

THE DROWNED MAN

Only when his arms and legs were numb from the cold did Aeron Greyjoy struggle back to shore and don his robes again.

He had run before the Crow's Eye as if he were still the weak thing he had been, but when the waves broke over his head they reminded once more that that man was dead. *I was reborn from the sea, a harder man and stronger.* No mortal man could frighten him, no more than the darkness could, nor the bones of his soul, the grey and grisly bones of his soul. *The sound of a door opening, the scream of a rusted iron hinge.*

The priest's robes crackled as he pulled them down, still stiff with salt from their last washing a fortnight past. The wool clung to his wet chest, drinking the brine that ran down from his hair. He filled his waterskin and slung it over his shoulder.

As he strode across the strand, a drowned man returning from a call of nature stumbled into him in the darkness. "Damphair," he murmured. Aeron laid a hand upon his head, blessed him, and moved on. The ground rose beneath his feet, gently at first, then more steeply. When he felt scrub grass between his toes, he knew that he had left the strand behind. Slowly he climbed, listening to the waves. *The sea is never weary. I must be as tireless.*

On the crown of the hill four-and-forty monstrous stone ribs rose from the earth like the trunks of great pale trees. The sight made Aeron's heart beat faster. Nagga had been the first sea dragon, the mightiest ever to rise from the waves. She fed on krakens and leviathans and drowned whole islands in her wrath, yet the Grey King had slain her and the Drowned God had changed her bones to stone so that men might never cease to wonder at the courage of the first of kings. Nagga's ribs became the beams and pillars of his longhall, just as her jaws became his throne. *For a thousand years and seven he reigned here,* Aeron recalled. *Here he took his mermaid wife and planned his wars against the Storm God. From here he ruled both stone*

and salt, wearing robes of woven seaweed and a tall pale crown made from Nagga's teeth.

But that was in the dawn of days, when mighty men still dwelt on earth and sea. The hall had been warmed by Nagga's living fire, which the Grey King had made his thrall. On its walls hung tapestries woven from silver seaweed most pleasing to the eyes. The Grey King's warriors had feasted on the bounty of the sea at a table in the shape of a great starfish, whilst seated upon thrones carved from mother-of-pearl. *Gone, all the glory gone.* Men were smaller now. Their lives had grown short. The Storm God drowned Nagga's fire after the Grey King's death, the chairs and tapestries had been stolen, the roof and walls had rotted away. Even the Grey King's great throne of fangs had been swallowed by the sea. Only Nagga's bones endured to remind the ironborn of all the wonder that had been.

It is enough, thought Aeron Greyjoy.

Nine wide steps had been hewn from the stony hilltop. Behind rose the howling hills of Old Wyk, with mountains in the distance black and cruel. Aeron paused where the doors once stood, pulled the cork from his waterskin, took a swallow of salt water, and turned to face the sea. *We were born from the sea, and to the sea we must return.* Even here he could hear the ceaseless rumble of the waves and feel the power of the god who lurked below the waters. Aeron went to his knees. *You have sent your people to me,* he prayed. *They have left their halls and hovels, their castles and their keeps, and come here to Nagga's bones, from every fishing village and every hidden vale. Now grant to them the wisdom to know the true king when he stands before them, and the strength to shun the false.* All night he prayed, for when the god was in him Aeron Greyjoy had no need of sleep, no more than the waves did, nor the fishes of the sea.

Dark clouds ran before the wind as the first light stole into the world. The black sky went grey as slate; the black sea turned grey-green; the black mountains of Great Wyk across the bay put on the blue-green hues of soldier pines. As color stole back into the world, a hundred banners lifted and began to flap. Aeron beheld the silver fish of Botley, the bloody moon of Wynch, the dark green trees of Orkwood. He saw warhorns and

leviathans and scythes, and everywhere the krakens great and golden. Beneath them, thralls and salt wives begin to move about, stirring coals into new life and gutting fish for the captains and the kings to break their fasts. The dawnlight touched the stony strand, and he watched men wake from sleep, throwing aside their sealskin blankets as they called for their first horn of ale. *Drink deep*, he thought, *for we have god's work to do today.*

The sea was stirring too. The waves grew larger as the wind rose, sending plumes of spray to crash against the longships. *The Drowned God wakes*, thought Aeron. He could hear his voice welling from the depths of the sea. *I shall be with you here this day, my strong and faithful servant*, the voice said. *No godless man will sit my Seastone Chair.*

It was there beneath the arch of Nagga's ribs that his drowned men found him, standing tall and stern with his long black hair blowing in the wind. "Is it time?" Rus asked. Aeron gave a nod, and said, "It is. Go forth and sound the summons."

