

THE IRON SUITOR

Grief appeared alone at daybreak, her black sails stark against the pale pink skies of morning.

Fifty-four, Victarion thought sourly when they woke him, *and she sails alone*. Silently he cursed the Storm God for his malice, his rage a black stone in his belly. *Where are my ships?*

He had set sail from the Shields with ninety-three, of the hundred that had once made up the Iron Fleet, a fleet belonging not to a single lord but to the Seastone Chair itself, captained and crewed by men from all the islands. Ships smaller than the great war dromonds of the green lands, aye, but thrice the size of any common longship, with deep hulls and savage rams, fit to meet the king's own fleets in battle.

In the Stepstones they had taken on grain and game and fresh water, after the long voyage along the bleak and barren coast of Dorne with its shoals and whirlpools. There, the *Iron Victory* had captured a fat merchant ship, the great cog *Noble Lady*, on her way to Oldtown by way of Gulltown, Duskendale, and King's Landing, with a cargo of salt cod, whale oil, and pickled herring. The food was a welcome addition to their stores. Five other prizes taken in the Redwyne Straights and along the Dornish coast—three cogs, a galleas, and a galley—had brought their numbers to ninety-nine.

Nine-and-ninety ships had left the Stepstones in three proud fleets, with orders to join up again off the southern tip of the Isle of Cedars. Forty-five had now arrived on the far side of the world. Twenty-two of Victarion's own had straggled in, by threes and fours, sometimes alone; fourteen of Ralf the Limper's; only nine of those that had sailed with Red Ralf Stonehouse. Red Ralf himself was amongst the missing. To their number the fleet had added nine new prizes taken on the seas, so the sum was fifty-four ... but the captured ships were cogs and fishing boats, merchantmen and slavers, not warships. In battle, they would be poor substitutes for the lost ships of the Iron Fleet.

The last ship to appear had been the *Maiden's Bane*, three days previous. The day before that, three ships had come out of the south together—his captive *Noble Lady*, lumbering along between *Ravenfeeder* and *Iron Kiss*. But the day before and the day before there had been nothing, and only *Headless Jeyne* and *Fear* before that, then two more days of empty seas and cloudless skies after Ralf the Limper appeared with the remnants of his squadron. *Lord Quellon*, *White Widow*, *Lamentation*, *Woe*, *Leviathan*, *Iron Lady*, *Reaper's Wind*, and *Warhammer*, with six more ships behind, two of them storm-wracked and under tow.

“Storms,” Ralf the Limper had muttered when he came crawling to Victarion. “Three big storms, and foul winds between. Red winds out of Valyria that smelled of ash and brimstone, and black winds that drove us toward that blighted shore. This voyage was cursed from the first. The Crow’s Eye fears you, my lord, why else send you so far away? He does not mean for us to return.”

Victarion had thought the same when he met the first storm a day out of Old Volantis. *The gods hate kinslayers*, he brooded, *elsewise Euron Crow’s Eye would have died a dozen deaths by my hand*. As the sea crashed around him and the deck rose and fell beneath his feet, he had seen *Dagon’s Feast* and *Red Tide* slammed together so violently that both exploded into splinters. *My brother’s work*, he’d thought. Those were the first two ships he’d lost from his own third of the fleet. But not the last.

So he had slapped the Limper twice across the face and said, “The first is for the ships you lost, the second for your talk of curses. Speak of that again and I will nail your tongue to the mast. If the Crow’s Eye can make mutes, so can I.” The throb of pain in his left hand made the words harsher than they might have been otherwise, but he meant what he said. “More ships will come. The storms are done for now. I will have my fleet.”

A monkey on the mast above howled derision, almost as if it could taste his frustration. *Filthy, noisy beast*. He could send a man up after it, but the monkeys seemed to like that game and had proved themselves more agile than his crew. The howls rang in his ears, though, and made the throbbing in his hand seem worse.

