

THE REAVER

The drums were pounding out a battle beat as the *Iron Victory* swept forward, her ram cutting through the choppy green waters. The smaller ship ahead was turning, oars slapping at the sea. Roses streamed upon her banners; fore and aft a white rose upon a red escutcheon, atop her mast a golden one on a field as green as grass. The *Iron Victory* raked her side so hard that half the boarding party lost their feet. Oars snapped and splintered, sweet music to the captain's ears.

He vaulted over the gunwale, landing on the deck below with his golden cloak billowing behind him. The white roses drew back, as men always did at the sight of Victarion Greyjoy armed and armored, his face hidden behind his kraken helm. They were clutching swords and spears and axes, but nine of every ten wore no armor, and the tenth had only a shirt of sewn scales. *These are no ironmen*, Victarion thought. *They still fear drowning.*

"Get him!" one man shouted. "He's alone!"

"COME!" he roared back. "Come kill me, if you can."

From all sides the rosey warriors converged, with grey steel in their hands and terror behind their eyes. Their fear was so ripe Victarion could taste it. Left and right he laid about, hewing off the first man's arm at the elbow, cleaving through the shoulder of the second. The third buried his own axehead in the soft pine of Victarion's shield. He slammed it into the fool's face, knocked him off his feet, and slew him when he tried to rise again. As he was struggling to free his axe from the dead man's rib cage, a spear jabbed him between the shoulder blades. It felt as though someone had slapped him on the back. Victarion spun and slammed his axe down onto the spearman's head, feeling the impact in his arm as the steel went crunching through helm and hair and skull. The man swayed for half a heartbeat, till the iron captain wrenched the steel free and sent his corpse staggering loose-limbed across the deck, looking more drunk than dead.

By then his ironborn had followed him down onto the deck of the broken longship. He heard Wulfe One-Ear let out a howl as he went to work, glimpsed Ragnor Pyke in his rusted mail, saw Nute the Barber send a throwing axe spinning through the air to catch a man in the chest. Victarion slew another man, and another. He would have killed a third, but Ragnor cut him down first. “Well struck,” Victarion bellowed at him.

When he turned to find the next victim for his axe, he spied the other captain across the deck. His white surcoat was spotted with blood and gore, but Victarion could make out the arms upon his breast, the white rose within its red escutcheon. The man bore the same device upon his shield, on a white field with a red embattled border. “*You!*” the iron captain called across the carnage. “*You of the rose! Be you the lord of Southshield?*”

The other raised his visor to show a beardless face. “His son and heir. Ser Talbert Serry. And who are you, kraken?”

“Your death.” Victarion bulled toward him.

Serry leapt to meet him. His longsword was good castle-forged steel, and the young knight made it sing. His first cut was low, and Victarion deflected it off his axe. His second caught the iron captain on the helm before he got his shield up. Victarion answered with a sidearm blow of his axe. Serry’s shield got in the way. Wooden splinters flew, and the white rose split lengthwise with a sweet sharp *crack*. The young knight’s longsword hammered at his thigh, once, twice, thrice, screaming against the steel. *This boy is quick*, the iron captain realized. He smashed his shield in Serry’s face and sent him staggering back against the gunwale. Victarion raised his axe and put all his weight behind his cut, to open the boy from neck to groin, but Serry spun away. The axehead crashed through the rail, sending splinters flying, and lodged there when he tried to pull it free. The deck moved under his feet, and he stumbled to one knee.

Ser Talbert cast away his broken shield and slashed down with his longsword. Victarion’s own shield had twisted half around when he stumbled. He caught Serry’s blade in an iron fist. Lobstered steel crunched, and a stab of pain made him grunt, yet Victarion held on. “I am quick as

well, boy,” he said as he ripped the sword from the knight’s hand and flung it into the sea.

Ser Talbert’s eyes went wide. “My sword...”

Victarion caught the lad about the throat with a bloody fist. “Go and get it,” he said, forcing him backwards over the side into the bloodstained waters.

That won him a respite to pull his axe loose. The white roses were falling back before the iron tide. Some tried to flee belowdecks, as others cried for quarter. Victarion could feel warm blood trickling down his fingers beneath the mail and leather and lobstered plate, but that was nothing. Around the mast a thick knot of foemen fought on, standing shoulder to shoulder in a ring. *These few are men, at least. They would sooner die than yield.* Victarion would grant some of them that wish. He beat his axe against his shield and charged them.

The Drowned God had not shaped Victarion Greyjoy to fight with words at kingsmoots, nor struggle against furtive sneaking foes in endless bogs. *This* was why he had been put on earth; to stand steel-clad with an axe red and dripping in his hand, dealing death with every blow.

They hacked at him from front and back, but their swords might have been willow switches for all the harm they did him. No blade could cut through Victarion Greyjoy’s heavy plate, nor did he give his foes the time to find the weak points at the joints, where only mail and leather warded him. Let three men assail him, or four, or five; it made no matter. He slew them one at a time, trusting in his steel to protect him from the others. As each foe fell he turned his wroth upon the next.