The drowned men took up their driftwood cudgels and began to beat them one against the other as they walked back down the hill. Others joined them, and the clangor spread along the strand. Such a fearful clacking and a clattering it made, as if a hundred trees were pummeling one another with their limbs. Kettledrums began to beat as well, *boom-boom-boom-boom-boom, boom-boom-boom-boom-boom*. A warhorn bellowed, then another. *AAAAAAooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.*

Men left their fires to make their way toward the bones of the Grey King's Hall; oarsmen, steersmen, sailmakers, shipwrights, the warriors with their axes and the fishermen with their nets. Some had thralls to serve them; some had salt wives. Others, who had sailed too often to the green lands, were attended by maesters and singers and knights. The common men crowded together in a crescent around the base of the knoll, with the thralls, children, and women toward the rear. The captains and the kings made their way up the slopes. Aeron Damphair saw cheerful Sigfry Stonetree, Andrik the Unsmiling, the knight Ser Harras Harlaw. Lord Baelor Blacktyde in his sable cloak stood beside The Stonehouse in ragged sealskin. Victarion loomed above all of them save Andrik. His brother wore no helm, but

elsewise he was all in armor, his kraken cloak hanging golden from his shoulders. *He shall be our king. What man could look on him and doubt it?*

When the Damphair raised his bony hands the kettledrums and the warhorns fell silent, the drowned men lowered their cudgels, and all the voices stilled. Only the sound of the waves pounding remained, a roar no man could still. “We were born from the sea, and to the sea we all return,” Aeron began, softly at first, so men would strain to hear. “The Storm God in his wrath plucked Balon from his castle and cast him down, yet now he feasts beneath the waves in the Drowned God’s watery halls.” He lifted his eyes to the sky. *“Balon is dead! The iron king is dead!”*

“The king is dead!” his drowned men shouted.

“Yet what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger!” he reminded them. “Balon has fallen, Balon my brother, who honored the Old Way and paid the iron price. Balon the Brave, Balon the Blessed, Balon Twice-Crowned, who won us back our freedoms and our god. Balon is dead... but an iron king shall rise again, to sit upon the Seastone Chair and rule the isles.”

“A king shall rise!” they answered. “He shall rise!”

“He shall. He must.” Aeron’s voice thundered like the waves. “But who? Who shall sit in Balon’s place? Who shall rule these holy isles? Is he here among us now?” The priest spread his hands wide. *“Who shall be king over us?”*

A seagull screamed back at him. The crowd began to stir, like men waking from a dream. Each man looked at his neighbors, to see which of them might presume to claim a crown. *The Crow’s Eye was never patient,* Aeron Damphair told himself. *Mayhaps he will speak first.* If so, it would be his undoing. The captains and the kings had come a long way to this feast and would not choose the first dish set before them. *They will want to taste and sample, a bite of him, a nibble of the other, until they find the one that suits them best.*

Euron must have known that as well. He stood with his arms crossed amongst his mutes and monsters. Only the wind and the waves answered Aeron’s call.

“The ironborn must have a king,” the priest insisted, after a long silence. “I ask again. *Who shall be king over us?*”

“I will,” came the answer from below.

At once a ragged cry of “Gylbert! Gylbert King!” went up. The captains gave way to let the claimant and his champions ascend the hill to stand at Aeron’s side beneath the ribs of Nagga.

This would-be king was a tall spare lord with a melancholy visage, his lantern jaw shaved clean. His three champions took up their position two steps below him, bearing his sword and shield and banner. They shared a certain look with the tall lord, and Aeron took them for his sons. One unfurled his banner, a great black longship against a setting sun. “I am Gylbert Farwynd, Lord of the Lonely Light,” the lord told the kingsmoot.