“Fifty-four,” he grumbled. It would have been too much to hope for the full strength of the Iron Fleet after a voyage of such length ... but seventy ships, even eighty, the Drowned God might have granted him that much. *Would that we had the Damphair with us, or some other priest.* Victarion had made sacrifice before setting sail, and again in the Stepstones when he split the fleet in three, but perhaps he had said the wrong prayers. *That, or the Drowned God has no power here.* More and more, he had come to fear that they had sailed too far, into strange seas where even the gods were queer ... but such doubts he confided only to his dusky woman, who had no tongue to repeat them.

When *Grief* appeared, Victarion summoned Wulfe One-Ear. “I will want words with the Vole. Send word to Ralf the Limper, Bloodless Tom, and the Black Shepherd. All hunting parties are to be recalled, the shore camps broken up by first light. Load as much fruit as can be gathered and drive the pigs aboard the ships. We can slaughter them at need. *Shark* is to remain here to tell any stragglers where we’ve gone.” She would need that long to make repairs; the storms had left her little more than a hulk. That would bring them down to fifty-three, but there was no help for it. “The fleet departs upon the morrow, on the evening tide.”

“As you command,” said Wulfe, “but another day might mean another ship, lord Captain.”

“Aye. And ten days might mean ten ships, or none at all. We have squandered too many days waiting on the sight of sails. Our victory will be that much the sweeter if we win it with a smaller fleet.” *And I must needs reach the dragon queen before the Volantenes.*

In Volantis he had seen the galleys taking on provisions. The whole city had seemed drunk. Sailors and soldiers and tinkers had been observed dancing in the streets with nobles and fat merchants, and in every inn and winesink cups were being raised to the new triarchs. All the talk had been of the gold and gems and slaves that would flood into Volantis once the dragon queen was dead. One day of such reports was all that Victarion Greyjoy could stomach; he paid the gold price for food and water, though it shamed him, and took his ships back out to sea.

The storms would have scattered and delayed the Volantenes, even as they had his own ships. If fortune smiled, many of their warships might have sunk or run aground. But not all. No god was that good, and those green galleys that survived by now could well have sailed around Valyria. *They will be sweeping north toward Meereen and Yunkai, great dromonds of war teeming with slave soldiers. If the Storm God spared them, by now they could be in the Gulf of Grief. Three hundred ships, perhaps as many as five hundred.* Their allies were already off Meereen: Yunkishmen and Astapors, men from New Ghis and Qarth and Tolos and the Storm God knew where else, even Meereen's own warships, the ones that fled the city before its fall. Against all that, Victarion had four-and-fifty. Three-and-fifty, less the *Shark*.

The Crow's Eye had sailed halfway across the world, reaving and plundering from Qarth to Tall Trees Town, calling at unholy ports beyond where only madmen went. Euron had even braved the Smoking Sea and lived to tell of it. *And that with only one ship. If he can mock the gods, so can I.*

"Aye, Captain," said Wulfe One-Ear. He was not half the man that Nute the Barber was, but the Crow's Eye had stolen Nute. By raising him to Lord of Oakenshield, his brother made Victarion's best man his own. "Is it still to be Meereen?"

"Where else? The dragon queen awaits me in Meereen." *The fairest woman in the world if my brother could be believed. Her hair is silver-gold, her eyes are amethysts.*

Was it too much to hope that for once Euron had told it true? *Perhaps.* Like as not, the girl would prove to be some pock-faced slattern with teats slapping against her knees, her "dragons" no more than tattooed lizards from the swamps of Sothoryos. *If she is all that Euron claims, though ...* They had heard talk of the beauty of Daenerys Targaryen from the lips of pirates in the Stepstones and fat merchants in Old Volantis. It might be true. And Euron had not made Victarion a gift of her; the Crow's Eye meant to take her for himself. *He sends me like a serving man to fetch her. How he will howl when I claim her for myself.* Let the men mutter. They had sailed too far and lost too much for Victarion to turn west without his prize.