The last man to face him must have been a smith; he had shoulders like a bull, and one much more muscular than the other. His armor was a studded brigandine and a cap of boiled leather. The only blow he landed completed the ruin of Victarion’s shield, but the cut the captain dealt in answer split his head in two. *Would that I could deal with the Crow’s Eye as simply.* When he jerked his axehead free again, the smith’s skull seemed to burst. Bone and blood and brain went everywhere, and the corpse fell

forward, up against his legs. *Too late to plead for quarter now*, Victarion thought as he untangled himself from the dead man.

By then the deck was slick beneath his feet, and the dead and the dying lay in heaps on every side. He threw his shield away and sucked in air. “Lord Captain,” he heard the Barber say beside him, “the day is ours.”

All around the sea was full of ships. Some were burning, some were sinking, some had been smashed to splinters. Between the hulls the water was thick as stew, full of corpses, broken oars, and men clinging to the wreckage. In the distance, half a dozen of southron longships were racing back toward the Mander. *Let them go*, Victarion thought, *let them tell the tale*. Once a man had turned his tail and run from battle he ceased to be a man.

His eyes were stinging from the sweat that had run down into them during the fight. Two of his oarsmen helped undo his kraken helm so he might lift it off. Victarion mopped at his brow. “That knight,” he grumbled, “the knight of the white rose. Did any of you pull him out?” A lord’s son would be worth a goodly ransom; from his father, if Lord Serry had survived the day. From his liege at Highgarden, if not.

None of his men had seen what became of the knight after he went over the side, however. Most like the man had drowned. “May he feast as he fought, in the Drowned God’s watery halls.” Though the men of the Shield Islands called themselves sailors, they crossed the seas in dread and went lightly clad in battle for fear of drowning. Young Serry had been different. *A brave man*, thought Victarion. *Almost ironborn*.

He gave the captured ship to Ragnor Pyke, named a dozen men to crew her, and clambered back up onto his own *Iron Victory*. “Strip the captives of arms and armor and have their wounds bound up,” he told Nute the Barber. “Throw the dying in the sea. If any beg for mercy, cut their throats first.” He had only contempt for such; better to drown on seawater than on blood. “I want a count of the ships we won and all the knights and lordlings we took captive. I want their banners too.” One day he would hang them in his hall, so when he grew old and feeble he could remember all the foes he had slain when he was young and strong.

“It will be done.” Nute grinned. “It is a great victory.”

Aye, he thought, a great victory for the Crow’s Eye and his wizards. The other captains would shout his brother’s name anew when the tidings reached Oakenshield. Euron had seduced them with his glib tongue and smiling eye and bound them to his cause with the plunder of half a hundred distant lands; gold and silver, ornate armor, curved swords with gilded pommels, daggers of Valyrian steel, striped tiger pelts and the skins of spotted cats, jade manticores and ancient Valyrian sphinxes, chests of nutmeg, cloves, and saffron, ivory tusks and the horns of unicorns, green and orange and yellow feathers from the Summer Sea, bolts of fine silk and shimmering samite... and yet all that was little and less, compared to this. Now he has given them conquest, and they are his for good and all, the captain thought. The taste was bitter on his tongue. This was my victory, not his. Where was he? Back on Oakenshield, lazing in a castle. He stole my wife and he stole my throne, and now he steals my glory.

Obedience came naturally to Victarion Greyjoy; he had been born to it. Growing to manhood in the shadow of his brothers, he had followed Balon dutifully in everything he did. Later, when Balon’s sons were born, he had grown to accept that one day he would kneel to them as well, when one of them took his father’s place upon the Seastone Chair. But the Drowned God had summoned Balon and his sons down to his watery halls, and Victarion could not call Euron “king” without tasting bile in his throat.

The wind was freshening, and his thirst was raging. After a battle he always wanted wine. He gave the deck to Nute and went below. In his cramped cabin aft, he found the dusky woman wet and ready; perhaps the battle had warmed her blood as well. He took her twice, in quick succession. When they were done there was blood smeared across her breasts and thighs and belly, but it was his blood, from the gash in his palm. The dusky woman washed it out for him with boiled vinegar.

“The plan was good, I grant him,” Victarion said as she knelt beside him. “The Mander is open to us now, as it was of old.” It was a lazy river, wide and slow and treacherous with snags and sandbars. Most seagoing vessels dared not sail beyond Highgarden, but longships with their shallow

draughts could navigate as far upstream as Bitterbridge. In ancient days, the ironborn had boldly sailed the river road and plundered all along the Mander and its vassal streams... until the kings of the green hand had armed the fisherfolk on the four small islands off the Mander's mouth and named them his shields.

