

THE IRON CAPTAIN

The wind was blowing from the north as the *Iron Victory* came round the point and entered the holy bay called Nagga's Cradle.

Victarion joined Nute the Barber at her prow. Ahead loomed the sacred shore of Old Wyk and the grassy hill above it, where the ribs of Nagga rose from the earth like the trunks of great white trees, as wide around as a dromond's mast and twice as tall.

The bones of the Grey King's Hall. Victarion could feel the magic of this place. "Balon stood beneath those bones, when first he named himself a king," he recalled. "He swore to win us back our freedoms, and Tarle the Thrice-Drowned placed a driftwood crown upon his head. 'BALON!' they cried. 'BALON! BALON KING!'"

"They will shout your name as loud," said Nute.

Victarion nodded, though he did not share the Barber's certainty. *Balon had three sons, and a daughter he loved well.*

He had said as much to his captains at Moat Cailin, when first they urged him to claim the Seastone Chair. "Balon's sons are dead," Red Ralf Stonehouse had argued, "and Asha is a woman. You were your brother's strong right arm, you must pick up the sword that he let fall." When Victarion reminded them that Balon had commanded him to hold the Moat against the northmen, Ralf Kenning said, "The wolves are broken, lord. What good to win this swamp and lose the isles?" And Ralf the Limper added, "The Crow's Eye has been too long away. He knows us not."

Euron Greyjoy, King of the Isles and the North. The thought woke an old rage in his heart, but still...

"Words are wind," Victarion told them, "and the only good wind is that which fills our sails. Would you have me fight the Crow's Eye? Brother against brother, ironborn against ironborn?" Euron was still his elder, no matter how much bad blood might be between them. *No man is as accursed as the kinslayer.*

But when the Damphair's summons came, the call to kingsmoot, then all was changed. *Aeron speaks with the Drowned God's voice*, Victarion reminded himself, *and if the Drowned God wills that I should sit the Seastone Chair...* The next day he gave command of Moat Cailin to Ralf Kenning and set off overland for the Fever River where the Iron Fleet lay amongst the reeds and willows. Rough seas and fickle winds had delayed him, but only one ship had been lost, and he was home.

Grief and Iron Vengeance were close behind as *Iron Victory* passed the headland. Behind came *Hardhand*, *Iron Wind*, *Grey Ghost*, *Lord Quellon*, *Lord Vickon*, *Lord Dagon*, and the rest, nine-tenths of the Iron Fleet, sailing on the evening tide in a ragged column that extended back long leagues. The sight of their sails filled Victarion Greyjoy with content. No man had ever loved his wives half as well as the Lord Captain loved his ships.

Along the sacred strand of Old Wyk, longships lined the shore as far as the eye could see, their masts thrust up like spears. In the deeper waters rode prizes: cogs, carracks, and dromonds won in raid or war, too big to run ashore. From prow and stern and mast flew familiar banners.

Nute the Barber squinted toward the strand. "Is that Lord Harlaw's *Sea Song*?" The Barber was a thickset man with bandy legs and long arms, but his eyes were not so keen as they had been when he was young. In those days he could throw an axe so well that men said he could shave you with it.

"*Sea Song*, aye." Rodrik the Reader had left his books, it would seem. "And there's old Drumm's *Thunderer*, with Blacktyde's *Nightflyer* beside her." Victarion's eyes were as sharp as they had ever been. Even with their sails furled and their banners hanging limp, he knew them, as befit the Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet. "*Silverfin* too. Some kin of Sawane Botley." The Crow's Eye had drowned Lord Botley, Victarion had heard, and his heir had died at Moat Cailin, but there had been brothers, and other sons as well. *How many? Four? No, five, and none with any cause to love the Crow's Eye.*

And then he saw her: a single-masted galley, lean and low, with a dark red hull. Her sails, now furled, were black as a starless sky. Even at anchor

Silence looked both cruel and fast. On her prow was a black iron maiden with one arm outstretched. Her waist was slender, her breasts high and proud, her legs long and shapely. A windblown mane of black iron hair streamed from her head, and her eyes were mother-of-pearl, but she had no mouth.