The iron captain closed his good hand into a fist. “Go see that my commands are carried out. And find the maester wherever he is hiding and send him to my cabin.”

“Aye.” Wulfe hobbled off.

Victarion Greyjoy turned back toward the prow, his gaze sweeping across his fleet. Longships filled the sea, sails furled and oars shipped, floating at anchor or run up on the pale sand shore. *The Isle of Cedars*. Where were these cedars? Drowned four hundred years ago, it seemed. Victarion had gone ashore a dozen times, hunting fresh meat, and had yet to see a cedar.

The girlish maester Euron had inflicted upon him back in Westeros claimed this place had once been called ‘the Isle of a Hundred Battles,’ but the men who had fought those battles had all gone to dust centuries ago. *The Isle of Monkeys, that’s what they should call it*. There were pigs as well: the biggest, blackest boars that any of the ironborn had ever seen and plenty of squealing piglets in the brush, bold creatures that had no fear of man. *They were learning, though*. The larders of the Iron Fleet were filling up with smoked hams, salted pork, and bacon.

The monkeys, though ... the monkeys were a plague. Victarion had forbidden his men to bring any of the demonic creatures aboard ship, yet somehow half his fleet was now infested with them, even his own *Iron Victory*. He could see some now, swinging from spar to spar and ship to ship. *Would that I had a crossbow*.

Victarion did not like this sea, nor these endless cloudless skies, nor the blazing sun that beat down on their heads and baked the decks until the boards were hot enough to scorch bare feet. He did not like these storms, which seemed to come up out of nowhere. The seas around Pyke were often stormy, but there at least a man could smell them coming. These southron storms were as treacherous as women. Even the water was the wrong color—a shimmering turquoise close to shore, and farther out a blue so deep that it was almost black. Victarion missed the grey-green waters of home, with their whitecaps and surges.

He did not like this Isle of Cedars either. The hunting might be good, but the forests were too green and still, full of twisted trees and queer bright flowers like none his men had ever seen before, and there were horrors lurking amongst the broken palaces and shattered statues of drowned Velos, half a league north of the point where the fleet lay at anchor. The last time Victarion had spent a night ashore, his dreams had been dark and disturbing and when he woke his mouth was full of blood. The maester said he had bitten his own tongue in his sleep, but he took it for a sign from the Drowned God, a warning that if he lingered here too long, he would choke on his own blood.

On the day the Doom came to Valyria, it was said, a wall of water three hundred feet high had descended on the island, drowning hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children, leaving none to tell the tale but some fisherfolk who had been at sea and a handful of Velosi spearmen posted in a stout stone tower on the island's highest hill, who had seen the hills and valleys beneath them turn into a raging sea. Fair Velos with its palaces of cedar and pink marble had vanished in a heartbeat. On the north end of the island, the ancient brick walls and stepped pyramids of the slaver port Ghozai had suffered the same fate.

So many drowned men, the Drowned God will be strong there, Victarion had thought when he chose the island for the three parts of his fleet to join up again. He was no priest, though. What if he had gotten it backwards? Perhaps the Drowned God had destroyed the island in his wrath. His brother Aeron might have known, but the Damphair was back on the Iron Islands, preaching against the Crow's Eye and his rule. *No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair*. Yet the captains and kings had cried for Euron at the kingsmoot, choosing him above Victarion and other godly men.

The morning sun was shining off the water in ripples of light too bright to look upon. Victarion's head had begun to pound, though whether from the sun, his hand, or the doubts that troubled him, he could not say. He made his way below to his cabin, where the air was cool and dim. The dusky woman knew what he wanted without his even asking. As he eased himself into his chair, she took a soft damp cloth from the basin and laid it across his brow. "Good," he said. "Good. And now the hand."

