

Iverno

A short story by
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Iverno spread his feet apart to steady himself and raised his sword. His arms were shaking from the fatigue, and sweat was trickling down from his eyebrows, blurring his vision.

"Come on!" barked Umero. "Is this all I've taught you?"

Iverno gazed at his father, who was watching the fight from the porch.

The small distraction was all that his opponent needed to cover the distance between them, disarm him with a twist of his sword and hit him on the side of the head with the blunt weapon.

Iverno felt his brain shake inside his helmet, and he fell down. His brother's weapon was at his throat before he could say a word.

Umero snorted and walked down from the porch, giving Estarno a proud slap on his back. "Well done son! We'll soon run out of *worthy* opponents for you."

A woman rushed to Iverno's side, pulled off his helmet and inspected the side of his head. Iverno hadn't noticed their mother watching the training. He sighed and grudgingly let her clean his wounds.

A messenger strode towards them and addressed his father: "My Lord, a letter from the Capital."

Umero accepted it, broke the seal and skimmed through it. His expression hardened the farther down he read. When he was done, he crushed the paper into a ball and looked down at Iverno.

"Stand up and be a man!" he barked before storming off.

Estarno gave him his usual snigger; then, he followed their father.

"Don't mind your father," said his mother while she cleaned his face with a wet cloth. "He's just upset about the king."

Iverno nodded and swallowed, feeling the bitter taste of blood in his mouth. "Has the king refused again to come to Easttown, then?"

"I assume so," answered his mother. She gave him a slap on the wrist, "Get up now, and go change."

Iverno pulled himself up ignoring the protests of his muscles, picked up his blunt sword and made his way to the armoury.

"How did ye do?" beamed Rick, looking up from the breastplate he was polishing as Iverno walked in.

The boy shrugged, removed all the pieces of his light armour with deliberate force and dropped them to the ground. "Hey!" snorted Rick, shaking his head, but Iverno scuttled away before he could catch him.

He reached the creek behind the palace just as Jova did. Alix, Fren and Loren were already there.

"You're late," said Loren.

"How did it go?" asked Alix.

"He sucked!" exclaimed Jova before Iverno could open his mouth.

"You watched?!" cried Iverno bitterly.

Jova grinned. "I was hiding behind the porch. You really did suck."

"My father distracted me!" grumbled Iverno, blushing. "I fight much better when he's not around. And Estarno is two years older than me! He'll be sixteen next month."

"He will be Lord of Easttown when your father is old, won't he?" said Fren, looking up from the lizard that wriggled in his hand.

"What will happen to you, then?" said Alix.

"He'll become Estarno's squire," grinned Jova.

"Shut up!" Iverno walked to the creek and pretended to wash his face to hide it from his friends.

"You should show them what you're worth," insisted Alix.

"Yeah," mirrored Loren. "You should do something nobody has ever done before!"

"You could climb The Three Peaks?" said Fren while poking the lizard, which looked more dead than alive.

Iverno snorted.

"That's a great idea!" cried Jova. "You could climb The Three Peaks and find the dragons' graveyard! Picture your father's face when you come back with a dragon skull!"

Loren laughed, Iverno shook his head.

"But what if you meet the dragons?!" cried Alix.

Jova snorted. "Everybody knows the dragons are extinct! They haven't been seen in over ten years!"

"Then why is everyone afraid of climbing the Peaks?"

Fren shrugged. "It's the old stories and the legends; they scare the old people."

"Fren's right. The lairs are empty. All that's left now is a graveyard."

Jova's eyes sparkled with excitement. "Imagine how jealous Estarno will be when you come down with a dragon's skull!"

Iverno swallowed and strode forward. The Three Peaks loomed dark and ragged in front of him like three sharp teeth.

He glanced over his shoulders. His friends were still waving at him from the bottom of the path. He couldn't back down now.

The steep path led him half the way up the small mountain. Its sharp end marked the farthest point Easttown woodcutters dared to venture to find timber. From there on, a single file animal trail led straight up and into the forest.

Iverno followed it without problems until mid-afternoon, when the trees became more sparse around him, and he met a small ridge which marked the flat top of the mountain. Around him, the three peaks loomed ever more menacingly from up close. The boy cast a fleeting glance at Easttown, which looked like a toy town from up here; then, he took a deep breath and walked up to the ridge.

A shady, stony valley opened up before him. The dale was divided by tall juts of stone which had somehow been smoothed into rounded tunnels. The rock was dark grey and unnaturally smooth, as if somebody had melted it down to make it more comfortable. The darkness of the place was uncanny, and Iverno felt a shiver down his spine.

He surreptitiously followed one of the largest tunnels, trying to shake off the eerie silence. The tunnel abruptly ended in a large clearing.

Iverno stopped and gaped in both fear and awe at the huge dragon skeleton that took up most of the space. The skull alone was taller than he was. There were many more bones scattered around. He recognised the skulls of bisons and goats as well as those of other dragons.