Two thousand years had passed, but in the watchtowers along their craggy shores, greybeards still kept the ancient vigil. At the first glimpse of longships the old men would light their beacon fires, and the call would leap from hill to hill and island to island. *Fear! Foes! Raiders! Raiders!* When the fisherfolk saw the fires burning on the high places they would put their nets and plows aside and take up their swords and axes. Their lords would rush from their castles, attended by their knights and men-at-arms. Warhorns would echo across the waters, from Greenshield and Greyshield, Oakenshield and Southshield, and their longships would come sliding out from moss-covered stone pens along the shores, oars flashing as they swarmed across the straits to seal the Mander and hound and harry the raiders upriver to their doom.

Euron had sent Torwold Browntooth and the Red Oarsman up the Mander with a dozen swift longships, so the lords of the Shield Islands would spill forth in pursuit. By the time his main fleet arrived, only a handful of fighting men remained to defend the isles themselves. The ironborn had come in on the evening tide, so the glare of the setting sun would keep them hidden from the greybeards in the watchtowers until it was too late. The wind was at their backs, as it had been all the way down from Old Wyk. It was whispered about the fleet that Euron's wizards had much and more to do with that, that the Crow's Eye appeased the Storm God with blood sacrifice. How else would he have dared sail so far to the west, instead of following the shoreline as was the custom?

The ironborn ran their longships up onto the stony shingles and spilled out into the purple dusk with steel glimmering in their hands. By then the fires were burning in the high places, but few remained to take up arms. Greyshield, Greenshield, and Southshield fell before the sun came up. Oakenshield lasted half a day longer. And when the men of the Four Shields

broke off their pursuit of Torwold and the Red Oarsman and turned downriver, they found the Iron Fleet waiting at the Mander's mouth.

"All fell out as Euron said it would," Victarion told the dusky woman as she bound up his hand with linen. "His wizards must have seen it." He had three aboard the *Silence*, Quellon Humble had confided in a whisper. Queer men and terrible, they were, but the Crow's Eye had made them slaves. "He still needs me to fight his battles, though," Victarion insisted. "Wizards may be well and good, but blood and steel win wars." The vinegar made his wound hurt worse than ever. He shoved the woman away and closed his fist, glowering. "Bring me wine."

He drank in the darkness, brooding on his brother. If I do not strike the blow with mine own hand, am I still a kinslayer? Victarion feared no man, but the Drowned God's curse gave him pause. If another strikes him down at my command, will his blood still stain my hands? Aeron Damphair would know the answer, but the priest was somewhere back on the Iron Islands, still hoping to raise the ironborn against their new-crowned king. Nute the Barber can shave a man with a thrown axe from twenty yards away. And none of Euron's mongrels could stand against Wulfe One-Ear or Andrik the Unsmiling. Any of them could do it. But what a man can do and what a man will do are two different things, he knew.

"Euron's blasphemies will bring down the Drowned God's wrath upon us all," Aeron had prophesied, back on Old Wyk. "We must stop him, brother. We are still of Balon's blood, are we not?"

"So is he," Victarion had said. "I like it no more than you, but Euron is the king. Your kingsmoot raised him up, and you put the driftwood crown upon his head yourself!"

"I placed the crown upon his head," said the priest, seaweed dripping in his hair, "and gladly will I wrest it off again and crown you in his stead. Only you are strong enough to fight him."

"The Drowned God raised him up," Victarion complained. "Let the Drowned God cast him down."

Aeron gave him a baleful look, the look that had been known to sour wells and make women barren. "It was not the god who spoke. Euron is

known to keep wizards and foul sorcerers on that red ship of his. They sent some spell among us, so we could not hear the sea. The captains and the kings were drunk with all this talk of dragons.”

“Drunk, and fearful of that horn. You heard the sound it made. It makes no matter. Euron is our king.”

“Not mine,” the priest declared. “The Drowned God helps bold men, not those who cower below their decks when the storm is rising. If you will not bestir yourself to remove the Crow’s Eye from the Seastone Chair, I must take the task upon myself.”

“How? You have no ships, no swords.”

“I have my voice,” the priest replied, “and the god is with me. Mine is the strength of the sea, a strength the Crow’s Eye cannot hope to withstand. The waves may break upon the mountain, yet still they come, wave upon wave, and in the end only pebbles remain where once the mountain stood. And soon even the pebbles are swept away, to be ground beneath the sea for all eternity.”

“Pebbles?” Victarion grumbled. “You are mad if you think to bring the Crow’s Eye down with talk of waves and pebbles.”

“The ironborn shall be waves,” the Damphair said. “Not the great and lordly, but the simple folk, tillers of the soil and fishers of the sea. The captains and the kings raised Euron up, but the common folk shall tear him down. I shall go to Great Wyk, to Harlaw, to Orkmont, to Pyke itself. In every town and village shall my words be heard. *No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair!*” He shook his shaggy head and stalked back out into the night. When the sun came up the next day, Aeron Greyjoy had vanished from Old Wyk. Even his drowned men knew not where. They said the Crow’s Eye only laughed when he was told.

