

VICTARION

The sea was black and the moon was silver as the Iron Fleet swept down on the prey.

They sighted her in the narrows between the Isle of Cedars and the rugged hills of the Astapori hinterlands, just as the black priest Moqorro had said they would. “Ghiscari,” Longwater Pyke shouted down from the crow’s nest. Victarion Greyjoy watched her sail grow larger from the forecastle. Soon he could make out her oars rising and falling, and the long white wake behind her shining in the moonlight, like a scar across the sea.

Not a true warship, Victarion realized. *A trading galley, and a big one*. She would make a fine prize. He signaled to his captains to give chase. They would board this ship and take her.

The captain of the galley had realized his peril by then. He changed course for the west, making for the Isle of Cedars, perhaps hoping to shelter in some hidden cove or run his pursuers onto the jagged rocks along the island’s northeast coast. His galley was heavy laden, though, and the ironborn had the wind. *Grief* and *Iron Victory* cut across the quarry’s course, whilst swift *Sparrowhawk* and agile *Fingerdancer* swept behind her. Even then the Ghiscari captain did not strike his banners. By the time *Lamentation* came alongside the prey, raking her larboard side and splintering her oars, both ships were so close to the haunted ruins of Ghozai that they could hear the monkeys chattering as the first dawn light washed over the city’s broken pyramids.

Their prize was named *Ghiscari Dawn*, the galley’s captain said when he was delivered to Victarion in chains. She was out of New Ghis and returning there by way of Yunkai after trading at Meereen. The man spoke no decent tongue but only a guttural Ghiscari, full of growls and hisses, as ugly a language as Victarion Greyjoy had ever heard. Moqorro translated the captain’s words into the Common Tongue of Westeros. The war for Meereen was won, the captain claimed; the dragon queen was dead, and a Ghiscari by the name of Hizdak ruled the city now.

Victarion had his tongue torn out for lying. Daenerys Targaryen was *not* dead, Moqorro assured him; his red god R'hllor had shown him the queen's face in his sacred fires. The captain could not abide lies, so he had the Ghiscari captain bound hand and foot and thrown overboard, a sacrifice to the Drowned God. "Your red god will have his due," he promised Moqorro, "but the seas are ruled by the Drowned God."

"There are no gods but R'hllor and the Other, whose name may not be said." The sorcerer priest was garbed in somber black, but for a hint of golden thread at collar, cuffs, and hem. There was no red cloth aboard the *Iron Victory*, but it was not meet that Moqorro go about in the salt-stained rags he had been wearing when the Vole fished him from the sea, so Victarion had commanded Tom Tidewood to sew new robes for him from whatever was at hand, and had even donated some of his own tunics to the purpose. Of black and gold those were, for the arms of House Greyjoy showed a golden kraken on a black field, and the banners and sails of their ships displayed the same. The crimson-and-scarlet robes of the red priests were alien to the ironborn, but Victarion had hoped his men might accept Moqorro more easily once clad in Greyjoy colors.

He hoped in vain. Clad in black from head to heel, with a mask of red-and-orange flames tattooed across his face, the priest appeared more sinister than ever. The crew shunned him when he walked the deck, and men would spit if his shadow chanced to fall upon them. Even the Vole, who had fished the red priest from the sea, had urged Victarion to give him to the Drowned God.

But Moqorro knew these strange shores in ways the ironborn did not, and secrets of the dragonkind as well. *The Crow's Eye keeps wizards, why shouldn't I?* His black sorcerer was more puissant than all of Euron's three, even if you threw them in a pot and boiled them down to one. The Damphair might disapprove, but Aeron and his pieties were far away.

So Victarion closed his burned hand into a mighty fist, and said, "*Ghiscari Dawn* is no fit name for a ship of the Iron Fleet. For you, wizard, I shall rename her *Red God's Wrath*."

His wizard bowed his head. “As the captain says.” And the ships of the Iron Fleet numbered four-and-fifty once again.

The next day a sudden squall descended on them. Moqorro had predicted that as well. When the rains moved on, three ships were found to have vanished. Victarion had no way to know whether they had foundered, run aground, or been blown off course. “They know where we are going,” he told his crew. “If they are still afloat, we will meet again.” The iron captain had no time to wait for laggards. Not with his bride encircled by her enemies. *The most beautiful woman in the world has urgent need of my axe.*

Besides, Moqorro assured him that the three ships were not lost. Each night, the sorcerer priest would kindle a fire on the forecastle of the *Iron Victory* and stalk around the flames, chanting prayers. The firelight made his black skin shine like polished onyx, and sometimes Victarion could swear that the flames tattooed on his face were dancing too, twisting and bending, melting into one another, their colors changing with every turn of the priest’s head.