Victarion's hands closed into fists. He had beaten four men to death with those hands, and one wife as well. Though his hair was flecked with hoarfrost, he was as strong as he had ever been, with a bull's broad chest and a boy's flat belly. *The kinslayer is accursed in the eyes of gods and men*, Balon had reminded him on the day he sent the Crow's Eye off to sea.

"He is here," Victarion told the Barber. "Drop sail. We proceed on oars alone. Command *Grief* and *Iron Vengeance* to stand between *Silence* and the sea. The rest of the fleet to seal the bay. None is to leave save at my command, neither man nor crow."

The men upon the shore had spied their sails. Shouts echoed across the bay as friends and kin called out greetings. But not from *Silence*. On her decks a motley crew of mutes and mongrels spoke no word as the *Iron Victory* drew nigh. Men black as tar stared out at him, and others squat and hairy as the apes of Sothoros. *Monsters*, Victarion thought.

They dropped anchor twenty yards from *Silence*. "Lower a boat. I would go ashore." He buckled on his swordbelt as the rowers took their places; his longsword rested on one hip, a dirk upon the other. Nute the Barber fastened the Lord Captain's cloak about his shoulders. It was made of nine layers of cloth-of-gold, sewn in the shape of the kraken of Greyjoy, arms dangling to his boots. Beneath he wore heavy grey chainmail over boiled black leather. In Moat Cailin he had taken to wearing mail day and night. Sore shoulders and an aching back were easier to bear than bloody bowels. The poisoned arrows of the bog devils need only scratch a man, and a few hours later he would be squirting and screaming as his life ran down his legs in gouts of red and brown. *Whoever wins the Seastone Chair, I shall deal with the bog devils*.

Victarion donned a tall black warhelm, wrought in the shape of an iron kraken, its arms coiled down around his cheeks to meet beneath his jaw. By

then the boat was ready. "I put the chests into your charge," he told Nute as he climbed over the side. "See that they are strongly guarded." Much depended on the chests.

"As you command, Your Grace."

Victarion returned a sour scowl. "I am no king as yet." He clambered down into the boat.

Aeron Damphair was waiting for him in the surf with his waterskin slung beneath one arm. The priest was gaunt and tall, though shorter than Victarion. His nose rose like a shark's fin from a bony face, and his eyes were iron. His beard reached to his waist, and tangled ropes of hair slapped at the back of his legs when the wind blew. "Brother," he said as the waves broke white and cold around their ankles, "what is dead can never die."

"But rises again, harder and stronger." Victarion lifted off his helm and knelt. The bay filled his boots and soaked his breeches as Aeron poured a stream of salt water down upon his brow. And so they prayed.

"Where is our brother Crow's Eye?" the Lord Captain demanded of Aeron Damphair when the prayers were done.

"His is the great tent of cloth-of-gold, there where the din is loudest. He surrounds himself with godless men and monsters, worse than before. In him our father's blood went bad."

"Our mother's blood as well." Victarion would not speak of kinslaying, here in this godly place beneath the bones of Nagga and the Grey King's Hall, but many a night he dreamed of driving a mailed fist into Euron's smiling face, until the flesh split and his bad blood ran red and free. *I must not. I pledged my word to Balon.* "All have come?" he asked his priestly brother.

"All who matter. The captains and the kings." On the Iron Islands they were one and the same, for every captain was a king on his own deck, and every king must be a captain. "Do you mean to claim our father's crown?"

Victarion imagined himself seated on the Seastone Chair. "If the Drowned God wills it."

“The waves will speak,” said Aeron Damphair as he turned away.
“Listen to the waves, brother.”

“Aye.” He wondered how his name would sound whispered by waves and shouted by the captains and the kings. *If the cup should pass to me, I will not set it by.*

A crowd had gathered round to wish him well and seek his favor. Victarion saw men from every isle: Blacktydes, Tawneys, Orkwoods, Stonetrees, Wynches, and many more. The Goodbrothers of Old Wyk, the Goodbrothers of Great Wyk, and the Goodbrothers of Orkmont all had come. The Cods were there, though every decent man despised them. Humble Shepherds, Weavers, and Netleys rubbed shoulders with men from Houses ancient and proud; even humble Humbles, the blood of thralls and salt wives. A Volmark clapped Victarion on the back; two Sparrs pressed a wineskin into his hands. He drank deep, wiped his mouth, and let them bear him off to their cookfires, to listen to their talk of war and crowns and plunder, and the glory and the freedom of his reign.