But though the priest was gone, his dire warnings lingered. Victarion found himself remembering Baelor Blacktyde’s words as well. “*Balon was mad, Aeron is madder, and Euron is maddest of them all.*” The young lord had tried to sail home after the kingsmoot, refusing to accept Euron as his liege. But the Iron Fleet had closed the bay, the habit of obedience was rooted deep in Victarion Greyjoy, and Euron wore the driftwood crown.

Nightflyer was seized, Lord Blacktyde delivered to the king in chains. Euron's mutes and mongrels had cut him into seven parts, to feed the seven green land gods he worshiped.

As a reward for his leal service, the new-crowned king had given Victarion the dusky woman, taken off some slaver bound for Lys. "I want none of your leavings," he had told his brother scornfully, but when the Crow's Eye said that the woman would be killed unless he took her, he had weakened. Her tongue had been torn out, but otherwise she was undamaged, and beautiful besides, with skin as brown as oiled teak. Yet sometimes when he looked at her, he found himself remembering the first woman his brother had given him, to make a man of him.

Victarion wanted to use the dusky woman once again, but found himself unable. "Fetch me another skin of wine," he told her, "then get out." When she returned with a skin of sour red, the captain took it up on deck, where he could breathe the clean sea air. He drank half the skin and poured the rest into the sea for all the men who'd died.

The *Iron Victory* lingered for hours off the mouth of the Mander. As the greater part of the Iron Fleet got under way for Oakenshield, Victarion kept *Grief*, *Lord Dagon*, *Iron Wind*, and *Maiden's Bane* about him as a rear guard. They pulled survivors from the sea, and watched *Hardhand* sink slowly, dragged under by the wreck that she had rammed. By the time she vanished beneath the waters Victarion had the count he'd asked for. He had lost six ships, and captured eight-and-thirty. "It will serve," he told Nute. "To the oars. We return to Lord Hewett's Town."

His oarsmen bent their backs toward Oakenshield, and the iron captain went belowdecks once again. "I could kill him," he told the dusky woman. "Though it is a great sin to kill your king, and a worse one to kill your brother." He frowned. "Asha should have given me her voice." How could she have ever hoped to win the captains and the kings, her with her pinecones and her turnips? *Balon's blood is in her, but she is still a woman.* She had run after the kingsmoot. The night the driftwood crown was placed on Euron's head, she and her crew had melted away. Some small part of Victarion was glad she had. *If the girl keeps her wits about her, she will wed*

some northern lord and live with him in his castle, far from the sea and Euron Crow's Eye.

"Lord Hewett's Town, Lord Captain," a crewman called.

Victarion rose. The wine had dulled the throbbing in his hand. Perhaps he would have Hewett's maester look at it, if the man had not been killed. He returned to deck as they came around a headland. The way Lord Hewett's castle sat above the harbor reminded him of Lordsport, though this town was twice as big. A score of longships prowled the waters beyond the port, the golden kraken writhing on their sails. Hundreds more were beached along the shingles and drawn up to the piers that lined the harbor. At a stone quay stood three great cogs and a dozen smaller ones, taking on plunder and provisions. Victarion gave orders for the *Iron Victory* to drop anchor. "Have a boat made ready."

The town seemed strangely still as they approached. Most of the shops and houses had been looted, as their smashed doors and broken shutters testified, but only the sept had been put to the torch. The streets were strewn with corpses, each with a small flock of carrion crows in attendance. A gang of sullen survivors moved amongst them, chasing off the black birds and tossing the dead into the back of a wagon for burial. The notion filled Victarion with disgust. No true son of the sea would want to rot beneath the ground. How would he ever find the Drowned God's watery halls, to drink and feast for all eternity?

The *Silence* was amongst the ships they passed. Victarion's gaze was drawn to the iron figurehead at her prow, the mouthless maiden with the windblown hair and outstretched arm. Her mother-of-pearl eyes seemed to follow him. *She had a mouth like any other woman, till the Crow's Eye sewed it shut.*

As they neared the shore, he noticed a line of women and children herded up onto the deck of one of the great cogs. Some had their hands bound behind their backs, and all wore loops of hempen rope about their necks. "Who are they?" he asked the men who helped tie up their boat.

"Widows and orphans. They're to be sold as slaves."

“Sold?” There were no slaves in the Iron Islands, only thralls. A thrall was bound to service, but he was not chattel. His children were born free, so long as they were given to the Drowned God. And thralls were never bought nor sold for gold. A man paid the iron price for thralls, or else had none. “They should be thralls, or salt wives,” Victarion complained.

“It’s by the king’s decree,” the man said.

“The strong have always taken from the weak,” said Nute the Barber. “Thralls or slaves, it makes no matter. Their men could not defend them, so now they are ours, to do with as we will.”