Aeron knew some Farwynds, a queer folk who held lands on the westernmost shores of Great Wyk and the scattered isles beyond, rocks so small that most could support but a single household. Of those, the Lonely Light was the most distant, eight days’ sail to the northwest amongst rookeries of seals and sea lions and the boundless grey oceans. The Farwynds there were even queerer than the rest. Some said they were skinchangers, unholy creatures who could take on the forms of sea lions, walruses, even spotted whales, the wolves of the wild sea.

Lord Gylbert began to speak. He told of a wondrous land beyond the Sunset Sea, a land without winter or want, where death had no dominion. “Make me your king, and I shall lead you there,” he cried. “We will build ten thousand ships as Nymeria once did and take sail with all our people to the land beyond the sunset. There every man shall be a king and every wife a queen.”

His eyes, Aeron saw, were now grey, now blue, as changeable as the seas. *Mad eyes*, he thought, *fool’s eyes*. The vision he spoke of was doubtless a snare set by the Storm God to lure the ironborn to destruction. The offerings that his men spilled out before the kingsmoot included sealskins and walrus tusks, arm rings made of whalebone, warhorns banded in bronze. The captains looked and turned away, leaving lesser men to help themselves to the gifts. When the fool was done talking and his champions

began to shout his name, only the Farwynds took up the cry, and not even all of them. Soon enough the cries of “Gylbert! Gylbert King!” faded away to silence. The gull screamed loudly above them, and landed atop one of Nagga’s ribs as the Lord of the Lonely Light made his way back down the hill.

Aeron Damphair stepped forward once more. “I ask again. *Who shall be king over us?*”

“Me!” a deep voice boomed, and once more the crowd parted.

The speaker was borne up the hill in a carved driftwood chair carried on the shoulders of his grandsons. A great ruin of a man, twenty stones heavy and ninety years old, he was cloaked in a white bearskin. His own hair was snow white as well, and his huge beard covered him like a blanket from cheeks to thighs, so it was hard to tell where the beard ended and the pelt began. Though his grandsons were great strapping men, they struggled with his weight on the steep stone steps. Before the Grey King’s Hall they set him down, and three remained below him as his champions.

Sixty years ago, this one might well have won the favor of the moot, Aeron thought, but his hour is long past.

“Aye, me!” the man roared from where he sat, in a voice as huge as he was. “Why not? Who better? I am Erik Ironmaker, for them who’s blind. Erik the Just. Erik Anvil-Breaker. Show them my hammer, Thormor.” One of his champions lifted it up for all to see; a monstrous thing it was, its haft wrapped in old leather, its head a brick of steel as large as a loaf of bread. “I can’t count how many hands I’ve smashed to pulp with that hammer,” Erik said, “but might be some thief could tell you. I can’t say how many heads I’ve crushed against my anvil neither, but there’s some widows could. I could tell you all the deeds I’ve done in battle, but I’m eight-and-eighty and won’t live long enough to finish. If old is wise, no one is wiser than me. If big is strong, no one’s stronger. You want a king with heirs? I’ve more’n I can count. King Erik, aye, I like the sound o’ that. Come, say it with me. *ERIK! ERIK ANVIL-BREAKER! ERIK KING!*”

As his grandsons took up the cry, their own sons came forward with chests upon their shoulders. When they upended them at the base of the

stone steps, a torrent of silver, bronze, and steel spilled forth; arm rings, collars, daggers, dirks, and throwing axes. A few captains snatched up the choicest items and added their voices to the swelling chant. But no sooner had the cry begun to build than a woman's voice cut through it. "*Erik!*" Men moved aside to let her through. With one foot on the lowest step, she said, "Erik, stand up."

A hush fell. The wind blew, waves broke against the shore, men murmured in each other's ears. Erik Ironmaker stared down at Asha Greyjoy. "Girl. Thrice-damned girl. What did you say?"

"Stand up, Erik," she called. "Stand up and I'll shout your name with all the rest. Stand up and I'll be the first to follow you. You want a crown, aye. Stand up and take it."