He walked warily through the graveyard until he found the skull of what he assumed was a small dragon, for it was the size of his own head but had long horns coming off its back. Iverno carefully picked it up to study it. Suddenly, something grabbed him roughly from the shoulders. Iverno cried in surprise and jumped forward, falling among the sharp bones.

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?!" shouted Estarno.

Iverno stared at his brother in shock. The shout echoed across the valley multiple times.

"Father will know about this!" hissed Estarno, offering his hand.

Iverno slapped it away and pulled himself up. "Why did you come?!" he hissed back. "Who told you I was here?!"

Estarno grabbed him and pulled him close. "You better show some respect, brother. You're in serious trouble this..."

An inhuman, blood-curdling scream shook the valley, making them cower in fear. A huge, reptilian head poked out from one of the darkest tunnels and snapped at them.

The huge, black dragon fought his way out of the tunnel, spread his wings and glided above them.

The two brothers cried in fear and ran for their lives. They stumbled forward, crushing the bones under their feet, and they randomly followed a sequence of connecting tunnels, until they ended up in another, smaller valley.

"Have we lost him?!" cried Iverno, shaking.

Estarno pulled him back just in time to avoid the jaws of another black dragon, who was squatting in what looked like a huge nest. Almost immediately, the huge dragon of before landed heavily on top of the female. The two brothers cried in fear and flattened against the mountain wall, watching with horror as the two dragons fought with talons, spikes and teeth.

The bigger dragon had caught the female by surprise and had almost overpowered her. He pushed her out of her nest, revealing two large, obsidian eggs.

In one sudden motion he extended his long neck and swallowed the larger of the two eggs whole.

The female shrieked incredibly loudly, and the two brothers were forced to cover their ears with their hands.

"Come away!" cried Estarno, pulling his brother as soon as he found a way out.

Iverno didn't move. He was staring into the large, red eyes of the female dragon, who was staring back at him in what seemed to be a pleading expression.

Suddenly, he felt a river of emotion wash over him: fear, rage, anguish, loss, desperation. Before he knew what he was doing, he broke free of his brother's grip and ran to the nest. At the same time, the female dragon turned sharply and bit the bigger male in the neck, distracting him long enough for Iverno to jump into the nest and take the last remaining egg.

He rejoined his brother, who grabbed him and dragged him away.

"Are you mad?!"

Iverno spared one last look at the two dragons and felt the female's mind again: fear, gratitude and then darkness.

The two brothers stumbled down the animal trail until they met the main path; then, they broke into a run and didn't stop until they reached the town.

A big crowd, probably attracted by the dragon shrieks, had assembled by the West Gate. Iverno tried to skirt around it, but his brother grabbed him and firmly pushed him forward to meet their father, who was rushing towards them.

"What has happened?!" he cried, looking from one to the other incredulously. "What have you done?!"

"Father, Iverno climbed the Three Peaks. He woke up the dragons..."

Umero pushed him aside and grabbed Iverno by the shoulders, looking straight at him. "Why..." he whispered, his voice trembling. Iverno averted his eyes and tried to cover up the big dragon egg he was carrying in his arms.

His father relaxed his grip, took a step backwards and slapped him with the back of his hand strong enough to send him to the ground.

"You are not my son..." he hissed. He took the egg and turned to the knights who were keeping the crowd at bay: "Escort them to their rooms."

Iverno was shaking under the blankets. He was done crying and cursing himself and his friends, and all that was left was a dull, unexplainable fear. His mother had spent hours trying to console him, while explaining

the danger he had put himself and everybody else in. Yet, all he had asked her about was the egg.

"It's in your father's study," she had replied. "He will destroy it in the morning."

Iverno climbed out of his bed, put on his shoes and approached the window determinedly.

The alarm wasn't raised until he was riding past the North Gate of the town. He turned to look back, barely containing the tears. Instead, he clutched the warm egg to his chest and pressed on.

That night the egg hatched, and Kyeel was born.

In the next five years, Iverno and Kyeel travelled across what in Easttown was known as the Dark Lands. Kyeel grew up quickly and, while the two bonded deeply, Iverno never forgot his family and his hometown. Similarly Kyeel was keen to see the place where he came from.

Are you sure you want to do this? asked Iverno as they were soaring over the plains north of the town.

Kyeel sent him a strong feeling of agreement with his mind and landed behind a small hill.

Iverno hid his face in his cowl and entered the city from the same gate he had escaped five years earlier. He broke into the palace unseen and found his brother in the stables. He was wearing the robes of the Lord of the town.

Iverno waited for him to notice his presence; then, he removed his hood and said: "Where is father?"

Estarno gaped at him in shock. "You?!"

They stared at each other in silence for a long time. Eventually, Estarno took a deep breath and said: "Follow me."

He took him to their parents's bedroom. Umero was there, surrounded by half a dozen people, including the doctor. Iverno approached the bed warily and looked at his father: he was delirious. His skin was as white as a ghost, his eyes were unfocused, and sweat was trickling down his face.