The dusky woman made no reply. Euron had sliced her tongue out before giving her to him. Victarion did not doubt that the Crow's Eye had bedded her as well. That was his brother's way. *Euron's gifts are poisoned*, the captain had reminded himself the day the dusky woman came aboard. *I want none of his leavings*. He had decided then that he would slit her throat and toss her in the sea, a blood sacrifice to the Drowned God. Somehow, though, he had never quite gotten around to it.

They had come a long way since. Victarion could talk to the dusky woman. She never attempted to talk back. "*Grief* is the last," he told her, as she eased his glove off. "The rest are lost or late or sunk." He grimaced as the woman slid the point of her knife beneath the soiled linen wound about his shield hand. "Some will say I should not have split the fleet. Fools. Nine-and-ninety ships we had ... a cumbersome beast to shepherd across the seas to the far end of the world. If I'd kept them together, the faster ships would have been held hostage to the slowest. And where to find provisions for so many mouths? No port wants so many warships in their waters. The storms would have scattered us, in any case. Like leaves strewn across the Summer Sea."

Instead he had broken the great fleet into squadrons, and sent each by a different route to Slaver's Bay. The swiftest ships he gave to Red Ralf Stonehouse to sail the corsair's road along the northern coast of Sothoryos. The dead cities rotting on that fervid, sweltering shore were best avoided, every seamen knew, but in the mud-and-blood towns of the Basilisks Isles, teeming with escaped slaves, slavers, skimmers, whores, hunters, brindled men, and worse, there were always provisions to be had for men who were not afraid to pay the iron price.

The larger, heavier, slower ships made for Lys, to sell the captives taken on the Shields, the women and children of Lord Hewett's Town and other islands, along with such men who decided they would sooner yield than die. Victarion had only contempt for such weaklings. Even so, the selling left a foul taste in his mouth. Taking a man as thrall or a woman as a salt wife, that was right and proper, but men were not goats or fowl to be bought and sold for gold. He was glad to leave the selling to Ralf the Limper, who

would use the coin to load his big ships with provisions for the long slow middle passage east.

His own ships crept along the shores of the Disputed Lands to take on food and wine and fresh water at Volantis before swinging south around Valyria. That was the most common way east, and the one most heavily trafficked, with prizes for the taking and small islands where they could shelter during storms, make repairs, and renew their stores if need be.

“Four-and-fifty ships is too few,” he told the dusky woman, “but I can wait no longer. The only way”—He grunted as she peeled the bandage off, tearing a crust of scab as well. The flesh beneath was green and black where the sword had sliced him.—”the only way to do this is to take the slavers unawares, as once I did at Lannisport. Sweep in from the sea and smash them, then take the girl and race for home before the Volantenes descend upon us.” Victarion was no craven, but no more was he a fool; he could not defeat three hundred ships with fifty-four. “She’ll be my wife, and you will be her maid.” A maid without a tongue could never let slip any secrets.

He might have said more, but that was when the maester came, rapping at the cabin door as timid as a mouse. “Enter,” Victarion called out, “and bar the door. You know why you are here.”

“Lord Captain.” The maester looked like a mouse as well, with his grey robes and little brown mustachio. *Does he think that makes him look more manly?* Kerwin was his name. He was very young, two-and-twenty maybe. “May I see your hand?” he asked.

A fool’s question. Maesters had their uses, but Victarion had nothing but contempt for this Kerwin. With his smooth pink cheeks, soft hands, and brown curls, he looked more girlish than most girls. When first he came aboard the *Iron Victory*, he had a smirky little smile too, but one night off the Stepstones he had smiled at the wrong man, and Burton Humble had knocked out four of his teeth. Not long after that Kerwin had come creeping to the captain to complain that four of the crew had dragged him belowdecks and used him as a woman. “Here is how you put an end to that,” Victarion had told him, slamming a dagger down on the table

between them. Kerwin took the blade—too afraid to refuse it, the captain judged—but he had never used it.

“My hand is here,” Victarion said. “Look all you like.”