Elsewhere in the press, the Crow's Eye laughed. Erik glared at him. The big man's hands closed tight around the arms of his driftwood throne. His face went red, then purple. His arms trembled with effort. Aeron could see a thick blue vein pulsing in his neck as he struggled to rise. For a moment it seemed as though he might do it, but the breath went out of him all at once, and he groaned and sank back onto his cushion. Euron laughed all the louder. The big man hung his head and grew old, all in the blink of an eye. His grandsons carried him back down the hill.

"Who shall rule the ironborn?" Aeron Damphair called again. "Who shall be king over us?"

Men looked at one another. Some looked at Euron, some at Victarion, a few at Asha. Waves broke green and white against the longships. The gull cried once more, a raucous scream, forlorn. "Make your claim, Victarion," the Merlyn called. "Let us have done with this mummer's farce."

"When I am ready," Victarion shouted back.

Aeron was pleased. It is better if he waits.

The Drumm came next, another old man, though not so old as Erik. He climbed the hill on his own two legs, and on his hip rode Red Rain, his famous sword, forged of Valyrian steel in the days before the Doom. His champions were men of note: his sons Denys and Donnel, both stout

fighters, and between them Andrik the Unsmiling, a giant of a man with arms as thick as trees. It spoke well of the Drumm that such a man would stand for him.

“Where is it written that our king must be a kraken?” Drumm began. “What right has Pyke to rule us? Great Wyk is the largest isle, Harlaw the richest, Old Wyk the most holy. When the black line was consumed by dragonfire, the ironborn gave the primacy to Vickon Greyjoy, aye... but as *lord*, not king.”

It was a good beginning. Aeron heard shouts of approval, but they dwindled as the old man began to tell of the glory of the Drumms. He spoke of Dale the Dread, Roryn the Reaver, the hundred sons of Gormond Drumm the Oldfather. He drew Red Rain and told them how Hilmar Drumm the Cunning had taken the blade from an armored knight with wits and a wooden cudgel. He spoke of ships long lost and battles eight hundred years forgotten, and the crowd grew restive. He spoke and spoke, and then he spoke still more.

And when Drumm’s chests were thrown open, the captains saw the niggard’s gifts he’d brought them. *No throne was ever bought with bronze*, the Damphair thought. The truth of that was plain to hear, as the cries of “*Drumm! Drumm! Dunstan King!*” died away.

Aeron could feel a tightness in his belly, and it seemed to him that the waves were pounding louder than before. *It is time*, he thought. *It is time for Victarion to make his claim*. “Who shall be king over us?” the priest cried once more, but this time his fierce black eyes found his brother in the crowd. “Nine sons were born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy. One was mightier than all the rest, and knew no fear.”

Victarion met his eyes, and nodded. The captains parted before him as he climbed the steps. “Brother, give me blessing,” he said when he reached the top. He knelt and bowed his head. Aeron uncorked his waterskin and poured a stream of seawater down upon his brow. “*What is dead can never die*,” the priest said, and Victarion replied, “*but rises again, harder and stronger.*”

When Victarion rose, his champions arrayed themselves beneath him; Ralf the Limper, Red Ralf Stonehouse, and Nute the Barber, noted warriors all. Stonehouse bore the Greyjoy banner; the golden kraken on a field as black as the midnight sea. As soon as it unfurled, the captains and the kings began to shout out the Lord Captain's name. Victarion waited till they quieted, then said, "You all know me. If you want sweet words, look elsewhere. I have no singer's tongue. I have an axe, and I have these." He raised his huge mailed hands up to show them, and Nute the Barber displayed his axe, a fearsome piece of steel. "I was a loyal brother," Victarion went on. "When Balon was wed, it was me he sent to Harlaw to bring him back his bride. I led his longships into many a battle, and never lost but one. The first time Balon took a crown, it was me sailed into Lannisport to singe the lion's tail. The second time, it was me he sent to skin the Young Wolf should he come howling home. All you'll get from me is more of what you got from Balon. That's all I have to say."