It is not the Old Way, he might have said, but there was no time. His victory had preceded him, and men were gathering round to offer congratulations. Victarion let them fawn, until one began to praise Euron’s daring. “It is daring to sail out of sight of land, so no word of our coming could reach these islands before us,” he growled, “but crossing half the world to hunt for dragons, that is something else.” He did not wait for a reply, but shouldered through the press and on up to the keep.

Lord Hewett’s castle was small but strong, with thick walls and studded oaken gates that evoked his House’s ancient arms, an oak escutcheon studded with iron upon a field of undy blue and white. But it was the kraken of House Greyjoy that flew atop his green-roofed towers now, and they found the great gates burned and broken. On the ramparts walked ironborn with spears and axes, and some of Euron’s mongrels too.

In the yard Victarion came on Gorold Goodbrother and old Drumm, speaking quietly with Rodrik Harlaw. Nute the Barber gave a hoot at the sight of them. “Reader,” he called out, “why is your face so long? Your misgivings were for nought. The day is ours, and ours the prize!”

Lord Rodrik’s mouth puckered. “These rocks, you mean? All four together wouldn’t make Harlaw. We have won some stones and trees and trinkets, and the enmity of House Tyrell.”

“The roses?” Nute laughed. “What rose can harm the krakens of the deep? We have taken their shields from them, and smashed them all to pieces. Who will protect them now?”

“Highgarden,” replied the Reader. “Soon enough all the power of the Reach will be marshaled against us, Barber, and then you may learn that some roses have steel thorns.”

Drumm nodded, one hand on the hilt of his Red Rain. “Lord Tarly bears the greatsword Heartsbane, forged of Valyrian steel, and he is always in Lord Tyrell’s van.”

Victarion’s hunger flared. “Let him come. I will take his sword for mine own, as your own forebear took Red Rain. Let them all come, and bring the Lannisters as well. A lion may be fierce enough on land, but at sea the kraken rules supreme.” He would give half his teeth for the chance to try his axe against the Kingslayer or the Knight of Flowers. That was the sort of battle that he understood. The kinslayer was accursed in the eyes of gods and men, but the warrior was honored and revered.

“Have no fear, Lord Captain,” said the Reader. “They will come. His Grace desires it. Why else would he have commanded us to let Hewett’s ravens fly?”

“You read too much and fight too little,” Nute said. “Your blood is milk.” But the Reader made as if he had not heard.

A riotous feast was in progress when Victarion entered the hall. Ironborn filled the tables, drinking and shouting and jostling each other, boasting of the men that they had slain, the deeds that they had done, the prizes they had won. Many were bedecked with plunder. Left-Hand Lucas Codd and Quellon Humble had torn tapestries off the walls to serve as cloaks. Germund Botley wore a rope of pearls and garnets over his gilded Lannister breastplate. Andrik the Unsmiling staggered by with a woman under each arm; though he remained unsmiling, he had rings on every finger. Instead of trenchers carved from old stale bread, the captains were eating off solid silver platters.

Nute the Barber’s face grew dark with anger as he looked about. “The Crow’s Eye sends us forth to face the longships, whilst his own men take the castles and the villages and grab all the loot and women. What has he left for us?”

“We have the glory.”

“Glory is good,” said Nute, “but gold is better.”

Victarion shrugged. “The Crow’s Eye says we shall have all of Westeros. The Arbor, Oldtown, Highgarden... that’s where you’ll find your gold. But enough talk. I’m hungry.”

By right of blood Victarion might have claimed a seat on the dais, but he did not care to eat with Euron and his creatures. Instead, he chose a place by Ralf the Limper, the captain of the *Lord Quellan*. “A great victory, Lord Captain,” said the Limper. “A victory worthy of a lordship. You should have an island.”

Lord Victarion. Aye, and why not? It might not be the Seastone Chair, but it would be something.

Hotho Harlaw was across the table, sucking meat off a bone. He flicked it aside and hunched forward. “The Knight’s to have Greyshield. My cousin. Did you hear?”

“No.” Victarion looked across the hall, to where Ser Harras Harlaw sat drinking wine from a golden cup; a tall man, long-faced and austere. “Why would Euron give that one an island?”

Hotho held out his empty wine cup, and a pale young woman in a gown of blue velvet and gilt lace refilled it for him. “The Knight took Grimston by himself. He planted his standard beneath the castle and defied the Grimms to face him. One did, and then another, and another. He slew them all... well, near enough, two yielded. When the seventh man went down, Lord Grimm’s septon decided the gods had spoken and surrendered the castle.” Hotho laughed. “He’ll be the Lord of Greyshield, and welcome to it. With him gone, I am the Reader’s heir.” He thumped his wine cup against his chest. “Hotho the Humpback, Lord of Harlaw.”