Maester Kerwin went down to one knee, the better to inspect the wound. He even sniffed at it, like a dog. “I will need to let the pus again. The color ... lord Captain, the cut is not healing. It may be that I will need to take your hand.”

They had talked of this before. “If you take my hand, I will kill you. But first I will tie you over the rail and make the crew a gift of your arse. Get on with it.”

“There will be pain.”

“Always.” *Life is pain, you fool. There is no joy but in the Drowned God’s watery halls.* “Do it.”

The boy—it was hard to think of one so soft and pink as a man—laid the edge of the dagger across the captain’s palm and slashed. The pus that burst forth was thick and yellow as sour milk. The dusky woman wrinkled her nose at the smell, the maester gagged, and even Victarion himself felt his stomach churn. “Cut deeper. Get it all. Show me the blood.”

Maester Kerwin pressed the dagger deep. This time it hurt, but blood welled up as well as pus, blood so dark that it looked black in the lantern light.

Blood was good. Victarion grunted in approval. He sat there unflinching as the maester dabbed and squeezed and cleaned the pus away with squares of soft cloth boiled in vinegar. By the time he finished, the clean water in his basin had become a scummy soup. The sight alone would sicken any man. “Take that filth and go.” Victarion nodded at the dusky woman. “She can bind me up.”

Even after the boy had fled, the stink remained. Of late, there was no escaping it. The maester had suggested that the wound might best be drained up on deck, amidst fresh air and sunlight, but Victarion forbade it.

This was not something that his crew could see. They were half a world away from home, too far to let them see that their iron captain had begun to rust.

His left hand still throbbed—a dull pain, but persistent. When he closed his hand into a fist it sharpened, as if a knife were stabbing up his arm. *Not a knife, a longsword. A longsword in the hand of a ghost.* Serry, that had been his name. A knight, and heir to Southshield. *I killed him, but he stabs at me from beyond the grave. From the hot heart of whatever hell I sent him to, he thrusts his steel into my hand and twists.*

Victarion remembered the fight as if it had been yesterday. His shield had been in shards, hanging useless from his arm, so when Serry's longsword came flashing down he had reached up and caught it. The stripling had been stronger than he looked; his blade bit through the lobstered steel of the captain's gauntlet and the padded glove beneath into the meat of his palm. *A scratch from a little kitten,* Victarion told himself afterward. He had washed the cut, poured some boiled vinegar over it, bound it up, and thought little more of it, trusting that the pain would fade and the hand heal itself in time.

Instead the wound had festered, until Victarion began to wonder whether Serry's blade had been poisoned. Why else would the cut refuse to heal? The thought made him rage. No true man killed with poison. At Moat Cailin the bog devils had loosed poisoned arrows at his men, but that was to be expected from such degraded creatures. Serry had been a knight, highborn. Poison was for cravens, women, and Dornishmen.

"If not Serry, who?" he asked the dusky woman. "Could that mouse of a maester be doing this? Maesters know spells and other tricks. He might be using one to poison me, hoping I will let him cut my hand off." The more he thought on it, the more likely it seemed. "The Crow's Eye gave him to me, wretched creature that he is." Euron had taken Kerwin off Greenshield, where he had been in service to Lord Chester, tending his ravens and teaching his children, or perhaps the other way around. And how the mouse had squealed when one of Euron's mutes delivered him aboard the *Iron Victory*, dragging him along by the convenient chain about his neck. "If this is his revenge, he wrongs me. It was Euron who insisted he be taken, to keep him from making mischief with his birds." His brother had given him

three cages of ravens too, so Kerwin could send back word of their voyaging, but Victarion had forbidden him to loose them. *Let the Crow's Eye stew and wonder.*

The dusky woman was binding his hand with fresh linen, wrapping it six times around his palm, when Longwater Pyke came pounding at the cabin door to tell him that the captain of *Grief* had come aboard with a prisoner. "Says he's brought us a wizard, Captain. Says he fished him from the sea."