With that his champions began to chant: "*VICTARION! VICTARION! VICTARION KING!*" Below, his men were spilling out his chests, a cascade of silver, gold, and gems, a wealth of plunder. Captains scrambled to seize the richest pieces, shouting as they did so. "*VICTARION! VICTARION! VICTARION KING!*" Aeron watched the Crow's Eye. *Will he speak now, or let the kingsmoot run its course?* Orkwood of Orkmont was whispering in Euron's ear.

But it was not Euron who put an end to the shouting, it was the *woman*. She put two fingers in her mouth and *whistled*, a sharp shrill sound that cut through the tumult like a knife through curds. "Nuncle! *Nuncle!*" Bending, she snatched up a twisted golden collar and bounded up the steps. Nute seized her by the arm, and for half a heartbeat Aeron was hopeful that his brother's champions would keep her silent, but Asha wrenched free of the Barber's hand and said something to Red Ralf that made him step aside. As she pushed past, the cheering died away. She was Balon Greyjoy's daughter, and the crowd was curious to hear her speak.

"It was good of you to bring such gifts to my queensmoot, Nuncle," she told Victarion, "but you need not have worn so much armor. I promise not

to hurt you.” Asha turned to face the captains. “There’s no one braver than my nuncle, no one stronger, no one fiercer in a fight. And he counts to ten as quick as any man, I have seen him do it... though when he needs to go to twenty he does take off his boots.” That made them laugh. “He has no sons, though. His wives keep dying. The Crow’s Eye is his elder and has a better claim...”

“He does!” the Red Oarsman shouted from below.

“Ah, but my claim is better still.” Asha set the collar on her head at a jaunty angle, so the gold gleamed against her dark hair. “Balon’s brother cannot come before Balon’s son!”

“Balon’s sons are dead,” cried Ralf the Limper. “All I see is Balon’s little daughter!”

“Daughter?” Asha slipped a hand beneath her jerkin. “Oho! What’s this? Shall I show you? Some of you have not seen one since they weaned you.” They laughed again. “Teats on a king are a terrible thing, is that the song? Ralf, you have me, I *am* a woman... though not an *old* woman like you. Ralf the Limper... shouldn’t that be Ralf the Limp?” Asha drew a dirk from between her breasts. “I’m a mother too, and here’s my suckling babe!” She held it up. “And here, my champions.” They pushed past Victarion’s three to stand below her: Qarl the Maid, Tristifer Botley, and the knight Ser Harras Harlaw, whose sword Nightfall was as storied as Dunstan Drumm’s Red Rain. “My nuncle said you know him. You know me too—”

“I want to know you better!” someone shouted.

“Go home and know your wife,” Asha shot back. “Nuncle says he’ll give you more of what my father gave you. Well, what was that? Gold and glory, some will say. *Freedom*, ever sweet. Aye, it’s so, he gave us that... and widows too, as Lord Blacktyde will tell you. How many of you had your homes put to the torch when Robert came? How many had daughters raped and despoiled? Burnt towns and broken castles, my father gave you that. *Defeat* was what he gave you. Nuncle here will give you more. Not me.”

“What will you give us?” asked Lucas Codd. “Knitting?”

“Aye, Lucas. I’ll knit us all a kingdom.” She tossed her dirk from hand to hand. “We need to take a lesson from the Young Wolf, who won every battle... and lost all.”

“A wolf is not a kraken,” Victarion objected. “What the kraken grasps it does not lose, be it longship or leviathan.”

“And what *have* we grasped, Nuncle? The north? What is that, but leagues and leagues of leagues and leagues, far from the sound of the sea? We have taken Moat Cailin, Deepwood Motte, Torrhen’s Square, even *Winterfell*. What do we have to show for it?” She beckoned, and her *Black Wind* men pushed forward, chests of oak and iron on their shoulders. “I give you the wealth of the Stony Shore,” Asha said as the first was upended. An avalanche of pebbles clattered forth, cascading down the steps; pebbles grey and black and white, worn smooth by the sea. “I give you the riches of Deepwood,” she said, as the second chest was opened. Pinecones came pouring out, to roll and bounce down into the crowd. “And last, the gold of Winterfell.” From the third chest came yellow turnips, round and hard and big as a man’s head. They landed amidst the pebbles and the pinecones. Asha stabbed one with her dirk. “Harmund Sharp,” she shouted, “your son Harrag died at Winterfell, for this.” She pulled the turnip off her blade and tossed it to him. “You have other sons, I think. If you’d trade their lives for turnips, shout my nuncle’s name!”