That night the men of the Iron Fleet raised a huge sailcloth tent above the tideline, so Victarion might feast half a hundred famous captains on roast kid, salted cod, and lobster. Aeron came as well. He ate fish and drank water, whilst the captains quaffed enough ale to float the Iron Fleet. Many promised him their voices: Fralegg the Strong, clever Alvyn Sharp, humpbacked Hotho Harlaw. Hotho offered him a daughter for his queen. “I have no luck with wives,” Victarion told him. His first wife died in childbed, giving him a stillborn daughter. His second had been stricken by a pox. And his third...

“A king must have an heir,” Hotho insisted. “The Crow’s Eye brings three sons to show before the kingsmoot.”

“Bastards and mongrels. How old is this daughter?”

“Twelve,” said Hotho. “Fair and fertile, newly flowered, with hair the color of honey. Her breasts are small as yet, but she has good hips. She takes after her mother, more than me.”

Victarion knew that to mean the girl did not have a hump. Yet when he tried to picture her, he only saw the wife he’d killed. He had sobbed each

time he struck her, and afterward carried her down to the rocks to give her to the crabs. "I will gladly look at the girl once I am crowned," he said. That was as much as Hotho dared hope for, and he shambled off, content.

Baelor Blacktyde was more difficult to please. He sat by Victarion's elbow in his lambswool tunic of black-and-green vair, smooth-faced and comely. His cloak was sable, and pinned with a silver seven-pointed star. He had been eight years a hostage in Oldtown, and had returned a worshiper of the seven green land gods. "Balon was mad, Aeron is madder, and Euron is maddest of them all," Lord Baelor said. "What of you, Lord Captain? If I shout your name, will you make an end of this mad war?"

Victarion frowned. "Would you have me bend the knee?"

"If need be. We cannot stand alone against all Westeros. King Robert proved that, to our grief. Balon would pay the iron price for freedom, he said, but our women bought Balon's crowns with empty beds. My mother was one such. The Old Way is dead."

"What is dead can never die, but rises harder and stronger. In a hundred years men will sing of Balon the Bold."

"Balon the Widowmaker, call him. I will gladly trade his freedom for a father. Have you one to give me?" When Victarion did not answer, Blacktyde snorted and moved off.

The tent grew hot and smoky. Two of Gorold Goodbrother's sons knocked a table over fighting; Will Humble lost a wager and had to eat his boot; Little Lenwood Tawney fiddled whilst Romny Weaver sang "The Bloody Cup" and "Steel Rain" and other old reaving songs. Qarl the Maid and Eldred Codd danced the finger dance. A roar of laughter went up when one of Eldred's fingers landed in Ralf the Limper's wine cup.

A woman was amongst those laughing. Victarion rose and saw her by the tent flap, whispering something in the ear of Qarl the Maid that made him laugh as well. He had hoped she would not be fool enough to come here, yet the sight of her made him smile all the same. "*Asha*," he called in a commanding voice. "*Niece*."

She made her way to his side, lean and lithe in high boots of salt-stained leather, green woolen breeches, and brown quilted tunic, a sleeveless leather jerkin half-unlaced. "Nuncle." Asha Greyjoy was tall for a woman, yet she had to stand on her toes to kiss his cheek. "I am pleased to see you at my queensmoot."

"Queensmoot?" Victarion laughed. "Are you drunk, niece? Sit. I did not spy your *Black Wind* on the strand."

"I beached her beneath Norne Goodbrother's castle and rode across the island." She sat upon a stool and helped herself unasked to Nute the Barber's wine. Nute raised no objection; he had passed out drunk some time ago. "Who holds the Moat?"

"Ralf Kenning. With the Young Wolf dead, only the bog devils remain to plague us."

"The Starks were not the only northmen. The Iron Throne has named the Lord of the Dreadfort as Warden of the North."

"Would you lesson me in warfare? I was fighting battles when you were sucking mother's milk."

"And losing battles too." Asha took a drink of wine.

Victarion did not like to be reminded of Fair Isle. "Every man should lose a battle in his youth, so he does not lose a war when he is old. You have not come to make a claim, I hope."