"A wizard?" Could the Drowned God have sent a gift to him, here on the far side of the world? His brother Aeron would have known, but Aeron had seen the majesty of the Drowned God's watery halls below the sea before being returned to life. Victarion had a healthy fear of his god, as all men should, but put his faith in steel. He flexed his wounded hand, grimacing, then pulled his glove on and rose. "Show me this wizard."

Grief's master awaited them on deck. A small man, as hairy as he was homely, he was a Sparr by birth. His men called him the Vole. "Lord Captain," he said when Victarion appeared, "this is Moqorro. A gift to us from the Drowned God."

The wizard was a monster of a man, as tall as Victarion himself and twice as wide, with a belly like a boulder and a tangle of bone-white hair that grew about his face like a lion's mane. His skin was black. Not the nut brown of the Summer Islanders on their swan ships, nor the red-brown of the Dothraki horselords, nor the charcoal-and-earth color of the dusky woman's skin, but *black*. Blacker than coal, blacker than jet, blacker than a raven's wing. *Burned*, Victarion thought, *like a man who has been roasted in the flames until his flesh chars and crisps and falls smoking from his bones*. The fires that had charred him still danced across his cheeks and forehead, where his eyes peered out from amongst a mask of frozen flames. *Slave tattoos*, the captain knew. *Marks of evil*.

"We found him clinging to a broken spar," said the Vole. "He was ten days in the water after his ship went down."

"If he were ten days in the water, he'd be dead, or mad from drinking seawater." Salt water was holy; Aeron Damphair and other priests might

bless men with it and swallow a mouthful or two from time to time to strengthen their faith, but no mortal man could drink of the deep sea for days at a time and hope to live. “You claim to be a sorcerer?” Victarion asked the prisoner.

“No, Captain,” the black man answered in the Common Tongue. His voice was so deep it seemed to come from the bottom of the sea. “I am but a humble slave of R’hllor, the Lord of Light.”

R’hllor. A red priest, then. Victarion had seen such men in foreign cities, tending their sacred fires. Those had worn rich red robes of silk and velvet and lambswool. This one was dressed in faded, salt-stained rags that clung to his thick legs and hung about his torso in tatters ... but when the captain peered at the rags more closely, it did appear as if they might once have been red. “A pink priest,” Victarion announced.

“A demon priest,” said Wulfe One-Ear. He spat. “Might be his robes caught fire, so he jumped overboard to put them out,” suggested Longwater Pyke, to general laughter. Even the monkeys were amused. They chattered overhead, and one flung down a handful of his own shit to spatter on the boards.

Victarion Greyjoy mistrusted laughter. The sound of it always left him with the uneasy feeling that he was the butt of some jape he did not understand. Euron Crow’s Eye had oft made mock of him when they were boys. So had Aeron, before he had become the Damphair. Their mockery oft came disguised as praise, and sometimes Victarion had not even realized he was being mocked. Not until he heard the laughter. Then came the anger, boiling up in the back of his throat until he was like to choke upon the taste. That was how he felt about the monkeys. Their antics never brought so much as a smile to the captain’s face, though his crew would roar and hoot and whistle.

“Send him down to the Drowned God before he brings a curse upon us,” urged Burton Humble.

“A ship gone down, and only him clinging to the wreckage,” said Wulfe One-Ear. “Where’s the crew? Did he call down demons to devour them?”

What happened to this ship?"

"A storm." Moqorro crossed his arms against his chest. He did not appear frightened, though all around him men were calling for his death. Even the monkeys did not seem to like this wizard. They leapt from line to line overhead, screaming.

Victarion was uncertain. *He came out of the sea. Why would the Drowned God cast him up unless he meant for us to find him?* His brother Euron had his pet wizards. Perhaps the Drowned God meant for Victarion to have one too. "Why do you say this man is a wizard?" he asked the Vole. "I see only a ragged red priest."