“Seven, you say.” Victarion wondered how Nightfall would fare against his axe. He had never fought a man armed with a Valyrian steel blade, though he had thrashed young Harras Harlaw many a time when both of them were young. As a boy Harlaw had been fast friends with Balon’s eldest son, Rodrik, who had died beneath the walls of Seagard.

The feast was good. The wine was of the best, and there was roast ox, rare and bloody, and stuffed ducks as well, and buckets of fresh crabs. The serving wenches wore fine woolens and plush velvets, the Lord Captain did not fail to note. He took them for scullions dressed up in the clothes of Lady Hewett and her ladies, until Hotho told him they *were* Lady Hewett and her ladies. It amused the Crow's Eye to make them wait and pour. There were eight of them: her ladyship herself, still handsome though grown somewhat stout, and seven younger women aged from twenty-five to ten, her daughters and good-daughters.

Lord Hewett himself sat in his accustomed place upon the dais, dressed in all his heraldic finery. His arms and legs had been tied to his chair, and a huge white radish shoved between his teeth so he could not speak... though he could see and hear. The Crow's Eye had claimed the place of honor at his lordship's right hand. A pretty, buxom girl of seventeen or eighteen years was in his lap, barefoot and disheveled, her arms around his neck. "Who is that?" Victarion asked the men around him.

"His lordship's bastard daughter," laughed Hotho. "Before Euron took the castle, she was made to wait at table on the rest and take her own meals with the servants."

Euron put his blue lips to her throat, and the girl giggled and whispered something in his ear. Smiling, he kissed her throat again. Her white skin was covered with red marks where his mouth had been; they made a rosy necklace about her neck and shoulders. Another whisper in his ear, and this time the Crow's Eye laughed aloud, then slammed his wine cup down for silence. "Good ladies," he called out to his highborn serving women, "Falia is concerned for your fine gowns. She would not have them stained with grease and wine and dirty groping fingers, since I have promised that she may choose her own clothes from your wardrobes after the feast. So you had best disrobe."

A roar of laughter washed over the great hall, and Lord Hewett's face turned so red that Victarion thought his head might burst. The women had no choice but to obey. The youngest one cried a little, but her mother comforted her and helped undo the laces down her back. Afterward, they

continued to serve as before, moving along the tables with flagons full of wine to fill each empty cup, only now they did so naked.

He shames Hewett as he once shamed me, the captain thought, remembering how his wife had sobbed as he was beating her. The men of the Four Shields oft married one another, he knew, just as the ironborn did. One of these naked serving wenches might well be Ser Talbert Serry's wife. It was one thing to kill a foe, another to dishonor him. Victarion made a fist. His hand was bloody where his wound had soaked through the linen.

On the dais, Euron pushed aside his slattern and climbed upon the table. The captains began to bang their cups and stamp their feet upon the floor. "*EURON!*" they shouted. "*EURON! EURON! EURON!*" It was kingsmoot come again.

"I swore to give you Westeros," the Crow's Eye said when the tumult died away, "and here is your first taste. A morsel, nothing more... but we shall feast before the fall of night!" The torches along the walls were burning bright, and so was he, blue lips, blue eye, and all. "What the kraken grasps it does not loose. These isles were once ours, and now they are again... but we need strong men to hold them. So rise, Ser Harras Harlaw, Lord of Greyshield." The Knight stood, one hand upon Nightfall's moonstone pommel. "Rise, Andrik the Unsmiling, Lord of Southshield." Andrik shoved away his women and lurched to his feet, like a mountain rising sudden from the sea. "Rise, Maron Volmark, Lord of Greenshield." A beardless boy of six-and-ten years, Volmark stood hesitantly, looking like the lord of rabbits. "And rise, Nute the Barber, Lord of Oakenshield."

Nute's eyes grew wary, as if he feared he was the butt of some cruel jape. "A lord?" he croaked.

Victarion had expected the Crow's Eye to give the lordships to his own creatures, Stonehand and the Red Oarsman and Left-Hand Lucas Codd. *A king must needs be open-handed*, he tried to tell himself, but another voice whispered, *Euron's gifts are poisoned*. When he turned it over in his head, he saw it plain. *The Knight was the Reader's chosen heir, and Andrik the Unsmiling the strong right arm of Dunstan Drumm. Volmark is a callow*

boy, but he has Black Harren's blood in him through his mother. And the Barber...

Victarion grabbed him by the forearm. "Refuse him!"

Nute looked at him as if he had gone mad. "Refuse him? Lands and lordship? Will *you* make me a lord?" He wrenched his arm away and stood, basking in the cheers.

And now he steals my men away, Victarion thought.

King Euron called to Lady Hewett for a fresh cup of wine and raised it high above his head. "Captains and kings, lift your cups to the Lords of the Four Shields!" Victarion drank with the rest. *There is no wine so sweet as wine taken from a foe.* Someone had told him that once. His father, or his brother Balon. *One day I shall drink your wine, Crow's Eye, and take from you all that you hold dear.* But was there anything Euron held dear?