She teased him with a smile. "And if I have?"

"There are men who remember when you were a little girl, swimming naked in the sea and playing with your doll."

"I played with axes too."

"You did," he had to grant, "but a woman wants a husband, not a crown. When I am king I'll give you one."

"My nuncle is so good to me. Shall I find a pretty wife for you, when I am queen?"

"I have no luck with wives. How long have you been here?"

“Long enough to see that Uncle Damphair has woken more than he intended. The Drumm means to make a claim, and Tarle the Thrice-Drowned was heard to say that Maron Volmark is the true heir of the black line.”

“The king must be a kraken.”

“The Crow’s Eye is a kraken. The elder brother comes before the younger.” Asha leaned close. “But I am the child of King Balon’s body, so I come before you both. Hear me, nuncle...”

But then a sudden silence fell. The singing died, Little Lenwood Tawney lowered his fiddle, men turned their heads. Even the clatter of plates and knives was hushed.

A dozen newcomers had entered the feast tent. Victarion saw Pinchface Jon Myre, Torwold Browntooth, Left-Hand Lucas Codd. Germund Botley crossed his arms against the gilded breastplate he had taken off a Lannister captain during Balon’s first rebellion. Orkwood of Orkmont stood beside him. Behind them were Stonehand, Quellon Humble, and the Red Oarsman with his fiery hair in braids. Ralf the Shepherd too, and Ralf of Lordsport, and Qarl the Thrall.

And the Crow’s Eye, Euron Greyjoy.

He looks unchanged, Victarion thought. He looks the same as he did the day he laughed at me and left. Euron was the most comely of Lord Quellon’s sons, and three years of exile had not changed that. His hair was still black as a midnight sea, with never a whitecap to be seen, and his face was still smooth and pale beneath his neat dark beard. A black leather patch covered Euron’s left eye, but his right was blue as a summer sky.

His smiling eye, thought Victarion. “Crow’s Eye,” he said.

“*King* Crow’s Eye, brother.” Euron smiled. His lips looked very dark in the lamplight, bruised and blue.

“We shall have no king but from the kingsmoot.” The Damphair stood. “No godless man—”

“—may sit the Seastone Chair, aye.” Euron glanced about the tent. “As it happens as I have oft sat upon the Seastone Chair of late. It raises no

objections.” His smiling eye was glittering. “Who knows more of gods than I? Horse gods and fire gods, gods made of gold with gemstone eyes, gods carved of cedar wood, gods chiseled into mountains, gods of empty air... I know them all. I have seen their peoples garland them with flowers, and shed the blood of goats and bulls and children in their names. And I have heard the prayers, in half a hundred tongues. Cure my withered leg, make the maiden love me, grant me a healthy son. Save me, succor me, make me wealthy... *protect* me! Protect me from mine enemies, protect me from the darkness, protect me from the crabs inside my belly, from the horselords, from the slavers, from the sellswords at my door. Protect me from the *Silence*.” He laughed. “*Godless*? Why, Aeron, I am the godliest man ever to raise sail! You serve one god, Damphair, but I have served ten thousand. From Ib to Asshai, when men see *my* sails, they pray.”

The priest raised a bony finger. “They pray to trees and golden idols and goat-headed abominations. False gods...”

“Just so,” said Euron, “and for that sin I kill them all. I spill their blood upon the sea and sow their screaming women with my seed. Their little gods cannot stop me, so plainly they are false gods. I am more devout than even you, Aeron. Perhaps it should be you who kneels to me for blessing.”

The Red Oarsman laughed loudly at that, and the others took their lead from him.

“*Fools*,” said the priest, “fools and thralls and blind men, that is what you are. Do you not see what stands before you?”

“A king,” said Quellon Humble.

The Damphair spat, and strode out into the night.

When he was gone, the Crow’s Eye turned his smiling eye upon Victarion. “Lord Captain, have you no greeting for a brother long away? Nor you, Asha? How fares your lady mother?”

“Poorly,” Asha said. “Some man made her a widow.”

Euron shrugged. “I had heard the Storm God swept Balon to his death. Who is this man who slew him? Tell me his name, niece, so I might revenge myself on him.”