“The black priest is calling demons down on us,” one oarsman was heard to say. When that was reported to Victarion, he had the man scourged until his back was blood from shoulders to buttocks. So when Moqorro said, “Your lost lambs will return to the flock off the isle called Yaros,” the captain said, “Pray that they do, priest. Or you may be the next to taste the whip.”

The sea was blue and green and the sun blazing down from an empty blue sky when the Iron Fleet took its second prize, in the waters north and west of Astapor.

This time it was a Myrish cog named *Dove*, on her way to Yunkai by way of New Ghis with a cargo of carpets, sweet green wines, and Myrish lace. Her captain owned a Myrish eye that made far-off things look close—two glass lenses in a series of brass tubes, cunningly wrought so that each section slid into the next, until the eye was no longer than a dirk. Victarion claimed that treasure for himself. The cog he renamed *Shrike*. Her crew would be kept for ransom, the captain decreed. They were neither slaves nor slavers, but free Myrmen and seasoned sailors. Such men were worth good coin. Sailing out of Myr, the *Dove* brought them no fresh news of Meereen or Daenerys,

only stale reports of Dothraki horsemen along the Rhoyme, the Golden Company upon the march, and others things Victarion already knew.

“What do you see?” the captain asked his black priest that night, as Moqorro stood before his nightfire. “What awaits us on the morrow? More rain?” It smelled like rain to him.

“Grey skies and strong winds,” Moqorro said. “No rain. Behind come the tigers. Ahead awaits your dragon.”

Your dragon. Victarion liked the sound of that. “Tell me something that I do not know, priest.”

“The captain commands, and I obey,” said Moqorro. The crew had taken to calling him the Black Flame, a name fastened on him by Steffar Stammerer, who could not say “Moqorro.” By any name, the priest had powers. “The coastline here runs west to east,” he told Victarion. “Where it turns north, you will come on two more hares. Swift ones, with many legs.”

And so it came to pass. This time the prey proved to be a pair of galleys, long and sleek and fast. Ralf the Limper was the first to sight them, but they soon outdistanced *Woe* and *Forlorn Hope*, so Victarion sent *Iron Wing*, *Sparrowhawk*, and *Kraken’s Kiss* to run them down. He had no swifter ships than those three. The pursuit lasted the best part of the day, but in the end both galleys were boarded and taken, after brief but brutal fights. They had been running empty, Victarion learned, making for New Ghis to load supplies and weapons for the Ghiscari legions encamped before Meereen ... and to bring fresh legionaries to the war, to replace all the men who’d died. “Men slain in battle?” asked Victarion. The crews of the galleys denied it; the deaths were from a bloody flux. The pale mare, they called it. And like the captain of the *Ghiscari Dawn*, the captains of the galleys repeated the lie that Daenerys Targaryen was dead.

“Give her a kiss for me in whatever hell you find her,” Victarion said. He called for his axe and took their heads off there and then. Afterward he put their crews to death as well, saving only the slaves chained to the oars. He broke their chains himself and told them they were now free men and would have the privilege of rowing for the Iron Fleet, an honor that every boy in

the Iron Islands dreamed of growing up. “The dragon queen frees slaves and so do I,” he proclaimed.

The galleys he renamed *Ghost* and *Shade*. “For I mean them to return and haunt these Yunkishmen,” he told the dusky woman that night after he had taken his pleasure of her. They were close now, and growing closer every day. “We will fall upon them like a thunderbolt,” he said, as he squeezed the woman’s breast. He wondered if this was how his brother Aeron felt when the Drowned God spoke to him. He could almost hear the god’s voice welling up from the depths of the sea. *You shall serve me well, my captain*, the waves seemed to say. *It was for this I made you*.

But he would feed the red god too, Moqorro’s fire god. The arm the priest had healed was hideous to look upon, pork crackling from elbow to fingertips. Sometimes when Victarion closed his hand the skin would split and smoke, yet the arm was stronger than it had ever been. “Two gods are with me now,” he told the dusky woman. “No foe can stand before two gods.” Then he rolled her on her back and took her once again.

When the cliffs of Yaros appeared off their larboard bows, he found his three lost ships waiting for him, just as Moqorro had promised. Victarion gave the priest a golden torque as a reward.