“And if I shout *your* name?” Harmund demanded. “What then?”

“Peace,” said Asha. “Land. Victory. I’ll give you Sea Dragon Point and the Stony Shore, black earth and tall trees and stones enough for every younger son to build a hall. We’ll have the northmen too... as friends, to stand with us against the Iron Throne. Your choice is simple. Crown me, for peace and victory. Or crown my nuncle, for more war and more defeat.” She sheathed her dirk again. “What will you have, ironmen?”

“*VICTORY!*” shouted Rodrik the Reader, his hands cupped about his mouth. “*Victory, and Asha!*”

“*ASHA!*” Lord Baelor Blacktyde echoed. “*ASHA QUEEN!*”

Asha’s own crew took up the cry. “*ASHA! ASHA! ASHA QUEEN!*” They stamped their feet and shook their fists and yelled, as the Damphair

listened in disbelief. *She would leave her father's work undone!* Yet Tristifer Botley was shouting for her, with many Harlaws, some Goodbrothers, red-faced Lord Merlyn, more men than the priest would ever have believed... for a *woman!*

But others were holding their tongues, or muttering asides to their neighbors. “*No craven's peace!*” Ralf the Limper roared. Red Ralf Stonehouse swirled the Greyjoy banner and bellowed, “*Victarion! VICTARION! VICTARION!*” Men began to shove at one another. Someone flung a pinecone at Asha's head. When she ducked, her makeshift crown fell off. For a moment it seemed to the priest as if he stood atop a giant anthill, with a thousand ants in a boil at his feet. Shouts of “*Asha!*” and “*Victarion!*” surged back and forth, and it seemed as though some savage storm was about to engulf them all. *The Storm God is amongst us*, the priest thought, *sowing fury and discord.*

Sharp as a swordthrust, the sound of a horn split the air.

Bright and baneful was its voice, a shivering hot scream that made a man's bones seem to *thrum* within him. The cry lingered in the damp sea air: *aaaaRRREEEEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.*

All eyes turned toward the sound. It was one of Euron's mongrels winding the call, a monstrous man with a shaved head. Rings of gold and jade and jet glistened on his arms, and on his broad chest was tattooed some bird of prey, talons dripping blood.

aaaaRRREEEEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

The horn he blew was shiny black and twisted, and taller than a man as he held it with both hands. It was bound about with bands of red gold and dark steel, incised with ancient Valyrian glyphs that seemed to glow redly as the sound swelled.

aaaaaaaaRRREE.

It was a terrible sound, a wail of pain and fury that seemed to burn the ears. Aeron Damphair covered his, and prayed for the Drowned God to raise a mighty wave and smash the horn to silence, yet still the shriek went on and on. *It is the horn of hell*, he wanted to scream, though no man would

have heard him. The cheeks of the tattooed man were so puffed out they looked about to burst, and the muscles in his chest twitched in a way that it made it seem as if the bird were about to rip free of his flesh and take wing. And now the glyphs were burning brightly, every line and letter shimmering with white fire. On and on and on the sound went, echoing amongst the howling hills behind them and across the waters of Nagga's Cradle to ring against the mountains of Great Wyk, on and on and on until it filled the whole wet world.

And when it seemed the sound would never end, it did.

The hornblower's breath failed at last. He staggered and almost fell. The priest saw Orkwood of Orkmont catch him by one arm to hold him up, whilst Left-Hand Lucas Codd took the twisted black horn from his hands. A thin wisp of smoke was rising from the horn, and the priest saw blood and blisters upon the lips of the man who'd sounded it. The bird on his chest was bleeding too.

Euron Greyjoy climbed the hill slowly, with every eye upon him. Above the gull screamed and screamed again. *No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair*, Aeron thought, but he knew that he must let his brother speak. His lips moved silently in prayer.