"On the morrow we prepare once more to sail," the king was saying. "Fill our casks anew with spring water, take every sack of grain and cask of beef, and as many sheep and goats as we can carry. The wounded who are still hale enough to pull an oar will row. The rest shall remain here, to help hold these isles for their new lords. Torwold and the Red Oarsman will soon be back with more provisions. Our decks will stink of pigs and chickens on the voyage east, but we'll return with dragons."

"*When?*" The voice was Lord Rodrik's. "When shall we return, Your Grace? A year? Three years? Five? Your dragons are a world away, and autumn is upon us." The Reader walked forward, sounding all the hazards. "Galleys guard the Redwyne Straits. The Dornish coast is dry and bleak, four hundred leagues of whirlpools, cliffs, and hidden shoals with hardly a safe landing anywhere. Beyond wait the Stepstones, with their storms and their nests of Lysene and Myrish pirates. If a thousand ships set sail, three hundred may reach the far side of the narrow sea... and then what? Lys will not welcome us, nor will Volantis. Where will you find fresh water, food? The first storm will scatter us across half the earth."

A smile played across Euron's blue lips. "I *am* the storm, my lord. The first storm, and the last. I have taken the *Silence* on longer voyages than

this, and ones far more hazardous. Have you forgotten? I have sailed the Smoking Sea and seen Valyria.”

Every man there knew that the Doom still ruled Valyria. The very sea there boiled and smoked, and the land was overrun with demons. It was said that any sailor who so much as glimpsed the fiery mountains of Valyria rising above the waves would soon die a dreadful death, yet the Crow’s Eye had been there, and returned.

“Have you?” the Reader asked, so softly.

Euron’s blue smile vanished. “Reader,” he said into the quiet, “you would do well to keep your nose in your books.”

Victarion could feel the unease in the hall. He pushed himself to his feet. “Brother,” he boomed. “You have not answered Harlaw’s questions.”

Euron shrugged. “The price of slaves is rising. We will sell our slaves in Lys and Volantis. That, and the plunder we have taken here, will give us sufficient gold to buy provisions.”

“Are we slavers now?” asked the Reader. “And for what? Dragons that no man here has seen? Shall we chase some drunken sailor’s fancy to the far ends of the earth?”

His words drew mutters of assent. “Slaver’s Bay is too far,” called out Ralf the Limper. “And too close to Valyria,” shouted Quellon Humble. Fralegg the Strong said, “Highgarden’s close. I say, look for dragons there. The *golden* kind!” Alvyn Sharp said, “Why sail the world, when the Mander lies before us?” Red Ralf Stonehouse bounded to his feet. “Oldtown is richer, and the Arbor richer still. Redwyne’s fleet is off away. We need only reach out our hand to pluck the ripest fruit in Westeros.”

“Fruit?” The king’s eye looked more black than blue. “Only a craven would steal a fruit when he could take the orchard.”

“It is the Arbor we want,” said Red Ralf, and other men took up the cry. The Crow’s Eye let the shouts wash over him. Then he leapt down from the table, grabbed his slattern by the arm, and pulled her from the hall.

Fled, like a dog. Euron’s hold upon the Seastone Chair suddenly did not seem as secure as it had a few moments before. *They will not follow him*

to Slaver's Bay. Perhaps they are not such dogs and fools as I had feared. That was such a merry thought that Victarion had to wash it down. He drained a cup with the Barber, to show him that he did not begrudge him his lordship, even if it came from Euron's hand.

Outside the sun went down. Darkness gathered beyond the walls, but inside the torches burned with a ruddy orange glow, and their smoke gathered under the rafters like a grey cloud. Drunken men began to dance the finger dance. At some point Left-Hand Lucas Codd decided he wanted one of Lord Hewett's daughters, so he took her on a table whilst her sisters screamed and sobbed.

Victarion felt a tap upon his shoulder. One of Euron's mongrel sons stood behind him, a boy of ten with woolly hair and skin the color of mud. "My father wishes words with you."

Victarion rose unsteadily. He was a big man, with a large capacity for wine, but even so, he had drunk too much. *I beat her to death with mine own hands, he thought, but the Crow's Eye killed her when he shoved himself inside her. I had no choice.* He followed the bastard boy from the hall and up a winding stone stair. The sounds of rape and revelry diminished as they climbed, until there was only the soft scrape of boots on stone.

The Crow's Eye had taken Lord Hewett's bedchamber along with his bastard daughter. When he entered, the girl was sprawled naked on the bed, snoring softly. Euron stood by the window, drinking from a silver cup. He wore the sable cloak he took from Blacktyde, his red leather eye patch, and nothing else. "When I was a boy, I dreamt that I could fly," he announced. "When I woke, I couldn't... or so the maester said. But what if he lied?"

