the Crow's Eye.

"Have your gods been good to you down in the dark," asked Left-Hand Lucas Codd.

One of the warlocks snarled some answer in his ugly, eastern tongue.

"I curse you all," Aeron said.

"Your cursed have no power here, priest," said Left-Hand Lucas Codd. "The Crow's Eye has fed your Drowned God well and he has grown fat with sacrifice. Words are wind, but blood is power. We have given thousands to the sea, and he has given us victories."

"Count yourself blessed, Damphair," said Stonehand. "We are going back to sea. The Redwyne Fleet creeps closer towards us. The winds have been against them rounding Dorne, but they are finally near enough to have emboldened the old woman in Oldtown, so now Leyton Hightower's sons moved down the Whispering Song with hopes of catching us in the rear."

"You know what its like to be caught in the rear, don't you," said the Red Oarsman, laughing.

"Take them to this ships," Torwald Browntooth commanded.

And so, Aeron Damphair returned to the salt sea. A dozen longships were drawn up at the wharf below the castle, twice as many beached along the strand. Familiar banners streamed from their masts, the Greyjoy kraken, the bloody moon of Winch, the warhorn of the Goodbrothers, but from their sterns flew a flag the priest had never seen before. A red eye with a black pupil beneath an iron crown escorted by two crows. Beyond them a host of merchants ships floated on a tranquil turquoise sea. Cogs, carracks, fishing boats, even a great cog, a swollen sow of a ship, as big as a leviathan. Prizes of war, the Damphair knew.

Euron Crow's Eye stood upon the deck of Silence clad in a suit of black-scaled armor like nothing Aeron had ever seen before. Dark as smoke it was, but Euron wore it as easy as if it was the thinnest silk. The scales were edged in red gold that gleamed and shimmered when he moved. Patterns could be seen within the metal. Whorls and glyphs and arcane symbols molded into steel. Valyrian steel, the Damphair knew. His armor is Valyrian steel. In all the Seven Kingdoms, no man owned a suit of Valyrian steel. Such things had been known four hundred years ago, in the days before the Doom, and even then they would have cost a kingdom.

Euron did not lie. He's been to Valyria. No wonder he was mad.

"Your Grace," said Torwald Browntooth. "I have the priests. What do you want done with them?"

"Bind them to the prows," Euron commanded. "My brother on the Silence. Take one for yourself. Let them dice for the others. One to a ship. Let them feel the spray, the kiss of the Drowned God, wet and salty."

This time the mutes did not drag him below. Instead they lashed him to the prow of the Silence beside the figurehead, a naked maiden, slim but strong, with outstretched arms and windblown hair, but no mouth below her nose. They bound Aeron Damphair tight with strips of leather that would shrink when wet. Clad only in his beard and breachcloth.

The Crow's Eye spoke a command. A black sail was raised. Lines were cast off and the Silence backed away from shore to the slow beat of the oarmaster's drum. Oars rising, and dipping, and rising again, churning the water. Above them, the castle was burning. Flames leapt from the open windows.

When they were well out to sea, Euron returned to him.

“Brother,” he said. “You look forlorn. I have a gift for you.

He beckoned and two of his bastard sons dragged a woman forward and bound her to the prow on the other side of the figurehead. Naked as the mouthless maiden, her smooth belly just beginning to swell with the child she was carrying, her cheeks red with tears. She did not struggle as the boys tightend the bonds. Her hair hung down in front of her face, but Aeron knew her all the same.

“Falia Flowers,” he called. “Have courage, girl. All this will be over soon. And we’ll feast together in the Drowned God’s watery halls.

The girl raised up her head but made no answer. She had no tongue to answer with, the Damphair knew. He licked his lips, and tasted salt.