Asha's champions stepped aside, and Victarion's as well. The priest took a step backward and put one hand upon the cold rough stone of Nagga's ribs. The Crow's Eye stopped atop the steps, at the doors of the Grey King's Hall, and turned his smiling eye upon the captains and the kings, but Aeron could feel his other eye as well, the one that he kept hidden.

"*IRONMEN*," said Euron Greyjoy, "you have heard my horn. Now hear my words. I am Balon's brother, Quellon's eldest living son. Lord Vickon's blood is in my veins, and the blood of the Old Kraken. Yet I have sailed farther than any of them. Only one living kraken has never known defeat. Only one has never bent his knee. Only one has sailed to Asshai by the Shadow, and seen wonders and terrors beyond imagining..."

"If you liked the Shadow so well, go back there," called out pink-cheeked Qarl the Maid, one of Asha's champions.

The Crow's Eye ignored him. "My little brother would finish Balon's war, and claim the north. My sweet niece would give us peace and pinecones." His blue lips twisted in a smile. "Asha prefers victory to defeat. Victarion wants a kingdom, not a few scant yards of earth. From me, you shall have both.

"Crow's Eye, you call me. Well, who has a keener eye than the crow? After every battle the crows come in their hundreds and their thousands to feast upon the fallen. A crow can espy death from afar. And I say that all of Westeros is dying. Those who follow me will feast until the end of their days.

"We are the ironborn, and once we were conquerors. Our writ ran everywhere the sound of the waves was heard. My brother would have you be content with the cold and dismal north, my niece with even less... but I shall give you Lannisport. Highgarden. The Arbor. Oldtown. The riverlands and the Reach, the kingswood and the rainwood, Dorne and the marches, the Mountains of the Moon and the Vale of Arryn, Tarth and the Stepstones. I say we take it *all*! I say, we take *Westeros*." He glanced at the priest. "All for the greater glory of our Drowned God, to be sure."

For half a heartbeat even Aeron was swept away by the boldness of his words. The priest had dreamed the same dream, when first he'd seen the red comet in the sky. *We shall sweep over the green lands with fire and sword, root out the seven gods of the septons and the white trees of the northmen...*

"Crow's Eye," Asha called, "did you leave your wits at Asshai? If we cannot hold the north—and we cannot—how can we win the whole of the Seven Kingdoms?"

"Why, it has been done before. Did Balon teach his girl so little of the ways of war? Victarion, our brother's daughter has never heard of Aegon the Conqueror, it would seem."

"Aegon?" Victarion crossed his arms against his armored chest. "What has the Conqueror to do with us?"

"I know as much of war as you do, Crow's Eye," Asha said. "Aegon Targaryen conquered Westeros with *dragons*."

“And so shall we,” Euron Greyjoy promised. “That horn you heard I found amongst the smoking ruins that were Valyria, where no man has dared to walk but me. You heard its call, and felt its power. It is a dragon horn, bound with bands of red gold and Valyrian steel graven with enchantments. The dragonlords of old sounded such horns, before the Doom devoured them. With this horn, ironmen, I can bind *dragons* to my will.”

Asha laughed aloud. “A horn to bind goats to your will would be of more use, Crow’s Eye. There are no more dragons.”

“Again, girl, you are wrong. There are three, and I know where to find them. Surely that is worth a driftwood crown.”

“*EURON!*” shouted Left-Hand Lucas Codd.

“*EURON! CROW’S EYE! EURON!*” cried the Red Oarsman.

The mutes and mongrels from the *Silence* threw open Euron’s chests and spilled out his gifts before the captains and the kings. Then it was Hotho Harlaw the priest heard, as he filled his hands with gold. Gorold Goodbrother shouted out as well, and Erik Anvil-Breaker. “*EURON! EURON! EURON!*” The cry swelled, became a roar. “*EURON! EURON! CROW’S EYE! EURON KING!*” It rolled up Nagga’s hill, like the Storm God rattling the clouds. “*EURON! EURON! EURON! EURON! EURON! EURON!*”

Even a priest may doubt. Even a prophet may know terror. Aeron Damphair reached within himself for his god and discovered only silence. As a thousand voices shouted out his brother’s name, all he could hear was the scream of a rusted iron hinge.