Asha got to her feet. “You know his name as well as I. Three years you were gone from us, and yet *Silence* returns within a day of my lord father’s death.”

“Do you accuse me?” Euron asked mildly.

“Should I?” The sharpness in Asha’s voice made Victarion frown. It was dangerous to speak so to the Crow’s Eye, even when his smiling eye was shining with amusement.

“Do I command the winds?” the Crow’s Eye asked his pets.

“No, Your Grace,” said Orkwood of Orkmont.

“No man commands the winds,” said Germund Botley.

“Would that you did,” the Red Oarsman said. “You would sail wherever you liked and never be becalmed.”

“There you have it, from the mouths of three brave men,” Euron said. “The *Silence* was at sea when Balon died. If you doubt an uncle’s word, I give you leave to ask my crew.”

“A crew of mutes? Aye, that would serve me well.”

“A husband would serve you well.” Euron turned to his followers again. “Torwold, I misremember, do you have a wife?”

“Only the one.” Torwold Browntooth grinned, and showed how he had won his name.

“I am unwed,” announced Left-Hand Lucas Codd.

“And for good reason,” Asha said. “All *women* do despise the Codd as well. Don’t look at me so mournful, Lucas. You still have your famous hand.” She made a pumping motion with her fist.

Codd cursed, till the Crow’s Eye put a hand upon his chest. “Was that courteous, Asha? You have wounded Lucas to the quick.”

“Easier than wounding him in the prick. I throw an axe as well as any man, but when the target is so small...”

“This girl forgets herself,” snarled Pinchface Jon Myre. “Balon let her believe she was a man.”

“Your father made the same mistake with you,” said Asha.

“Give her to me, Euron,” suggested the Red Oarsman. “I’ll spank her till her arse is as red as my hair.”

“Come try,” said Asha, “and hereafter we can call you the Red Eunuch.” A throwing axe was in her hand. She tossed it in the air and caught it deftly. “Here is my husband, Nuncle. Any man who wants me should take it up with him.”

Victarion slammed his fist upon the table. “I’ll have no blood shed here. Euron, take your... pets... and go.”

“I had looked for a warmer welcome from you, brother. I *am* your elder... and soon, your rightful king.”

Victarion’s face darkened. “When the kingsmoot speaks, we shall see who wears the driftwood crown.”

“On that we can agree.” Euron lifted two fingers to the patch that covered his left eye, and took his leave. The others followed at his heels like mongrel dogs. Silence lingered behind them, till Little Lenwood Tawney took up his fiddle. The wine and ale began to flow again, but several guests had lost their thirst. Eldred Codd slipped out, cradling his bloody hand. Then Will Humble, Hotho Harlaw, a goodly lot of Goodbrothers.

“Nuncle.” Asha put a hand upon his shoulder. “Walk with me, if you would.”

Outside the tent the wind was rising. Clouds raced across the moon’s pale face. They looked a bit like galleys, stroking hard to ram. The stars were few and faint. All along the strand the longships rested, tall masts rising like a forest from the surf. Victarion could hear their hulls creaking as they settled on the sand. He heard the keening of their lines, the sound of banners flapping. Beyond, in the deeper waters of the bay, larger ships bobbed at anchor, grim shadows wreathed in mist.

They walked along the strand together just above the surf, far from the camps and the cookfires. “Tell me true, nuncle,” Asha said, “why did Euron go away so suddenly?”

“The Crow’s Eye oft went reaving.”

“Never for so long.”

“He took the *Silence* east. A lengthy voyage.”

“I asked *why* he went, not where.” When he did not answer, Asha said, “I was away when *Silence* sailed. I had taken *Black Wind* around the Arbor to the Stepstones, to steal a few trinkets from the Lyseni pirates. When I came home, Euron was gone and your new wife was dead.”

“She was only a salt wife.” He had not touched another woman since he gave her to the crabs. I will need to take a wife when I am king. A true wife, to be my queen and bear me sons. A king must have an heir.

“My father refused to speak of her,” said Asha.

“It does no good to speak of things no man can change.” He was weary of the subject. “I saw the Reader’s longship.”

“It took all my charm to winkle him out of his Book Tower.”