"I thought the same, lord Captain ... but he *knows* things. He knew that we made for Slaver's Bay before any man could tell him, and he knew you would be here, off this island." The small man hesitated. "Lord Captain, he told me ... he told me you would surely die unless we brought him to you."

"That *I* would die?" Victarion snorted. *Cut his throat and throw him in the sea*, he was about to say, until a throb of pain in his bad hand went stabbing up his arm almost to the elbow, the agony so intense that his words turned to bile in his throat. He stumbled and seized the rail to keep from falling.

"The sorcerer's cursed the captain," a voice said.

Other men took up the cry. "*Cut his throat! Kill him before he calls his demons down on us!*" Longwater Pyke was the first to draw his dirk. "*NO!*" Victarion bellowed. "Stand back! All of you. Pyke, put up your steel. Vole, back to your ship. Humble, take the wizard to my cabin. The rest of you, about your duties." For half a heartbeat he was not certain they would obey. They stood about muttering, half with blades to hand, each looking to the others for resolve. Monkey shit rained down around them all, *splat splat splat*. No one moved until Victarion seized the sorcerer by the arm and pulled him to the hatchway.

As he opened the door to the captain's cabin, the dusky woman turned toward him, silent and smiling ... but when she saw the red priest at his side her lips drew back from her teeth, and she *hisssssed* in sudden fury, like a

snake. Victarion gave her the back of his good hand and knocked her to the deck. “Be quiet, woman. Wine for both of us.” He turned to the black man. “Did the Vole speak true? You saw my death?”

“That, and more.”

“Where? When? Will I die in battle?” His good hand opened and closed. “If you lie to me, I will split your head open like a melon and let the monkeys eat your brains.”

“Your death is with us now, my lord. Give me your hand.”

“My hand. What do you know of my hand?”

“I have seen you in the nightfires, Victarion Greyjoy. You come striding through the flames stern and fierce, your great axe dripping blood, blind to the tentacles that grasp you at wrist and neck and ankle, the black strings that make you dance.”

“*Dance?*” Victarion bristled. “Your nightfires lie. I was not made for dancing, and I am no man’s puppet.” He yanked off his glove and shoved his bad hand at the priest’s face. “Here. Is this what you wanted?” The new linen was already discolored by blood and pus. “He had a rose on his shield, the man who gave this to me. I scratched my hand on a thorn.”

“Even the smallest scratch can prove mortal, lord Captain, but if you will allow me, I will heal this. I will need a blade. Silver would be best, but iron will serve. A brazier as well. I must needs light a fire. There will be pain. Terrible pain, such as you have never known. But when we are done, your hand will be returned to you.”

They are all the same, these magic men. The mouse warned me of pain as well. “I am ironborn, priest. I laugh at pain. You will have what you require ... but if you fail, and my hand is not healed, I will cut your throat myself and give you to the sea.”

Moqorro bowed, his dark eyes shining. “So be it.”

The iron captain was not seen again that day, but as the hours passed the crew of his *Iron Victory* reported hearing the sound of wild laughter coming from the captain's cabin, laughter deep and dark and mad, and when Longwater Pyke and Wulfe One-Eye tried the cabin door they found it barred. Later singing was heard, a strange high wailing song in a tongue the maester said was High Valyrian. That was when the monkeys left the ship, screeching as they leapt into the water.

Come sunset, as the sea turned black as ink and the swollen sun tinted the sky a deep and bloody red, Victarion came back on deck. He was naked from the waist up, his left arm blood to the elbow. As his crew gathered, whispering and trading glances, he raised a charred and blackened hand. Wisps of dark smoke rose from his fingers as he pointed at the maester. "That one. Cut his throat and throw him in the sea, and the winds will favor us all the way to Meereen." Moqorro had seen that in his fires. He had seen the wench wed too, but what of it? She would not be the first woman Victarion Greyjoy had made a widow.