Now he had a choice to make: should he risk the straits, or take the Iron Fleet around the island? The memory of Fair Isle still rankled in the iron captain’s memory. Stannis Baratheon had descended on the Iron Fleet from both north and south whilst they were trapped in the channel between the island and the mainland, dealing Victarion his most crushing defeat. But sailing around Yaros would cost him precious days. With Yunkai so near, shipping in the straits was like to be heavy, but he did not expect to encounter Yunkish warships until they were closer to Meereen.

What would the Crow’s Eye do? He brooded on that for a time, then signaled to his captains. “We sail the straits.”

Three more prizes were taken before Yaros dwindled off their sterns. A fat galleas fell to the Vole and *Grief*, and a trading galley to Manfryd Merlyn of *Kite*. Their holds were packed with trade goods, wines and silks and spices,

rare woods and rarer scents, but the ships themselves were the true prize. Later that same day, a fishing ketch was taken by *Seven Skulls* and *Thrall's Bane*. She was a small, slow, dingy thing, hardly worth the effort of boarding. Victarion was displeased to hear that it had taken two of his own ships to bring the fishermen to heel. Yet it was from their lips that he heard of the black dragon's return. "The silver queen is gone," the ketch's master told him. "She flew away upon her dragon, beyond the Dothraki sea."

"Where is this Dothraki sea?" he demanded. "I will sail the Iron Fleet across it and find the queen wherever she may be."

The fisherman laughed aloud. "That would be a sight worth seeing. The Dothraki sea is made of grass, fool."

He should not have said that. Victarion took him around the throat with his burned hand and lifted him bodily into the air. Slamming him back against the mast, he squeezed till the Yunkishman's face turned as black as the fingers digging into his flesh. The man kicked and writhed for a while, trying fruitlessly to pry loose the captain's grip. "No man calls Victarion Greyjoy a fool and lives to boast of it." When he opened his hand, the man's limp body flopped to the deck. Longwater Pyke and Tom Tidewood chucked it over the rail, another offering to the Drowned God.

"Your Drowned God is a demon," the black priest Moqorro said afterward. "He is no more than a thrall of the Other, the dark god whose name must not be spoken."

"Take care, priest," Victarion warned him. "There are godly men aboard this ship who would tear out your tongue for speaking such blasphemies. Your red god will have his due, I swear it. My word is iron. Ask any of my men."

The black priest bowed his head. "There is no need. The Lord of Light has shown me your worth, lord Captain. Every night in my fires I glimpse the glory that awaits you."

Those words pleased Victarion Greyjoy mightily, as he told the dusky woman that night. "My brother Balon was a great man," he said, "but I shall

do what he could not. The Iron Islands shall be free again, and the Old Way will return. Even Dagon could not do that.” Almost a hundred years had passed since Dagon Greyjoy sat the Seastone Chair, but the ironborn still told tales of his raids and battles. In Dagon’s day a weak king sat the Iron Throne, his rheumy eyes fixed across the narrow sea where bastards and exiles plotted rebellion. So forth from Pyke Lord Dagon sailed, to make the Sunset Sea his own. “He bearded the lion in his den and tied the direwolf’s tail in knots, but even Dagon could not defeat the dragons. But I shall make the dragon queen mine own. She will share my bed and bear me many mighty sons.”

That night the ships of the Iron Fleet numbered sixty.

Strange sails grew more common north of Yaros. They were very near to Yunkai, and the coast between the Yellow City and Meereen would be teeming with merchantmen and supply ships coming and going, so Victarion took the Iron Fleet out into the deeper waters, beyond the sight of land. Even there they would encounter other vessels. “Let none escape to give warning to our foes,” the iron captain commanded. None did.

The sea was green and the sky was grey the morning *Grief* and *Warrior Wench* and Victarion’s own *Iron Victory* captured the slaver galley from Yunkai in the waters due north of the Yellow City. In her holds were twenty perfumed boys and four score girls destined for the pleasure houses of Lys. Her crew never thought to find peril so close to their home waters, and the ironborn had little trouble taking her. She was named the *Willing Maiden*.

Victarion put the slavers to the sword, then sent his men below to un-chain the rowers. “You row for me now. Row hard, and you shall prosper.” The girls he divided amongst his captains. “The Lyseni would have made whores of you,” he told them, “but we have saved you. Now you need only serve one man instead of many. Those who please their captains may be taken as salt wives, an honorable station.” The perfumed boys he wrapped in chains and threw into the sea. They were unnatural creatures, and the ship smelled better once cleansed of their presence.