She has the Harlaws, then. Victarion’s frown grew deeper. “You cannot hope to rule. You are a woman.”

“Is that why I always lose the pissing contests?” Asha laughed. “Nuncle, it grieves me to say so, but you may be right. For four days and four nights, I have been drinking with the captains and the kings, listening to what they say... and what they will not say. Mine own are with me, and many Harlaws. I have Tris Botley too, and some few others. Not enough.” She kicked a rock, and sent it splashing into the water between two longships. “I am of a mind to shout my nuncle’s name.”

“Which uncle?” he demanded. “You have three.”

“Four. Nuncle, hear me. I will place the driftwood crown upon your brow myself... if you will agree to share the rule.”

“*Share* the rule? How could that be?” The woman was not making sense. *Does she want to be my queen?* Victarion found himself looking at Asha in a way he had never looked at her before. He could feel his manhood beginning to stiffen. *She is Balon’s daughter,* he reminded himself. He remembered her as a little girl, throwing axes at a door. He crossed his arms against his chest. “The Seastone Chair seats but one.”

“Then let my nuncle sit,” Asha said. “I will stand behind you, to guard your back and whisper in your ear. No king can rule alone. Even when the dragons sat the Iron Throne, they had men to help them. The King’s Hands. Let me be your Hand, Nuncle.”

No King of the Isles had ever needed a Hand, much less one who was a woman. *The captains and the kings would mock me in their cups.* “Why would you wish to be my Hand?”

“To end this war before this war ends us. We have won all that we are like to win... and stand to lose all just as quick, unless we make a peace. I have shown Lady Glover every courtesy, and she swears her lord will treat with me. If we hand back Deepwood Motte, Torrhen’s Square, and Moat Cailin, she says, the northmen will cede us Sea Dragon Point and all the Stony Shore. Those lands are thinly peopled, yet ten times larger than all the isles put together. An exchange of hostages will seal the pact, and each side will agree to make common cause with the other should the Iron Throne—”

Victarion chuckled. “This Lady Glover plays you for a fool, niece. Sea Dragon Point and the Stony Shore are ours. Why hand back anything? Winterfell is burnt and broken, and the Young Wolf rots headless in the earth. We will have *all* the north, as your lord father dreamed.”

“When longships learn to row through trees, perhaps. A fisherman may hook a grey leviathan, but it will drag him down to death unless he cuts it loose. The north is too large for us to hold, and too full of northmen.”

“Go back to your dolls, niece. Leave the winning of wars to warriors.” Victarion showed her his fists. “I have two hands. No man needs three.”

“I know a man who needs House Harlaw, though.”

“Hotho Humpback has offered me his daughter for my queen. If I take her, I will have the Harlaws.”

That took the girl aback. “Lord Rodrik rules House Harlaw.”

“Rodrik has no daughters, only books. Hotho will be his heir, and I will be the king.” Once he had said the words aloud, they sounded true. “The Crow’s Eye has been too long away.”

“Some men look larger at a distance,” Asha warned. “Walk amongst the cookfires if you dare, and listen. They are not telling tales of your strength, nor of my famous beauty. They talk only of the Crow’s Eye; the far places he has seen, the women he has raped and the men he’s killed, the cities he has sacked, the way he burnt Lord Tywin’s fleet at Lannisport...”

“*I* burnt the lion’s fleet,” Victarion insisted. “With mine own hands I flung the first torch onto his flagship.”

“The Crow’s Eye hatched the scheme.” Asha put her hand upon his arm. “And killed your wife as well... did he not?”

Balon had commanded them not to speak of it, but Balon was dead. “He put a baby in her belly and made me do the killing. I would have killed him too, but Balon would have no kinslaying in his hall. He sent Euron into exile, never to return...”

“...so long as Balon lived?”

Victarion looked at his fists. “She gave me horns. I had no choice.” Had it been known, men would have laughed at me, as the Crow’s Eye laughed when I confronted him. “She came to me wet and willing,” he had boasted. “It seems Victarion is big everywhere but where it matters.” But he could not tell her that.

“I am sorry for you,” said Asha, “and sorrier for her... but you leave me small choice but to claim the Seastone Chair myself.”

You cannot. “Your breath is yours to waste, woman.”

“It is,” she said, and left him.