Victarion could smell the sea through the open window, though the room stank of wine and blood and sex. The cold salt air helped to clear his head. "What do you mean?"

Euron turned to face him, his bruised blue lips curled in a half smile. "Perhaps we can fly. All of us. How will we ever know unless we leap from some tall tower?" The wind came gusting through the window and stirred his sable cloak. There was something obscene and disturbing about his

nakedness. “No man ever truly knows what he can do unless he dares to leap.”

“There is the window. Leap.” Victarion had no patience for this. His wounded hand was troubling him. “What do you want?”

“The world.” Firelight glimmered in Euron’s eye. *His smiling eye.* “Will you take a cup of Lord Hewett’s wine? There’s no wine half so sweet as wine taken from a beaten foe.”

“No.” Victarion glanced away. “Cover yourself.”

Euron seated himself and gave his cloak a twitch, so it covered his private parts. “I had forgotten what a small and noisy folk they are, my ironborn. I would bring them dragons, and they shout out for grapes.”

“Grapes are real. A man can gorge himself on grapes. Their juice is sweet, and they make wine. What do dragons make?”

“Woe.” The Crow’s Eye sipped from his silver cup. “I once held a dragon’s egg in this hand, brother. This Myrish wizard swore he could hatch it if I gave him a year and all the gold that he required. When I grew bored with his excuses, I slew him. As he watched his entrails sliding through his fingers he said, ‘*But it has not been a year.*’” He laughed. “Cragorn’s died, you know.”

“Who?”

“The man who blew my dragon horn. When the maester cut him open, his lungs were charred as black as soot.”

Victarion shuddered. “Show me this dragon’s egg.”

“I threw it in the sea during one of my dark moods.” Euron gave a shrug. “It comes to me that the Reader was not wrong. Too large a fleet could never hold together over such a distance. The voyage is too long, too perilous. Only our finest ships and crews could hope to sail to Slaver’s Bay and back. The Iron Fleet.”

The Iron Fleet is mine, Victarion thought. He said nothing.

The Crow’s Eye filled two cups with a strange black wine that flowed as thick as honey. “Drink with me, brother. Have a taste of this.” He offered one of the cups to Victarion.

The captain took the cup Euron had not offered, sniffed at its contents suspiciously. Seen up close, it looked more blue than black. It was thick and oily, with a smell like rotted flesh. He tried a small swallow, and spit it out at once. “Foul stuff. Do you mean to poison me?”

“I mean to open your eyes.” Euron drank deep from his own cup, and smiled. “*Shade-of-the-evening*, the wine of the warlocks. I came upon a cask of it when I captured a certain galleas out of Qarth, along with some cloves and nutmeg, forty bolts of green silk, and four warlocks who told a curious tale. One presumed to threaten me, so I killed him and fed him to the other three. They refused to eat of their friend’s flesh at first, but when they grew hungry enough they had a change of heart. Men are meat.”

Balon was mad, Aeron is madder, and Euron is maddest of them all. Victarion was turning to go when the Crow’s Eye said, “A king must have a wife, to give him heirs. Brother, I have need of you. Will you go to Slaver’s Bay and bring my love to me?”

I had a love once too. Victarion’s hands coiled into fists, and a drop of blood fell to patter on the floor. *I should beat you raw and red and feed you to the crabs, the same as I did her.* “You have sons,” he told his brother.

“Baseborn mongrels, born of whores and weepers.”

“They are of your body.”

“So are the contents of my chamber pot. None is fit to sit the Seastone Chair, much less the Iron Throne. No, to make an heir that’s worthy of him, I need a different woman. When the kraken weds the dragon, brother, let all the world beware.”

“What dragon?” said Victarion, frowning.

“The last of her line. They say she is the fairest woman in the world. Her hair is silver-gold, and her eyes are amethysts... but you need not take my word for it, brother. Go to Slaver’s Bay, behold her beauty, and bring her back to me.”

“Why should I?” Victarion demanded.

“For love. For duty. Because your king commands it.” Euron chuckled. “And for the Seastone Chair. It is yours, once I claim the Iron Throne. You

shall follow me as I followed Balon... and your own trueborn sons shall one day follow you.”

My own sons. But to have a trueborn son a man must first have a wife. Victarion had no luck with wives. *Euron’s gifts are poisoned*, he reminded himself, *but still...*

“The choice is yours, brother. Live a thrall or die a king. Do you dare to fly? Unless you take the leap, you’ll never know.”

Euron’s smiling eye was bright with mockery. “Or do I ask too much of you? It is a fearsome thing to sail beyond Valyria.”

“I could sail the Iron Fleet to hell if need be.” When Victarion opened his hand, his palm was red with blood. “I’ll go to Slaver’s Bay, aye. I’ll find this dragon woman, and I’ll bring her back.” *But not for you. You stole my wife and despoiled her, so I’ll have yours. The fairest woman in the world, for me.*