For himself, Victarion claimed the seven choicest girls. One had red-gold hair and freckles on her teats. One shaved herself all over. One was brown-

haired and brown-eyed, shy as a mouse. One had the biggest breasts he had ever seen. The fifth was a little thing, with straight black hair and golden skin. Her eyes were the color of amber. The sixth was white as milk, with golden rings through her nipples and her nether lips, the seventh black as a squid's ink. The slavers of Yunkai had trained them in the way of the seven sighs, but that was not why Victarion wanted them. His dusky woman was enough to satisfy his appetites until he could reach Meereen and claim his queen. No man had need of candles when the sun awaited him.

The galley he renamed the *Slaver's Scream*. With her, the ships of the Iron Fleet numbered one-and-sixty. "Every ship we capture makes us stronger," Victarion told his ironborn, "but from here it will grow harder. On the morrow or the day after, we are like to meet with warships. We are entering the home waters of Meereen, where the fleets of our foes await us. We will meet with ships from all three Slaver Cities, ships from Tolos and Elyria and New Ghis, even ships from Qarth." He took care not to mention the green galleys of Old Volantis that surely must be sailing up through the Gulf of Grief even as he spoke. "These slavers are feeble things. You have seen how they run before us, heard how they squeal when we put them to the sword. Every man of you is worth twenty of them, for only we are made of iron. Remember this when first we next spy some slaver's sails. Give no quarter and expect none. What need have we of quarter? We are the ironborn, and two gods look over us. We will seize their ships, smash their hopes, and turn their bay to blood."

A great cry went up at his words. The captain answered with a nod, grim-faced, then called for the seven girls he had claimed to be brought on deck, the loveliest of all those found aboard the *Willing Maiden*. He kissed them each upon the cheeks and told them of the honor that awaited them, though they did not understand his words. Then he had them put aboard the fishing ketch that they had captured, cut her loose, and had her set afire.

"With this gift of innocence and beauty, we honor both the gods," he proclaimed, as the warships of the Iron Fleet rowed past the burning ketch. "Let these girls be reborn in light, undefiled by mortal lust, or let them descend to the Drowned God's watery halls, to feast and dance and laugh until the seas dry up."

Near the end, before the smoking ketch was swallowed by the sea, the cries of the seven sweetlings changed to joyous song, it seemed to Victarion Greyjoy. A great wind came up then, a wind that filled their sails and swept them north and east and north again, toward Meereen and its pyramids of many-colored bricks. *On wings of song I fly to you, Daenerys*, the iron captain thought.

That night, for the first time, he brought forth the dragon horn that the Crow's Eye had found amongst the smoking wastes of great Valyria. A twisted thing it was, six feet long from end to end, gleaming black and banded with red gold and dark Valyrian steel. *Euron's hellhorn*. Victarion ran his hand along it. The horn was as warm and smooth as the dusky woman's thighs, and so shiny that he could see a twisted likeness of his own features in its depths. Strange sorcerous writings had been cut into the bands that girded it. "Valyrian glyphs," Moqorro called them.

That much Victarion had known. "What do they say?"

"Much and more." The black priest pointed to one golden band. "Here the horn is named. '*I am Dragonbinder*,' it says. Have you ever heard it sound?"

"Once." One of his brother's mongrels had sounded the hellhorn at the kingsmoot on Old Wyk. A monster of a man he had been, huge and shaven-headed, with rings of gold and jet and jade around arms thick with muscle, and a great hawk tattooed across his chest. "The sound it made ... it burned, somehow. As if my bones were on fire, searing my flesh from within. Those writings glowed red-hot, then white-hot and painful to look upon. It seemed as if the sound would never end. It was like some long scream. A thousand screams, all melted into one."

"And the man who blew the horn, what of him?"

"He died. There were blisters on his lips, after. His bird was bleeding too." The captain thumped his chest. "The hawk, just here. Every feather dripping blood. I heard the man was all burned up inside, but that might just have been some tale."

“A true tale.” Moqorro turned the hellhorn, examining the queer letters that crawled across a second of the golden bands. “Here it says, ‘*No mortal man shall sound me and live.*’ ”

Bitterly Victarion brooded on the treachery of brothers. *Euron’s gifts are always poisoned.* “The Crow’s Eye swore this horn would bind dragons to my will. But how will that serve me if the price is death?”

“Your brother did not sound the horn himself. Nor must you.” Moqorro pointed to the band of steel. “Here. ‘*Blood for fire, fire for blood.*’ Who blows the hellhorn matters not. The dragons will come to the horn’s master. You must *claim* the horn. With blood.”