"What's happened to him?" whispered Iverno to his brother.

Estarno pulled the blankets down to reveal a large gash on his torso.

Iverno shivered. "Who did this?!"

"Your legacy," spat Estarno. "The black dragon is back."

Iverno was led outside, and Estarno explained what had happened since he had left.

"The black dragon that almost killed us five years ago is the last remaining dragon in the Three Peaks. Since you stole his dinner, he's been targeting the town. Every two or three months he glides over the city, steals our cattle and burns down anything in his path. Father and the knights have tried to take him down..." He shook his head.

Iverno clenched his fists in rage.

Estarno crossed his arms. "But what would you care. You have abandoned us. We thought you dead. Why are you back?"

"I am back to fight!"

Estarno snorted. "The dragon is impossible to kill."

Iverno grabbed his shoulders: "Follow me."

Iverno adjusted his new armour for the umpteenth time. He could feel Kyeel's excitement pour through the link between their minds. They were both staring at the town, from which a thick grey smoke was rising. The smell of charred pig was distinguishable even from as far as their hiding place behind the hills.

Iverno turned his attention to the Three Peaks, wondering if their prey would fall for it.

Estarno had been hard to convince, but had eventually agreed to the plan.

"We'll roast a hundred pigs," he had said, "to bait the dragon. Once he appears, we'll attack him frontally."

A blood-curdling shriek broke the silence of the night.

The huge, black dragon appeared from the valley within the mountain and glided down towards the town. He was twice as big as Kyeel.

They waited impatiently for the monster to reach the large campfire and dive to steal the pigs.

Now! shouted Iverno with his mind.

Kyeel jumped forward with his rear legs and flew towards his opponent.

At the same time, five hundred arrows flew from behind the dozen carriages that surrounded the campfire. Most of the darts rebounded harmlessly against the dragon's thick hide, but a few hit the thin membrane of his massive wings and perforated it.

The dragon cried in rage and spread his wings, immediately changing his target.

The knights scrambled to get out of the way of the dragon's talons. The monster landed heavily, crushed a carriage and poured a stream of black flames all over the campfire.

Led by Estarno, the knights ran around the quickly expanding fire and threw their lances at the dragon, who hastily tried to take off again to avoid the much heavier darts.

Roaring, Kyeel landed heavily on the monster's back, who shrieked in surprise and crashed to the ground.

Iverno heard the cheers of the knights; then, the two dragons attacked each other.

In the scorching heat of the circle of flames, Iverno found himself helpless in a fight of claws, teeth and horns bigger than his sword.

Kyeel's element of surprise was quickly overpowered by the sheer size of their opponent, who kicked the smaller dragon to the side and jumped over him, growling.

Iverno watched in horror as the monster raised his head, bared his teeth and readied to strike. He cried for help and saw Estarno charge towards them. He jumped over the circle of flames and threw a well aimed spear, which penetrated deeply into the dragon's right eye.

The monster shrieked and thrashed in pain, releasing his hold on Kyeel. Blind and mad, he breathed in to spit another stream of fire.

"No!" cried Iverno. He jumped off the saddle and landed on the other dragon's head, meeting his strong skull with the tip of his sword.

At the same time, Kyeel roared and jumped forward, closing his teeth around the monster's neck.

The struggle lasted for a few seconds; then, the dragon stopped moving.

The cheers from the knights filled the air like thunder, shaking off the echoes of the dragon's shrieks.

Iverno slowly climbed down the head of the carcass and hugged Kyeel, who was still shaking from the fatigue, but wasn't badly injured.

"Brother!"

Estarno was walking towards him, his arms were spread wide, beaming.

Iverno smiled back, dropped his sword and ran towards his big brother. Estarno grabbed him and hugged him tightly.

"We did it!" said Iverno, breathing hard.

Estarno nodded, hugged him tighter and turned towards his men: "NOW!"

Immediately, five hundred knights lifted their bows and spears and pointed them at Kyeel. At the same time, Estarno locked his brother's arms and pushed him down.

"What's going on?!"

A hundred arrows and just as many spears flew towards Kyeel, who shrieked in surprise and tried to take cover behind the body of the dead dragon.

Shouting a war cry, the knights blocked every escape and charged.

As Kyeel tried to spread his wings to fly, another storm of arrows reached him and perforated his wings in multiple places.

Iverno felt his dragon's pain through the connection they shared. Rage for the betrayal made him mad. He kicked and thrashed, but his brother's lock was unbreakable.

Use the smoke! cried Iverno to Kyeel with his mind.

The dragon breathed in deeply and let out a cloud of pitch black smoke which disorientated the knights.

At the same time, Iverno felt his brother's grip relax, and he took his chance. He kicked him in the groin and ran towards Kyeel, guided by the dragon's amazing eyesight.

Kyeel helped his rider up onto his back, spread his wings and jumped into the sky, flying out of the range of the arrows.

Iverno hugged him tight and did not spare a single look back.

We paid our debts. We're free now.